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# Beneath Alder Hollow

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# Introduction

The sign looked smaller than Maya remembered, the paint dulled to a patient, municipal green: Welcome to Alder Hollow — Founded 1883. Someone had tied a yellow ribbon in a careful bow around the post. The knot had been cinched so many times the ends were frayed into whiskers. Fog pooled in the shallow dip of the road as if the town were a bowl collecting the morning, and beyond the sign the maples crowded close, bare-limbed and rattling like bones.

She slowed at the curve where the river ran nearest the asphalt. You didn’t see the water so much as feel it here—the air dipped colder, a damp breath that slid under the collar, a faint smell of metal and algae and something older. When the wind shifted, the other scent found her: a trace of creosote, ember, a memory that lived in the nose. She rolled up the window and told herself it was chimney smoke, woodstoves at work on a raw day. She told herself a lot of things in Alder Hollow and then swallowed them back down.

The funeral home squatted in the same place it always had, a Victorian that had been painted a respectable cream with a glossy black door. It had the kind of porch that invited casseroles and condolences. Her father had hated the porch, called it a stage. Even in death he had been right about the performance of it all. People stood in the drizzle with paper cups and held their coats closed like secrets. Eyes flicked. Heads tilted. Maya had been gone ten years. Time had a way of turning your life into a story people told each other at the grocery store.

Inside, the air was colored by lilies and whatever the mortuary used to polish the pews. There was a photograph on an easel: her father younger, his shoulders square under a work jacket, a fish held up in the brilliant lie of a summer afternoon. Someone had pressed a collage of snapshots into a frame, and Maya paused there, because it had the force of an ambush. Here was Jonah with his arm around a younger Maya, both of them streaked with river mud. There was Nora with a cigarette she didn’t think their father had seen. There was a birthday cake with trick candles burning on and on, refusing to be snuffed by the little girl shrieking in delight. The fire in candles was different, she told herself, but the image made her jaw tense anyway.

Nora stood by the guest book, stylus tapping the tablet the funeral director had insisted on calling modern. Nora’s hair was scraped back, and even with exhaustion sitting on her shoulders, she wore the quiet armor of a badge under the black sweater. They nodded at each other. That was what they had, at least for now: nods and shared air.

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“You made it,” Nora said. Her voice tried for brisk and missed.

“I said I would.”

Nora’s eyes did their inventory—Maya’s coat from a city thrift store that looked nicer than it was, the scuffed boots, the face they shared in bones but not in expression. “There’s coffee,” Nora said. “Mrs. Tisdale brought baked ziti. I think three versions of it, actually.”

“Of course she did.” Maya’s mouth twitched. “How is it out there?”

Nora’s gaze slid to the window. “Quiet. Or, you know.” A breath. “Quiet like people holding it in.”

There were flyers on the side table where once there would have been hymnals. The bright glossy kind the desktop printers made now: MISSING across the top in red, as if drowning were a font. Hannah Price looked out from the cheap paper with that uneven lurch of girlhood about to tilt into adulthood. Seventeen. A messy bun over one ear, a freckle beside her lip. The photograph had been pulled from a school event or a friend’s phone, one hand cropped holding someone else’s shoulder. Someone had pulled the brightness up too far so that Hannah glowed. It made Maya think of how a television looks in daylight, the wrong light for it, untrustworthy.

“Two weeks,” Maya said, touching the edge of the paper. It came out as a fact even though the question was there.

“Thirteen days,” Nora said. “Fourteen at midnight. We’re not calling it that in public. Calvin doesn’t like the number. Says it makes people think odd things.”

Sheriff Calvin Mercer had the smooth voice of a man who had won elections and expected to keep winning. He stood now by the bouquet with the largest ribbon and the smallest card, smiling in the way men did when they were using their teeth to hold something back.

“Maya Whitaker.” He said her name like a headline. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Her father would have snorted. People like Calvin, he’d say, could arrange apology into a billboard and still sell something on it.

“Thank you,” Maya said. She kept her tone flat enough to skate on. “How’s the search?”

“Active,” he said immediately. “Ongoing. We’ve got county in on it, and the state’s

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assisting. These things, you know how it is. We're talking to everyone. Every hour matters. We're… we're staying optimistic." He slid a look to the flyers and away.

