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The Silence Beneath Hollow Ridge

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Homecoming
- **Chapter 2** The Locket
- **Chapter 3** Old Wounds
- **Chapter 4** The Town Meeting
- **Chapter 5** The First Lead
- **Chapter 6** Secrets in the Archive
- **Chapter 7** Friendly Enemy
- **Chapter 8** A Quiet Confession
- **Chapter 9** The Reverend's Sermon
- **Chapter 10** Forensics Turnaround
- **Chapter 11** The Contractor's Note
- **Chapter 12** Night Watch
- **Chapter 13** Emily's Diary (interlude)
- **Chapter 14** The Broken Promise
- **Chapter 15** A Second Body?
- **Chapter 16** Pressure and Payoffs
- **Chapter 17** Tom's Memory
- **Chapter 18** Threats from Within
- **Chapter 19** The Underground Passage
- **Chapter 20** Betrayal
- **Chapter 21** Breaking Point
- **Chapter 22** The Night of Fire
- **Chapter 23** The Hidden Meeting
- **Chapter 24** The Ridge Confrontation
- **Chapter 25** Truth at Dawn

Introduction

Claire Hart hit the town line at dusk, the ridge cutting a dark edge against a sky the color of a bruise. Hollow Ridge rose out of the trees as if it had been there since the first stone fences and the first Sunday bell, neat and certain and waiting to be believed. Porches glowed. A wind curled off the millpond and carried the faint sweetness of dying leaves and the metallic tang of turned earth. She hadn't planned to come back. She told herself this was only a check-in, a week, maybe two—just long enough to make sure her father remembered to eat, to check the locks, to bring his pills to the kitchen table, to prove to herself she could still arrive and leave without being pulled under by all the old currents.

The sign for the new development stood where the orchard used to be, a glossy billboard promising renderings of glass and brick and café lights strung like constellations. Salvation, in four-color ink. Jobs, the mayor's smile seemed to say from every laminated flyer Claire had seen online before packing a bag. Beneath the billboard, the ground had been scraped clear, machines parked for the night like great sleeping insects. A backhoe's bucket caught the last of the light and threw it back dull and coppery. Even from the road, Claire could hear the site's strange quiet, that held breath that comes after something is disturbed.

Walter Hart answered the door slower than she remembered. He was thinner, the angles of him sharper, but his eyes were the same—flinty, amused, complicated. He had already set out two mugs and a plate of store-bought cookies he'd pretend were a treat for her. He talked about his neighbor's new dog, the church roof fund, the price of heating oil, all the small things that knit a day together and keep the larger holes from showing. When she asked how he was sleeping, he said, "Like an honest man," and then looked away. Claire knew the evasion; she used to practice it in mirrors.

Sleep didn't come for her that first night. The floorboards still made the same complaint outside her old room, and the radiator still coughed warm air like a forgiving old man. She lay awake and listened to the town as if it were speaking a language she half-remembered—late laughter from the road, the whistle of something small descending nerve-quick through the hedges, the hush that settles over houses that know each other too well. Guilt, familiar as a scar beneath clothing, itched. In the city she had made a choice, one that clipped a career line and left a voice on her phone she could not erase. Here, the silence pressed in gentler and somehow more accusing.

Morning brought the scrape of metal on stone. Claire had just left her father's porch with a grocery list in her pocket when she saw the cluster of workers on the site, their bodies turned toward a shallow trench as if around a campfire. Curiosity—not

professional yet, just human—drew her across the property line. The foreman lifted something out of the dirt with a work glove and swore under his breath as though he'd disturbed a grave. In his palm lay a small oval smeared with soil, the chain a rusted line. A locket. When he thumbed it open, a smell rose—wet metal, old perfume that had become only the idea of sweetness.

Claire didn't mean to reach for it. She wasn't sworn in here. No one had asked her opinion. But the tiny engraving on the locket's face, revealed once she'd wiped it clean with the corner of her sleeve, undid years. A swallow cut in shallow lines, one wing nicked, the bird angled as if climbing a ridge. She knew that bird; she had watched a redheaded girl draw it over and over on the back of hymn sheets and notebook paper, a small, stubborn hope in graphite. Emily Stone had made that swallow her signature the year they were both fifteen and restless in different ways—Emily with her secret defiances, Claire with her rules that sometimes cut like razors.

"Belonged to someone?" the foreman asked. His tone was neutral, but a worker a few feet back crossed himself. Claire heard herself answer, though her throat felt tight. "Maybe," she said. "You should call the sheriff's office." Maybe. As if there were even a sliver of doubt.

