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# Echoes of Hollow Creek

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## Introduction

Claire Hart had taught herself to love quiet places, the kind with thin walls and anonymous stairwells where no one knew her name. Six years away from Hollow Creek, she'd stitched together a life on the outskirts of Boston—rent by the month, coffee by the paper cup, favors traded among people who asked no questions. She learned how to make a room smaller with a stack of boxes, how to ignore night sounds that were only pipes settling and not footsteps at the door. The badge had gone into a drawer; the part of her that answered to it followed, like a houseplant moved out of the sun until it stopped asking for light.

In the same drawer sat her father's brass watch, heavy as a truth. The back was scuffed and pitted, the face hairline-cracked, the second hand forever stalled between ticks. He'd worn it to Sunday dinners and to the mill floor in his younger years, a talisman against lateness. Claire would lift it sometimes and feel the cool press of metal in her palm, the way you might test a tooth you know is gone. Behind the felt lining she kept a creased photo of two girls—herself and Sophie, bare knees and grass stains by a riverbank—and their father's shadow falling over them like a tree. The watch never started up again, no matter how gently she turned the crown.

The call came at dusk, when the city's windows were turning to orange eyes. Sophie's number first—missed—and then a message from Sheriff Lena Price she let play twice, the voice even and carefully impersonal. Skeletal remains had been found along the river in Hollow Creek, up past the bend where the birches lean. "You'll want to know," Lena said. "You always did." Claire felt the apartment tilt, the past sliding toward her like a drawer she hadn't closed all the way. An hour later, while she sat at the table with the watch in her hand, Jonah Reyes's name lit her phone. He didn't leave a message. The third call did: the kind of call that rearranges your bones. Her father was gone.

Afterward, the quiet returned with a different weight. Outside, the evening hung low and purple, streetlights shifting halos onto wet pavement. The news article Jonah finally sent—just a link and nothing else—showed the river under a washed-out sky, a strip of yellow tape caught in reeds, a patrol car's lights smearing on the water. Claire could smell the place even through the screen: the iron tang the mill exhaled when the air turned, the damp breath of the creek when it lifted off the stones at dusk. Somewhere in the photo's blur she could almost hear the clocktower tolling the hour, slow and hollow as a distant bell buoy.

She told herself she'd left Hollow Creek for good when the last case snapped something vital inside her. The town had given her a name and then taken it back;

she'd given it her trust and learned how quickly trust could be traded for convenience. She told herself she'd learned to live with absence—of a badge, of a future she'd once traced neatly from promotion to retirement. But the river, the watch, the calls—that was the old rhythm picking up, the one that pulled her through nights when truth was a moving target and memory a fog you could drown in.

She packed without thinking about it: a small bag, the worn leather notebook, the spare keys to a house that might not accept her anymore. The watch went into her coat pocket, the photo back behind its felt, as if returning it to its hiding place could keep time from showing its face. A storm was threading itself along the interstate, rain stippling the glass, and the car smelled faintly of oil and paper. When she turned the ignition, the clock on the dash blinked 7:00 and then rolled forward, steady, unconcerned with what hours meant in Hollow Creek.

The discovery itself had a shape she recognized before words formed around it. Bones pulled from the bank where the current dragged, too clean for chance, the kind of careful a person used when they meant for something to be found but not too soon. The sheriff's tone. Jonah's silence. Sophie's missed call. Patterns were what Claire did when she couldn't sleep. She drew lines between storms and power outages, between holidays and domestic disputes, between the chime of the clocktower and the hour someone vanished, and sometimes the lines spelled nothing. Sometimes they spelled a name.

By the time the first mile markers blurred past, the city had thinned to warehouse lots and fuel stations. The storm marched with her, leveling the night. She kept one hand near the watch in her pocket, feeling the old cold weight knock gently against her hip with each curve of road. In her mind the river unspooled along the dark, the current brown and muscled, the banks dipping into shadow. She pictured the clocktower as she'd last seen it, bright with winter lights, tolling seven notes as the restaurants emptied and families walked home under their coats. Maybe it was tolling now. Maybe someone was counting.

Claire did not know yet which truths she would open and which would refuse to come clean. She only knew the town would greet her with the same practiced smile it gave outsiders, the one that said good to see you without committing to anything deeper. She knew Sophie would be somewhere inside those smiles, older and quieter and brimming with unshed things. She knew the mill would be breathing its metal breath, and the church would be lit on weeknights for meetings that ran late, and the charity office would stack pamphlets in neat towers whose edges lined up perfectly.