Maya waited. He didn't offer more. That was one of the differences between a sheriff and a journalist. A journalist learned to leave the silence there until it showed you the outline of itself. Calvin filled silences with civic words.

Across the room, the mayor hugged a woman whose face had collapsed, and Maya realized with a small bodily shock that the red-haired figure in the navy dress was Helene Price. Hannah's mother. Helene had been two grades ahead of Maya, a cheer captain with skin like bottled summer. Now there was a tautness under her eyes, a flinch when anyone touched her elbow. Helene caught Maya looking and gave a short nod, something flickering in her face—recognition, maybe disapproval. Back when Maya babysat for a neighbor down the block, Helene had come by with a cigarette and a rumor and asked if their mother was home. That had been one of those nights that broke open and didn't close.

The service was a series of small, practiced gestures. People stood and spoke and sat and cried and tried not to. Someone told a story about Maya's father pulling their car from a ditch in a January ice storm. Someone else talked about the way he could fix a thing with wire and stubbornness. There was a gap where their mother would have been, a shape in the air even after so many years. Maya didn't speak. She wanted to say that grief in Alder Hollow was the same as anywhere else and that it wasn't. The difference was in how people held it and who they let see.

At the graveside the fog had lifted into a thin milk, the sky a pale bruise. The minister's voice shivered over the stones. Maya looked at the ground instead of at the hole, because holes had a way of pulling. Her boots sank half an inch into the grass, and in the damp she smelled that other thing again—the echo of heat. She pressed her teeth together until the molars hummed.

After, they stood around with cups that had gone cold. The talk turned to weather as if it were polite punctuation. Somebody mentioned deer season. Somebody else muttered about the mill development. "Good for jobs," a man said. "Good to see the old place used for something besides birds and ghosts." The word ghosts got a look from two women that said don't. The mill's dark bulk hunched over the bend of the river, visible between trunks when the trees stood naked. Once, the mill had been a crown, the town priding itself on generating something—grain, paper, electricity—depending on the century. Now it was boards on windows and graffiti and a chain-link fence that sagged like a sentence without a period. Under it, the river kept on. It always had.

"Hey," Jonah said, and Maya turned to find him standing with his shoulders hunched against the cold, his eyes the same exhausted blue they had been when he was

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seventeen and always about to fall asleep in the last row of a math class he never passed. He had a cardboard tray of coffees braced against his chest, cups flapped over with the funeral home’s napkins. “I brought the good stuff from Mill Street,” he added lamely, lifting the tray. “The donut place. People need sugar.”

“You run a hardware store,” Maya said, unable not to smile. “But you deliver coffee.”

“I’m diversifying.” The smile he gave was small and honest. Closer, she saw the sober pin punched into his coat, a round mark like a coin. His fingers smelled like machine oil when he handed her a cup. “Sorry about your dad. He used to come by for nails and talk about the price of lumber like it was a personal affront.”

“It was,” she said. “To him everything was personal.”

They stood together without touching. There had been a time when she knew the shape of his shoulder like the curve of a riverbank. He had been the first person to hold her hand after the fire, his thumb running along the ridge of her palm like he could smooth it.

“You back for… just the week?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” The words were honest and surprised her. “I have to deal with the house.”

He nodded. “If you need, you know, a drill or a crowbar or whatever.”

“A sledgehammer?” she said, and he laughed softly. “I might.”

When Maya left the cemetery, she drove not to the motel but to the house on Hollow Road. Her father had always refused to live closer to town, said he needed space and air and a long driveway to warn him of approach. The once-white siding had taken on the gray of weather and disuse. The porch sagged, the swing’s chain rusted to freckles. She remembered the sound the swing made in August, long low creaks like someone telling a story in another room.

Inside, the cold had the layered smell of an unheated house—dust, old coffee, the ghost of soap. The mail had been stacked in neat piles by a hand that wasn’t her father’s. Nora, then. On the kitchen table, the calendar still sat open to last month with every square empty. That wasn’t right. Her father had kept time in pen. She looked at the hook by the back door where he kept his keys and found the familiar ring, the small brass lantern charm he’d whittled and drilled a hole through years ago. It swung in her palm, familiar weight knocking against the keys stamped S and Shed and FH. FH. Father was a man who labeled everything. Or maybe those were the initials of the place he wouldn’t talk about.

