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The Silence Beneath Hollow Pines

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Introduction

Fog clings to the pines the way gossip clings to this town—low, wet, and everywhere at once. The church sits on the bluff like it's waiting for the ocean to make up its mind, its clapboard sides damp with salt film, its bell quiet. I stand at the back because I'm late and because I always was, at least for him. The scent of pine resin and old hymnals threads the air. A cough. The creak of a pew. My name in a whisper that doesn't ask me to turn.

My father lies in a polished box he would have called a waste of money. I can hear him: Don't let them dress me up for people who never visited when I was alive. We didn't talk for the last year, unless you count voicemails I didn't answer and postcards I sent from places he'd never go. I left Hollow Pines at nineteen with a secondhand camera and a lie I told myself about never looking back. It held, until now.

Hollow Pines looks smaller from the back pew, like a set I could break down and pack into a truck. But then a gust rattles the stained-glass window and the ocean answers somewhere below, a dull, steady impact as if the shore is beating out a secret in code. I trace the tide line by memory—the pier, the stacked crab pots, the diners that change owners but not menus. I know where the fog rolls in first, how it eats sound at the orchard and amplifies it on the wharf. Knowing is not the same as belonging.

Sheriff Lucas Hale stands near the pulpit, head bowed, hands clasped like a man in a brochure for reassurance. He was a good listener in high school when we cut class to sit on the hood of his father's truck and pretend we weren't scared of anything. Now he looks broader, smoothed at the edges, the kind of man who says it's complicated and means you should stop asking. Across the aisle, Jonah Wells keeps his eyes on the floor. He's older, sharper around the cheekbones, carrying an old grief badly folded. When he finally looks up, he doesn't look at me. Good. I don't know what my face would give away.

The Pastor talks about forgiveness, the way he always does when he's run out of things to say about the dead. My father was not an easy man, he intones, a phrase that lands like a thrown stone. In my chest, something tightens and releases, tightens again. I remember the slam of his truck door at midnight, the smell of bait and gasoline, the way he watched me and didn't. I remember his quiet after Mia vanished, a kind of winter that moved into the house and stayed. I remember telling him I needed to leave, and him turning back to the sink, hands in the dishwater, saying, Do what you're going to do, Nora. You will anyway.

After, the reception blurs—a hundred plates of casseroles in shades of beige, a

hundred hands. Condolences like rain: brief, chilled, impersonal. I keep my answers short. I'm sorry, yes. He was stubborn. No, I'm not staying long. Outside, the fog thickens into a soft wall. I breathe it in until my hair tastes like salt and my throat remembers childhood winters, that fine ache that says you've been near the sea too long.

His house is colder than the church. It's the same little place off Harbor Road, the roof pitched against the wind, the porch boards cupping rain. Inside, a soaked-in quiet. The air holds damp and the faint metallic smell of old pipes. I flip a switch and the kitchen blinks into being: mugs with chipped rims, a jar of screws, a calendar that stopped in May. His boots stand by the door like sentries who fell asleep on their feet. I don't open the fridge. I don't sit at the table we fought at. I go straight to the back room where he kept the things he didn't want me to touch.

Dust softens everything. Cardboard boxes sag at the corners, labels faded to ghosts. Tackle boxes. Coffee tins full of bolts. A cigar box that holds nothing but rubber bands and a dime. I crouch and start with what looks least sentimental, the practical, the things that won't hurt to handle. Paper rubs my fingers slick with age. Receipts, maps, a folded tide chart from a summer I can't forget. The pines outside scrape the siding in a steady, breathy way, like they're practicing a language I used to speak.

At the bottom of a dented metal lunch pail, under a bed of rusted hooks and a coil of monofilament line, my fingers find plastic. Smooth, rectangular, familiar in a way that takes me a second to name. I lift it out and the light from the single overhead bulb finds it: a microcassette, opaque gray, the kind that fit into the recorder I used before everything turned digital. My breath stops in that small, embarrassing way it does when the past puts its hand on your shoulder. On the label, in my father's careful, kid-glove print, someone else's name: M. Carter. And below it, a word I haven't said out loud in twenty years—Orchard.

CHAPTER ONE: The Funeral Fog

Fog eats sound in Hollow Pines the way tide eats chalk. It softens edges until everything looks like a version of itself you might be willing to forgive. This morning it wraps the church like a second skin, heavy with salt and the low, stubborn reek of damp pine. I arrive late and slip through a side door so I don't have to face the nave head-on. The floor shivers under my shoes, a familiar complaint of old boards, and the hymnals smell like dust and rain. I keep my head down. This is not a return; it is an interruption.

My father waits in a box at the front, dressed in wool that costs more than he ever spent on me in a year. I picture him objecting from somewhere under the floorboards, the way he objected to flowers, to fuss, to anything that softened the look of hard facts. He liked knots that stayed tied and doors that locked. He liked silence, mostly, and the ways you could store it in jars to open later when the world grew too loud. I never loved him, and I never stopped wanting him to love me anyway, which is a dumb sort of math that comes standard in this family.