She drove toward all of it, toward the secrets that had learned to live in plain sight. The watch was silent in her pocket, but she could hear the tick anyway, loud as memory, measuring out a road she'd sworn not to take again. And when the green sign announced her exit and the river's scent rose up out of the dark, Claire Hart

understood that Hollow Creek had called her back with two voices—death, and what death leaves behind—and that this time she would have to listen.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Call Back

The city had its own kind of quiet, the hollow hum inside a building when the last elevator has stopped running and the only voices left are the ones trapped in the walls. Claire Hart had built a life inside that hum, a deliberate smallness she carried like a folded coat. Six years had turned Boston into a map of anonymous corners: the laundromat with the temperamental dryer, the coffee shop where the barista never learned her name, the bus route that let her off three blocks from an apartment with thin walls and stairs that did not creak under unfamiliar feet. She had learned to step softly through other people's lives, never leaving prints. The badge she'd once worn lived now in a drawer, under a stack of old paperbacks and a scarf she never wore. The part of her that answered to it had followed, like a dog taught to sleep on a smaller bed.

The watch lived in the same drawer. Her father's brass watch, heavy with the history of mill shifts and Sunday dinners. It had a cracked face and a second hand that had stopped somewhere between ticks, a perpetual pause she found herself tracing with her thumb when her thoughts ran too fast. On the back, the metal was pitted and worn smooth where his thumb had turned it every day for thirty years. Inside the drawer's felt lining she kept a creased photograph: two girls on a riverbank, bare knees stained with grass, a man's shadow falling long across them. Sophie, younger and gap-toothed, and Claire with a braid too thick for her own head. She had taken the photo out sometimes and pressed it flat against her palm as if warmth could redevelop the faded edges. The watch never started again, no matter how gently she coaxed the crown.

The call came at dusk, when the city's windows were turning orange and the streets below were slick with a thin rain that did not bother to make a case for itself. It was the time of day when the air pressed against the glass as if asking to be let in. She had just finished a slice of toast that tasted more like the idea of dinner than dinner itself, and she was thinking about the laundry she had ignored for another week when her phone vibrated against the table's cheap laminate. The screen lit with Sophie's name, a familiar rectangle of blue. It rang three times and then fell silent. Before she could decide to call back, another call slid in, the tone different, the number sharp and official. She didn't recognize the exchange but knew the rhythm of it anyway, the way small towns make their numbers look like the time on a clock.

She answered.

"Claire? It's Lena Price." The voice was steady, unhurried, the voice of a woman who had learned to keep the weather out of her words. "Hollow Creek Sheriff's

Department.”

Claire felt the floor tilt slightly, like a chair leg finding a soft spot in the rug. “Sheriff Price.”

“I’m calling because you’ll want to know.” There was no softness in the statement, no apology. “Skeletal remains were found this afternoon along the river, up past the bend where the birches lean. A couple of kids with a metal detector and too much imagination.”

The river. The bend. The birches that looked as if they were always trying to step out of the water. Claire could see it even through the phone’s small speaker, the way the current curled and the bank undercut in flood season. She had stood there once with her hands in her pockets, watching the water worry the stones. “How old?”

“Preliminary, it’s old. Dirt and roots have grown over it. The ME is on his way. I thought you’d want the courtesy call.” Lena paused, a beat that stretched. “You always did.”

Claire closed her eyes. The apartment smelled faintly of rain and hot plastic from the cheap iron she never used. “Who found them?”

“Local kids. They brought a trowel and left with a scare.” Lena’s tone didn’t change. “We have the scene contained. I thought you’d want to know,” she repeated, and this time it sounded less like courtesy and more like a test. “Before someone calls you directly.”

Before Jonah, she meant. Before the press. Before the old stories started breathing again. Claire could feel the watch in the drawer calling to her like a weight she had promised not to lift. “Are you asking me to come back?”

“I’m telling you the river gave something up. What you do with that is your business.” The line clicked with the unmistakable sound of a radio pressed against fabric. “Your father would have wanted you to know.”

The words landed cleanly. Before Claire could ask what that meant, the call ended. She held the phone in her hand for a long second and then, without deciding, pressed Sophie’s number. It rang and went to voice mail, the tone younger than it had been when Sophie recorded it. “Hey, it’s Soph. Leave a message and maybe I’ll call you back.” Maybe. Claire left nothing.