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She walked through the rooms, laying her hand against doorframes as if to take the temperature. The living room had the old woodstove with the enamel chipped, the round black belly of it squat and stubborn. The mantle had a tin lantern with sooty glass. It had belonged to her grandmother. Her father would light it when the power went out, the burn small and certain in the dark. Fire can be good, he’d told them, a tool, a friend, if you treat it the way it demands. The night of the mill fire he’d come home with that same scent clinging to him—creosote, something deeper. He had sat at the table and stared at the wall while their mother washed dishes with a furious care that made the plates sing.

He’d said very little about that night. People didn’t, in Alder Hollow. They spoke obliquely, like a man stepping on stones in a river, choosing each one by feel. Maya was ten when it happened, and the memory lived at a slant inside her. The part she knew: a crack of sirens that burst open the sky. The run, the thud of shoes on the path, the air tasted like pennies. The heat at her face like a hand. A boy’s laugh caught in her ear forever, then gone. She’d watched men move in a rhythm that wasn’t panic, buckets and shouts and names called into smoke that grinned its terrible mouth. After, soot had settled on everything light. In school the next day there had been an empty desk. She could still draw its outline with her finger on the air.

In the small bedroom at the back, she stopped. The drawers were half-open like someone had been searching and got bored. That felt like Nora—efficient disruption, a list in her head and a better one waiting in her phone. Maya crouched and slid her hand under the bed. Dust stung her throat. Her fingers met the flat cardboard of a shoebox. Inside were photographs and things that were trying not to be photographs: a folded map, a ribbon from a county fair, a matchbook from the Riverview Bar burned along one edge, the scorch making a jagged horizon. On the bottom was a square of glossy paper curling at the corner, the color turned strange with age. She lifted it and froze.

Two girls stood on the riverbank, water up to their calves, both of them with their backs turned so you saw the sharp cut of their shoulder blades and the fall of hair. One was her. She knew the tilt of her spine the way you know your own handwriting. The other had hair in a bright ribbon, the color of a stop sign. This was impossible because no one had taken a picture that day. Where was the camera? Who had been able to catch them without their turning? The ribbon made her think of the sign on the way in and then, illogically, of Hannah Price, who in the missing poster wore her hair in the same high knot youthful confidence permits.

She put the photograph back and shut the box. The room tilted a fraction. The house made an old-house sound, a creak in the bones. “It’s nothing,” she told the air. “It’s wood talking.” Outside, a car went by and slowed because that is what cars did on Hollow Road, the cautious instinct of people for whom privacy and suspicion were two

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sides of the same coin.

Her phone buzzed with a notification. When she tapped it, the blast of people's public grief rushed up: a town Facebook page with a post about the search grid, a link to a blog that promised the truth the sheriff didn't want you to know, a photo of Helene standing at a bank of microphones looking like she would devour every word if it contained her daughter. There were the comments, the ones that made you understand what people did when they thought they were anonymous. Hannah had a reputation, someone named NotYourConcern claimed. She had been seen getting into a truck. She had posted a story with a song in it that meant something if you knew how to listen. Another person said it wasn't like that at all. It was always easier to write about a girl when she wasn't there to correct you.

Maya closed the app. The river gave a small bell of sound out there in the trees. She stood very still and listened to the layered quiet. Under it, something else: a low mechanical hum that you felt in the floorboards, faint as a remembered ache. It could have been the neighbor's dryer, the mill's distant generator coughing to life for reasons of its own. It could have been her body reminding her that she hadn't eaten since the cinnamon bun Nora had shoved at her early, square in the middle of driving into town. She found a can of soup in the cupboard and ate it standing up with her coat still on. The tin tasted like winters with the power out and her father cussing at the line down across the road.