On Main, people still waved. They said her name a little too carefully, like it had gained something sharp in her years away. A stack of pamphlets about the development rested on the counter at the diner beside the pies; someone had scrawled in the margin of one: Remember what happened last time we rushed. Claire tucked the locket's image away behind her eyes and tried to taste her coffee. Across the street the church door stood open for morning prayers, and Reverend Hale's voice carried out—rich, soothing, full of assurances about the balm of forgetting. Old instincts sparked. Where there was public comfort, there was private cost.

Walter wouldn't say Emily's name at first. He looked past Claire, out the window, where the millpond lay flat and faithful beneath the ridge and a skein of geese stitched itself into the sky. "Some things are better off leaving to the Lord," he said, which wasn't like him. She pressed his hand and felt how the bones had grown nearer the skin. A beat later he added, softer, "People meant well. Mostly." A town could be built on those two words, meant well. Claire had spent a decade studying the distance between intent and harm. Hollow Ridge had taught her about it before she had a badge for context.

By noon the story had traveled faster than any official notice could. A locket dug up where the new jobs would go. A bird scratched on its face. Cops would come by and cordon the spot with bright tape like a wound bandaged in public. Claire stood again at the edge of the site and watched a pair of deputies she recognized from high school string the tape tight. Ben Castillo glanced up as if he'd felt her there, and the flicker on his face—alert, wary, threaded with something like relief—told her the past wasn't

past for him either. He nodded once, the gesture a small bridge nobody else needed to see.

She could have turned away. She could have driven to the pharmacy, filled Walter's prescriptions, memorized the doctor's instructions, and retrained her mind on casseroles and calendars until her leave ended and she was back in a squad room where the angles were familiar and the cases were not personal. But the swallow kept beating in her ribs, a trapped thing. Eighteen years of silence lay under this town like the old cellar holes in the woods—most days covered, a few times a year tripping some kid who cut across where he wasn't supposed to. The ground had shifted. Something that belonged to a girl who vanished had risen into a new century and asked to be seen.

Claire didn't pray, not the way the town would have taught her, but she stood at the ridge that evening with the millpond below glassing over in the cooling air and made herself a promise. She would ask the questions people had stopped asking, or had never asked out loud. She would treat Hollow Ridge like any other scene and any other witness—kindly, firmly, without getting sentimental about its white steeple and its summer parade. She had come home to take care of her father. Now, whether she chose it or not, the town had asked for something else too: to lift a quiet that had settled where truth should have been. And the locket, bright as a wound in her memory, would not let her refuse.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The scent of pine needles and damp earth was the first thing that truly registered for Claire, an immediate, grounding contrast to the antiseptic tang of city air. It clung to her clothes, her hair, even after she'd pulled her suitcase from the trunk of her beat-up sedan. Hollow Ridge hadn't just returned to her; it had wrapped itself around her like an old, slightly suffocating blanket. Her father, Walter, stood on the porch, a thin, almost frail figure against the backdrop of the familiar blue clapboard house. He held a mug of tea, the steam curling into the crisp autumn air like a silent question mark.

"Took you long enough, kiddo," he said, his voice a little rougher than she remembered, but the underlying warmth was there, a steady ember. His eyes, though, were a deeper shade of weary than she'd allowed herself to process over the phone. Claire felt a familiar pang of guilt, that dull ache that came with knowing she should have been here sooner, should have called more, should have worried less about her own carefully constructed distance. She hugged him, feeling the sharp points of his shoulders, the brittle strength of him.

Inside, the house was a time capsule of their shared history. The slightly faded floral wallpaper in the living room, the perpetually crooked painting of a ship battling a storm that her mother had always loved, the faint, comforting smell of pipe tobacco that had long since departed with its owner, but lingered in the fabric of the furniture. Claire moved through the rooms with a hesitant grace, a stranger in a land she knew intimately. Her old bedroom was exactly as she'd left it: a stack of ancient mystery novels by her bedside, a forgotten high school yearbook gathering dust on the shelf, the window overlooking the backyard where a single, stubborn apple tree still clung to a few wizened fruits.

Walter, bless his predictable heart, had made dinner: a slightly overcooked pot roast, a staple of their childhood that always tasted faintly of worry and duty. They ate in comfortable silence at first, the kind that only years of shared experience could forge. He recounted the usual small-town sagas: Mrs. Henderson's prize-winning gladiolas, the new roof fund for the church that Reverend Hale was spearheading with his characteristic persuasive zeal, the ongoing debate about the town's annual fall festival. Claire listened, nodding, offering the occasional noncommittal grunt. She tried to sift through his words for any hint of distress beyond the normal anxieties of aging, but Walter was a master of deflection, his stories a carefully constructed wall.

"So, the development," Claire ventured, pushing a piece of roast around her plate. "It's really going ahead?"