She set the phone down and went to the window. A storm had been building all afternoon, climbing the skyline like a slow cat. Rain touched the glass in irregular taps, a code she couldn’t read. Traffic on the street below was a smear of red and white. The apartment was two floors up, and sometimes she could hear the building’s bones

settle, the way her father used to say the mill groaned when the air cooled. A second phone buzzed on the table. This number she recognized. Jonah Reyes. No message. Just a link that opened to a local news site she hadn't visited in years. The picture was a standard news still: a strip of yellow tape caught in the reeds, the river gray and indifferent, a patrol car's light painting a vague circle on the water. The caption was short. Police have not released details. She could smell the place through the screen if she let herself—iron, damp earth, the particular metallic scent of cold water over stone.

She was still staring at the photo when a third call came, the tone heavier, the kind that rearranged your bones before you answered. She didn't recognize the number but knew anyway, the way you know the shape of bad news without seeing it.

"Claire Hart?" A man's voice, formal, carefully modulated.

"Yes."

"This is Dr. Patel from University General. I'm calling about your father, William Hart." He waited for her to make a sound. When she did not, he went on. "There's been an incident at the mill. He was found without signs of life. The paramedics worked the scene. I'm very sorry for your loss."

The rain hit the glass with more authority. Claire pulled out a chair and sat because the floor had decided not to be there for a moment. She said something that sounded like words. The doctor said the body would be released in a day or two, that paperwork was a matter of hours, that they would need someone to identify, to sign, to speak. She answered with more sounds. The call ended, and the apartment's quiet returned, but heavier now, weighted.

For a minute she did nothing. Then she stood and went to the drawer and took out the watch. It was still quiet in her palm, cold, stubborn. She turned the crown with her thumb, gently, feeling the teeth catch and release. The second hand remained frozen. She pressed the watch to her ear as if it might have decided to start beating again. Nothing. The photograph slid partly out from under the felt. She pushed it back and closed the drawer.

She packed without giving it much thought. The leather notebook she used for lists and loose facts went into a small bag, along with a charger and a clean shirt and the kind of socks that make a long drive tolerable. She took the spare keys to her father's house on Willow Street and then hesitated and put them back. The house would be empty. The house would be full. She put the watch in her coat pocket. It made a dull clink against her keys. She grabbed a jacket that had been on the back of a chair long enough to become part of the chair, and then, on impulse, she took the photograph out again and slipped it into her wallet, behind old receipts and a loyalty card for a

coffee shop she would never visit again.

The storm had moved inland by the time she reached her car, rain ticking off in a more businesslike way. She turned the ignition and the dashboard clock flashed 7:00 before settling into the current time. Seven. In Hollow Creek, seven meant the mill whistle would be winding down for the second shift if the mill had still run like it used to. It meant the restaurants along Main Street would be full, the church doors unlocked for choir practice. It meant the clocktower would be readying itself to chime, slow and sure, the sound carrying over the river and into all the streets that had names like memories.

She pulled out into traffic and headed west, following the stubborn line of the interstate toward a town that had made her and unmade her in equal parts. The radio found a station playing old songs she recognized but could not name, and she left it there for company. The storm went with her, skirting the edge of the highway, flaring lightning in the distance like a thought that refuses to settle. She passed exits that were names she knew: towns that sold cheap fireworks, towns with diners that still served pie at midnight. She kept her right hand near the pocket where the watch sat. At a toll plaza she stopped and saw her own face in the window, the reflection pulled thin by the rain. She looked away.

An hour out, her phone buzzed again. Jonah this time, finally with words. "Claire. I didn't want to leave a message. You heard?"

"I heard."

"They found a shoe," he said. "Near the bones. Old style. I have a picture if you want it."

"I want the scene," she said. "Not the picture."

"Copy that. Also, your father—"

"I know."

"I'm sorry, Claire."

She drove. The highway rose and fell in gentle waves. The watch ticked silently in her pocket, a weight that said nothing and everything. When she passed the sign for Hollow Creek, the letters half-eaten by spray paint, she felt the town take a breath. The air smelled of wet leaves and, faintly, of iron, as if the mill had exhaled after holding it in for years.

Main Street was just as she remembered, only more so. The storefronts had all been

repainted in the same shade of gray that tried to be historic and ended up looking patient. The diner still had the same neon mug in its window, blinking on and off as if winking at a joke older than most of its patrons. A new shop had appeared between the bookstore and the hardware store, its sign reading HOLLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHARITY in letters tall enough to be counted from the river. The windows were filled with posters for coat drives and after-school programs. A woman Claire didn't recognize was locking the door as she passed, keys jangling, her face lit briefly by the streetlight.