When the light dimmed, she went to the back door and toggled the switch for the porch. The bulb blew with a sharp pop and a puff of tired smoke. Swearing softly, she pulled her coat up and went out anyhow, the cold tucking itself into the notch at the base of her throat. The yard sloped down toward the stand of trees, and beyond that the hint of the river. She could make out the shed, its padlock like a mouth closed against a word. The wind moved something on the porch—an old lantern hung from a nail, its glass smudged with fingerprints belonging to people who could no longer be named. She took it down and thumbed the wheel. It would need oil. It would need attention. But even unlit, it changed the air. She imagined the small, stubborn light it would make, the way it would press back at the dark without ever conquering it. That had always seemed truer to her than the clean switch of a bulb. Light you earned.

Her father had kept too many things, junk and spare parts and lengths of coiled wire he swore would be necessary one day. He had kept his silences the same way, stacked on shelves, labeled, ready to be used to build something he could live inside. Somewhere among them had been the truth about that night at the mill. Somewhere among them was the reason Hannah Price had walked out of her mother's house two weeks ago and vanished into fog thick as soup.

She thought of Hannah's face, its youth and its angle. She thought of how the town had learned to live with the unnamed, the unresolved, making it part of the furniture.

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She thought of the word missing like a hole cut into a thing. Under her feet, the boards spoke again, a sigh that could have been settling or could have been warning. Maya moved her palm over the lantern’s glass and felt the grit catch at her skin.

She had left this place because its walls had pressed in until the air didn’t move. She had become someone else in a city where you could be only what you said you were if you said it loudly. She had spent years not writing the stories she’d meant to write, accumulating facts for other people’s narratives: product launches, charity press releases, tweets with clever hooks. The work had paid her rent and not much else. Now she stood in the house where silence had trained her, and she felt the old narrative stir. There were things under the things. There were names in ledgers she had never seen. There were photographs someone had taken when no one was looking. There was a girl whose face the whole town had tacked up on cork boards and taped to windows and shared with a click. There was the river, running under it all.

A car door shut somewhere down on the road and a man’s voice said something brief. Maya held her breath without meaning to. After a while, the sound faded. She laughed then, quietly, because the town was right: Alder Hollow held its breath. She had arrived in the middle of the inhale. It would exhale, and when it did, things would move and fall and burn.

Inside, she set the lantern on the kitchen table and went looking for oil. On a high shelf in the pantry, in a coffee can that once held loose screws, she found a small, squat bottle with a cap that stuck. She worked it until it gave, the faint chemical odor like a scratch on the tongue. The lantern drank a little, enough to moisten the wick. When she struck the match, the sound was the quick threat of a blade. The flame took and trembled, then steadied. It made a circle of warm on the table, turned the photographs in the shoebox into small lakes of memory. It caught on the brass of her father’s keys and on the FH stamp as if to insist.

She could go back to the motel, turn on the television, let the noise overlay the quiet. Or she could make herself a bed in the room where she’d slept until she couldn’t and listen to the house shift around her. She turned her phone face down. For now, she would do the simplest thing: she would sleep where she was. In the morning she would go to town and look where other people had already looked and then look again. She would ask the questions she knew how to ask and then the ones that made people look away. She would pick at the thread of the photo that shouldn’t exist until it gave her something. She would find the places under things—the basements, the back rooms, the spaces where the river ate at the foundation.

Maya reached and turned down the wick. The flame dipped and then returned, stubborn, a small insistence. She watched it a moment longer, feeling the shape of the key ring against her palm where she had curled her hand over it. She saw, briefly and unbidden, the way the mill had looked lit from within on the night it burned: a lantern

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the size of a building, every window an eye. She shut her eyes and let the image pass over her. When she opened them, the lantern on the table was the size a human hand could hold, a light she could carry with her where she needed to go. She would. Outside, the river went on saying its untranslatable thing. Somewhere in that soft, relentless sound, there was an answer. Or a warning. Or both.

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# CHAPTER ONE: The Town Holds Its Breath

The engine of Maya’s old sedan ticked as she killed it, the sound contracting in the damp air like something alive shrinking away from the cold. She sat for a moment with her hands on the wheel, looking at the sign for Alder Hollow. It was smaller, yes, but the real change was in the grammar of the place. The town had always been a statement; now it was a question mark. Yellow caution tape fluttered from the handle of the metal guardrail where the road dipped toward the river, a bright, anxious flag. Someone had spray-painted a jagged flower on the stop sign, the petals too heavy, the stem dripping. It looked like a wound.