Walter's fork paused mid-air. "Looks that way. Mayor Pryce has been talking it up something fierce. Says it'll bring jobs, revitalize the town. Give us a future, he calls it." He resumed eating, but his gaze drifted toward the window, out into the encroaching twilight. The new construction site, Claire knew, was just visible from their kitchen window if you craned your neck. A jagged, ugly scar on the familiar landscape.

"And what do you think?" she pressed, watching him.

He shrugged, a small, tired movement. "Pryce is a smooth talker. Always has been. Good for the town, probably. Needs something to kickstart it. Half the storefronts on Main are empty these days." He finished his thought with a sigh, a deeper one than the subject seemed to warrant. "Just hope they know what they're doing, digging up all that ground."

Claire picked up on the subtle shift in his tone. "Why? Anything specific?"

Walter just shook his head, a faint frown creasing his brow. "Just... old timers like me, we remember things. Some spots are better left alone, is all." He pushed his plate away, the roast barely touched. "You get enough to eat, honey? Always too skinny, you are."

The diversion was as transparent as a newly washed windowpane. Claire let it go, for now. She knew her father. Pushing too hard would only make him retreat further. Instead, she helped him clear the table, the familiar rhythm of their unspoken chores a comfort. She watched him take his evening pills, making a mental note of the labels and dosages. His memory, she realized with a fresh wave of concern, was definitely not what it used to be. A subtle tremor in his hand as he raised the glass of water caught her attention.

Later, as darkness fully enveloped Hollow Ridge, Claire went for a walk. The air was colder now, carrying the bite of early winter. She headed towards the town center, drawn by the faint glow of streetlights. The old millpond shimmered under the bruised sky, reflecting the skeletal trees along its banks. The ridge itself loomed, a dark, protective presence, its silhouette a familiar comfort and a sudden, unsettling reminder of forgotten stories. The town was quiet, too quiet. Not the peaceful quiet of a sleeping hamlet, but a hushed, almost expectant quiet. A nervous energy hummed beneath the surface, a collective holding of breath.

She passed the general store, its windows dark, a handwritten 'For Sale' sign taped haphazardly to the glass. Further down, the old diner, the aroma of stale coffee and fried food still faintly clinging to its brick facade, was one of the few places still lit. A single, tired-looking waitress wiped down the counter inside. A few patrons sat nursing lukewarm cups, their faces etched with the weariness of a long day and perhaps, a

longer worry. Claire saw a cluster of pamphlets about the new development stacked beside the sugar dispenser, the glossy images of happy families and bustling businesses feeling jarringly out of place against the reality of the half-empty room.

The new development site was a gaping maw in the heart of town. Construction equipment sat idle, massive shadows against the moon-drenched earth. The excavated ground looked raw, exposed, as if the town's very foundations had been laid bare. A temporary fence had been erected, but it felt more symbolic than genuinely prohibitive. A few warning signs, faded and flapping in the wind, declared it a hard hat area. Claire peered through a gap in the fence, the disturbed earth smelling sharp and metallic, a scent that prickled at her detective's instincts. It was the smell of something unearthed, something disturbed.

She thought about her father's comment, about some spots being better left alone. It was a sentiment she'd heard often enough in her line of work – the past, buried deep, often best left undisturbed. But the truth, she knew, rarely stayed buried forever. Something always found a way to surface, to demand attention. The cold night air seemed to carry a weight, a quiet expectation. She wasn't sure what it was, but she felt it pressing in, a subtle but insistent drumbeat beneath the quiet hum of the town.

On her way back to her father's house, she passed the Hollow Ridge Community Church. The imposing stone structure stood sentinel, its steeple piercing the inky sky. Reverend Malcolm Hale's office light was on, a warm glow spilling onto the manicured lawn. Claire remembered him from her youth, a man of booming sermons and reassuring smiles, a pillar of the community who always seemed to know just what to say to comfort the grieving or rally the faltering. Now, though, a different kind of curiosity sparked within her. She wondered what counsel he offered about the new development, about the changing face of Hollow Ridge, about the secrets that undoubtedly lingered in the town's collective memory.

As she finally settled back into her childhood bed, the silence of the house felt different. No longer merely a familiar quiet, it was imbued with a subtle tension. The rhythmic creak of the old house, the distant howl of a lone dog, the rustle of leaves outside her window – each sound seemed amplified, charged with an unspoken narrative. She pulled the covers tighter, but sleep felt a long way off. Her detective's mind, accustomed to sifting through layers of deception and omission, was already working, replaying conversations, cataloging observations, noticing the things that didn't quite fit. Hollow Ridge, she realized, was far from the simple, sleepy town she remembered. And her return, she suspected, was going to be anything but a quiet visit. The quiet beneath the ridge was an illusion, a fragile veneer over something stirring. And she had a feeling it was about to break.

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