She turned onto Willow Street and parked in front of her father's house. It looked smaller than it had when she left, or maybe she had just spent six years making herself smaller. The porch light was off. The grass needed cutting. A neighbor's wind chime had an argument with the breeze. She sat for a long minute, listening to the engine cool, listening to the way a house sounds when it knows you're outside. The watch dug into her thigh. She got out.

Inside, the house smelled like the lemon polish her father favored and the faint metallic scent of old pipes. The kitchen table was set for one plate and one cup, as if he had been expecting breakfast and then hadn't made it that far. On the counter was a folded note in his precise, slanted hand: *If you come home, there's soup. Heat slow.* She put the note down gently and opened the fridge. A container of soup sat on the top shelf, its lid sweating. She closed the fridge without taking it out.

She moved through the rooms like a guest, touching the backs of chairs, the edges of bookshelves. In the living room, the mantel held a picture of Sophie, taken last year at a fair, her smile just a little too tight. There was no photo of Claire herself on display. She didn't blame him. She found her old room mostly unchanged, the bed made, the curtains drawn. The desk was clear except for a small wooden box that held paper clips and rubber bands and, she knew, a key that had never been explained. She pocketed the key without thinking.

When she stepped back onto the porch, the clocktower struck eight. The sound rolled through the streets like a slow wave, the first chime deeper than the others, the rest falling in a pattern that had taught generations to measure their evenings. She closed her eyes and let it pass. When it ended, she heard an engine cut two houses down and a door open and close with care. Headlights swept the street, then dimmed to parking lights. A figure walked toward her under the streetlight's hazy circle, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched against the damp. It was Jonah, all right, older by six years and wearing a jacket with a newspaper's logo stitched near the collar. He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps and looked up at her, then at the house, then back at her.

"You didn't have to come tonight," he said.

"Neither did you."

“Brought you something.” He held out a thin folder, the kind that buckles when you squeeze it too hard. “Preliminary from the ME’s office. Someone left it on my desk. I didn’t ask questions.”

She took it but didn’t open it. “Who’s got the scene?”

“Lena. She’s keeping it tight.” He climbed one step, then another, until they were level. “I’m sorry about your dad, Claire. Everyone at the paper loved him.”

“Everyone everywhere loved him.” She said it flat, not cruel. “That was his gift.”

Jonah nodded, eyes on the house’s dark windows. “There’s a meeting tomorrow morning at the town hall. Mayor Crowe’s calling it, for transparency. He’ll say the right things.”

“And the wrong things?”

“He’s good at both.” Jonah ran a hand through hair that had decided to stop being cooperative. “You going to be there?”

“Try to stop me.”

He smiled a little, the old smile that had seen her through bad nights and worse days. “Lena won’t like it if you poke around.”

“Lena and I have a history.”

“She’s not the same sheriff she was back then.”

“Neither am I.”

They stood in the quiet that followed, the kind where the air carries more than humidity. Somewhere a dog barked twice and then thought better of it. The watch pressed against her leg through the fabric of her coat. Claire opened the folder just enough to see the first page, a form with typed lines and a box that read *Decedent*. The word made her stomach tighten in a way she hadn’t expected. She scanned down to a single line: *Estimated Time Since Death: 10–15 years (preliminary, pending full forensic evaluation)*. Old. Older than she had let herself imagine. The river had kept its secret for a long time. Someone had finally asked it to give the secret back.

She closed the folder and handed it back to Jonah. “Keep it,” she said. “I don’t want to carry it yet.”

"You planning to stay?"

"Tonight, at least."

"I'll leave you to it, then." He hesitated, a man standing between two streets. "If you need something, call. Don't knock on my door at two a.m. unless you're bringing coffee."

"Deal."

He turned and walked back to his car. She watched until the headlights came on and swept across the house, turning the porch rail into a bright line for a second. The car pulled away with a soft rumble, and the street settled again. She stood on the porch a while longer, listening for the clocktower to strike again even though she knew it wouldn't. She went inside and locked the door. The watch, when she took it out, was still the same silent thing it had always been. She set it on the nightstand, face up, and lay down on the bed without taking off her shoes. The house ticked around her, the old bones of it whispering in a language she had almost forgotten how to hear.

In the dark, she counted the seconds between the tick of the furnace and the click of the refrigerator. She counted the ways the river could keep a body hidden. She counted the reasons she had left and the reasons she had returned and found them the same list, just flipped over. When she finally slept, it was the thin, restless sleep of someone waiting for a bell, and in that sleep the river moved over stones, the birches leaned and straightened, and the watch in her pocket started to beat again, just once, loud enough to wake her.

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