She got out, and the smell hit her immediately—wet asphalt, decaying leaves, and that sharp undercurrent of chimney smoke that always seemed to carry a ghost of something else. Tonight, it was creosote. It was the remembered taste of panic. Maya locked the car, the click echoing louder than it should have. The street was deserted, but she felt watched from the dark squares of windows. In Alder Hollow, curtains were a primary form of civic architecture. She walked toward the funeral home, her boots crunching on grit that had washed up against the curb, and tried not to look at the river moving black and heavy under the bridge.

Inside the lobby, the heat was turned up too high and smelled of lilies and industrial cleaner. It was a smell that belonged to waiting. The director, a man named Tibbs who had been there since Maya was a child, gave her a nod that managed to be both deferential and deeply rehearsed. He gestured vaguely toward the parlor where the main gathering was happening. The sound of it spilled out—a low hum of conversation, the clink of a cup against a saucer, a cough that was trying to be discreet. It sounded like a party that no one wanted to be at but everyone had dressed for.

Maya paused at the threshold. Her father, Elias Whitaker, had been a man of specific dimensions: six feet tall, shoulders wide enough to carry a tree branch, hands that could hold a bird without crushing it. The photograph on the easel did him justice, but it was the wrong kind. It was the him he presented to strangers, not the him who sat at the kitchen table at three in the morning staring at a blank page in his ledger. She moved past the image, feeling the polite weight of gazes settling on her. The city clothes—a structured wool coat, dark trousers, boots that were practical but sleek—marked her as different. She was the daughter who had left, the one who had not come back for the years that counted.

Nora was there, of course. Her sister stood near the guest book, her posture an exercise in contained exhaustion. She wore her detective’s badge on a chain around her neck, visible above the black sweater, a silver glint that said she was here in an

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official capacity as much as a familial one. When their eyes met, Nora's mouth tightened in a way that was almost a smile but missed by a fraction. Maya crossed the small space between them.

"You made it," Nora said. Her voice was tired gravel.

"I said I would." Maya accepted the hug that came with the stiff reluctance of two people who had built their lives on separate fault lines. Nora's hair smelled of rain and coffee. "How are you holding up?"

"Ask me after I've slept for a week." Nora glanced at the room. "Dad didn't want any of this. He told Tibbs once he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes thrown in the river so he could watch the town drown."

Maya snorted, a laugh that escaped before she could catch it. "That sounds like him." She looked at the guest book. "Who's been here?"

"Everyone who matters. And everyone who thinks they do." Nora's eyes flicked toward the corner where Sheriff Calvin Mercer stood with the mayor. "Mercer's been by twice. Once for the viewing, once to make sure people knew he'd been by."

Maya followed her gaze. Calvin Mercer had the kind of smile that looked stamped on, a currency he spent to buy goodwill. He was talking to Helene Price, the mayor, whose face had the brittle look of someone holding together with sheer will. Between them, a glossy poster on an easel stood like a third guest. A girl with messy hair and a freckle by her lip. Missing.

"Two weeks," Maya said, the words leaving her mouth on instinct, the old reporter's mind slotting time into boxes.

"Thirteen days," Nora corrected. "We're not counting to fourteen publicly. Calvin thinks it changes the temperature of the room. Makes people imagine outcomes we don't want them to imagine."

Maya nodded, but her eyes were on the poster. Hannah Price. She knew the name, or the shape of it. She knew it because Helene had been two grades ahead in school, a bright, brittle thing who had married the mayor after a brief, flashy courtship. Maya had babysat for a neighbor when Helene used to come by with cigarettes and questions about who was sleeping with whom. Hannah was a lineage of rumor and high cheekbones, and now she was a face on a flyer.

Calvin spotted them and broke away from the mayor. He crossed the room with the smooth gait of a man who had learned to walk on polished floors. "Maya Whitaker," he said, her name rolling out with a practiced solemnity. "I am sorry for your loss. Elias

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was a good man.”

Maya had the sudden, vivid memory of her father describing Mercer as a man whose spine was made of campaign buttons. “Thank you, Sheriff,” she said, keeping her voice level. “I appreciate that. Any word on the search?”

The smile didn’t shift. “Active,” he said. “Ongoing. We’ve got county assisting, state support where we need it. We’re pursuing every lead, Maya. You know how these things go. We’re staying optimistic.” He shifted his weight, a subtle pivot that angled him away from her, toward the door.

She watched him, the instincts she had buried under years of writing SEO-optimized corporate blog posts stirring. The answers were a little too quick, a little too polished. “I’m sure you are,” she said, letting the sentence land flat. She didn’t add the question she wanted to ask: what lead have you pursued that wasn’t a rumor?

Across the room, a woman broke down, and Helene Price put a hand on her shoulder, murmuring something that didn’t reach across the space. Helene’s gaze lifted and met Maya’s for a fraction of second. There was a flash of recognition, then something else—disapproval, or perhaps the simple exhaustion of seeing a face that belonged to a past she didn’t want to revisit. Then Helene looked away, back to the woman, back to the performance of strength.

The service was short. A cousin read a psalm. A neighbor told a story about Maya’s father hauling a deer out of the woods on his back when he was sixty-five, refusing help, cursing the weight with a grin. Another neighbor talked about how he had fixed their furnace during a blizzard and refused payment, taking instead a pie and a bottle of whiskey. The gaps in the room were loud—their mother, dead ten years now, and the empty chair where their father should have been sitting, laughing at the stories like they were about someone else.

Maya didn’t speak. She stood with her hands clasped and thought about how grief here was an inheritance, a property deed you couldn’t sell. She thought about the town’s eyes on her, weighing the years she had been gone against the hours she was present. When they moved outside for the graveside portion, the air had cooled further, and the fog had crept in, turning the cemetery into a half-seen geography of stones and wet grass. The river ran nearby, its voice a steady whisper that seemed to underwrite everything.

The minister’s words didn’t linger. People shifted, their shoes sinking slightly. The ground had the soft, yielding quality of a sponge. Maya looked down, and the smell hit her again—creosote and ash, faint but insistent, as if the river had stirred it up from the bottom. She pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth, the old trick, and waited for the ground to feel solid again.

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Afterward, people clustered with paper cups of coffee and plates of food they didn't want. They talked about the weather, about the mill—about whether the development would bring jobs or just more traffic and the wrong kind of people. A woman muttered that the mill's new owners were talking about turning part of it into apartments. "Lofts," she said, like the word was suspect. "Who wants to live in a place where the walls have heard so much?"

"Jonah's here," Nora said quietly, nodding toward the edge of the parking lot.

He leaned against a pickup truck, shoulders hunched against the damp, a cardboard tray of coffee cups braced against his chest. Jonah Hale. The name landed in Maya's chest with a dull thud that was almost pain. He looked older in the way men sometimes do when life chisels rather than smooths—the lines around his eyes deeper, a set to his mouth that suggested he was still learning the shape of a sober face. He caught her looking and gave a small, uncertain wave.

Maya walked over. "Jonah."

"Maya." He held out a cup. "From Mill Street. I figured everyone could use something that wasn't from an urn." He paused. "I'm sorry about your dad. He came in every other week for nails or washers and told me my prices were robbery. He was half-right."

"He was always half-right," she said, taking the coffee. The warmth seeped into her fingers. "How's the store?"

"Busy. People always need screws and things fall apart." He looked at her like he was trying to measure something. "Are you back for…?"

"I don't know yet," she said, and the honesty surprised them both. "I have to deal with the house."

He nodded. "If you need a crowbar, a hammer, a sledgehammer… I've got all of it. And my truck." He smiled then, a brief, genuine thing that lifted years off his face. "I'm sober a year and change. I'm good at showing up now."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said, and meant it. She reached for something else to say, some bridge across the decade, but the moment held and then broke on its own. He lifted his coffee cup in a small salute and turned back to the truck. Maya watched him go, the taillights bleeding red into the fog.

She didn't go to the motel. She drove to the house on Hollow Road. It sat back from the street, the trees crowded close like an audience. The white paint had surrendered

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to gray. The porch swing hung crooked, its chain rusted to a deep orange. She remembered summer nights there, the creak a slow rhythm, the lightning bugs smearing the dark. Now the air felt heavier, like it had absorbed the house’s secrets and expanded.

Inside, the cold met her with a layered smell of dust, coffee grounds, the faint chemical bite of woodstove cleaner. Someone—Nora—had stacked the mail on the kitchen table in neat, resentful piles. The calendar on the wall was still turned to last month, every square empty. Her father had been meticulous about crossing off days, sometimes with elaborate doodles in the margins. The empty squares felt like a refusal.

She walked through the rooms, trailing a hand along the doorframes. The living room held the old woodstove, its belly black and stubborn. On the mantle sat a tin lantern, its glass clouded with soot. It had been her grandmother’s. Her father lit it when the power went out, the flame small but insistent. She remembered him saying, Fire is a good servant and a terrible master, a line he probably read somewhere but delivered with authority. The night of the mill fire, he had come home smelling like the inside of a chimney. He’d sat at the table, staring at the wall, while their mother washed dishes with a quiet fury that made the plates sing.

He had said almost nothing about the fire afterward. It was the town’s way. They spoke around subjects like men stepping on stones, choosing each step carefully. Maya had been ten. She remembered sirens like a rip in the sky, the run through the dark, the taste of pennies in her mouth. Heat at her face like a hand pushing her back. Men moving in a rhythm that wasn’t panic. Soot settling on everything light afterward. An empty desk in her classroom. She could still trace the shape of it in the air with her finger.

In the small back bedroom, she stopped. The closet door was ajar, and the drawers had been pulled open just enough to show they had been gone through and closed again. She knelt and slid her hand under the bed. Dust rose and made her cough. Her fingers hit cardboard. A shoebox. Inside, photographs and scraps of things: a county fair ribbon, a map folded to a specific crease, a matchbook from the Riverview Bar, its edge burned into a jagged black line. And under it, a square of glossy paper with a curl at the corner.

She lifted it and went still.

Two girls on the riverbank, water up to their calves, hair wet and slick. Both with their backs turned. One was her—she knew the angle of her shoulder blade, the way her spine tilted when she stood in water. The other had hair tied with a red ribbon, bright as a warning. The photo didn’t make sense. No one had taken a picture that day. There hadn’t been a camera. They had been alone. She was certain of it.

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She put the photo back and closed the lid, the cardboard resisting a little. The room tilted a fraction. She stood and told herself it was the quiet, the way old houses creaked and settled. She walked to the kitchen and stood at the back door, looking out at the yard sloping down to the trees. The shed sat at the edge, its padlock a dark comma. The wind moved something on the porch—an old lantern hanging from a nail, glass smudged with fingerprints that didn’t belong to anyone living.

She went outside, coat pulled tight. The lantern was heavy, the metal cold enough to bite. She took it down and tried the wheel. It was stiff, rusted. She needed oil. She needed tools. She needed to learn what the house had learned and refused to say.

Inside again, she set the lantern on the table. Her phone buzzed with notifications she didn’t want. She ignored them and opened the pantry. On a high shelf sat a coffee can labeled in her father’s blocky hand: SCREWS—MISC. She lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in a nest of lint and metal shavings, was a small oil bottle. The cap stuck, and she worked it until it gave with a reluctant sigh. She tipped oil onto the wick, waited while it wicked upward, then struck a match. The flame caught, trembled, and settled into a steady glow that pushed the corners of the kitchen back a few inches.

She sat at the table, the lantern making a small, warm circle on the wood. The photograph in the shoebox felt like a pulse under the floorboards. She thought of Hannah Price’s face on the poster, that careless knot of hair, the freckle like a punctuation mark. She thought of the town’s silence, how it seemed to be holding its breath. She thought of the river, running under everything, patient, eroding, keeping its own counsel.

She turned the lantern’s wick down and then up again, watching the flame respond. It was a small light, but it was hers. She would carry it into the morning, into the town, into the places where people stacked their silences like firewood. She would look where they had already looked and then look again. She would ask until people looked away. She would follow the smell of ash.

Outside, the river kept talking. It sounded like a warning. It sounded like a promise.

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