I choose a pew near the back where the light is thin and stained, blues and grays cutting across my forearms like old bruises. From here I can pretend the church is a stage and the mourners are guests who showed up late to a party they never wanted to attend. Sheriff Lucas Hale holds himself like a prop for small-town safety, broad shoulders under a cheap suit, jaw set against whatever he's refusing to feel. He was my friend once. We shared a pack of cigarettes behind the bait shop and pretended we could outrun the tide. Now he watches the crowd with a practiced sweep, and I wonder who he sees when he looks at me: a witness, a threat, or a failed product of local parenting.

Jonah Wells sits alone across the aisle. He has learned to bend his body into angles that warn people off. I know the shape of that language. We grew up exchanging secrets like loose change, and I spent years not repaying the debt. When I glance his way, his eyes don't flicker, which means they've decided I'm not worth the trouble of a reaction. I can't say I blame him. I left. I built a life from footage and voiceovers and the careful exclusion of this town. He stayed. He watched Mia disappear into an August that still hasn't let go.

The pastor offers words that sound like they came from a bin of secondhand comforts. Forgiveness, he says, as if it were a bus that runs on schedule. Grief, he adds, as if it were a season you could outwait. I listen and count the ways his mouth moves without saying anything useful. My father was not a simple man, the pastor says, which is Hollow Pines code for hard to love and easier to ignore. In the front row, Celia Mercer

arranges her gloves with slow, practiced precision, watching the room the way someone watches a ledger. She runs the town's soft machinery, the money and the favors that never appear on ballots. Her smile is a small, closed door.

I remember my father's voice, low and impatient in the truck on nights like this, fog wrapping the headlights into useless halos. He didn't teach me how to mourn. He taught me how to survive interruptions. He taught me that most questions were insults in disguise. When I told him I wanted to leave, he didn't beg. He wiped his hands on a rag and nodded like he'd already watched me go. Do what you're going to do, he said. You will anyway. I left at nineteen with a borrowed camera and a head full of promises I couldn't keep. I told myself I wasn't running from him. I told myself I was running toward something cleaner. Maybe both were true.

After the service, the blur of casseroles and pressed hands. Someone tells me I look well. Someone else says he would have liked to see my work. I offer practiced sentences that land like stones in soup. I am sorry. Yes, it was sudden. No, I don't plan to stay. The fog outside tastes like metal and wet bark. It coats the back of my throat. Harbor Road is quiet, just the suck of tires on damp pavement and the occasional bark of a dog who knows better than to trust strangers. His house crouches at the end like it expects the tide to come up and finish the job.

Inside, the air is cool and dense, the kind of cold that settles in corners and waits for you to make the first move. I don't turn on all the lights. I leave the rooms in shadow, half-visible, the way he liked them. The kitchen table holds a tower of mail, the envelopes pale and soft as shed skins. I don't open them. I move to the back room, the one he warned me away from as a kid, the place where he stored things that mattered and didn't want anyone touching. The door groans like a confession. Dust floats in the slanted light, tasting like old books and electrical heat.

Boxes slump against each other, taped shut with care or neglect. Tackle boxes. Coffee tins jammed with screws and nails. A ceramic mug with a crack so fine it looks like a hairline thought. I work methodically, lifting, setting aside, refusing to romanticize the chore. My hands remember the weight of small, stubborn objects from childhood, the way I used to hide treasures and then forget where. A tide chart from a summer that still feels unfinished. A stack of receipts with numbers that mean nothing now. A folded map of the coast with penciled lines that lead nowhere I recognize.

At the bottom of a dented metal lunch pail, under a nest of rusted hooks and a coil of fishing line that still smells faintly of sea, I find plastic. It fits into the pad of my fingers like it was made for them. A microcassette, gray and opaque, the kind that used to sit in the dashboard of my father's truck during long, wordless drives. On the label, his careful print, each letter leaning slightly right like it's being blown by an invisible wind. M. Carter. Beneath it, a place name that hits me low in the gut: Orchard.

The room tilts for a second. I steady myself against the table and breathe until the edges come back into focus. Mia Carter. The name tastes like smoke and salt. A summer of cicadas and whispered plans. A girl who laughed as if she had a secret she wasn't going to keep. A disappearance that Hollow Pines folded into its daily routine like a shirt tucked under a mattress. The cassette sits in my hand like a live wire. It should be nothing. It should be a mistake, a relic, a thing mislabeled or misplaced. But I know my father's handwriting, and I know the Orchard, and I know that some silences are not empty at all.

I pocket the tape like a thief. Outside, the fog thickens, pressing against the windows like it wants in. I look at the tools on the table, at the knots I could cut and the boxes I could tape shut. I could leave now. I could drive back to the city and pretend I never felt the weight of that plastic in my palm. But the Orchard is waiting, and so is something I buried a long time ago that is now digging its way up.

I step into the hall and pull my coat tight. The house holds its breath. Somewhere down the road, the tide comes in and the pines lean closer, listening. I don't know what I'll find on that tape. I don't know who recorded it or why my father kept it like a secret kept in a jar. But I know what it means to return and pretend you haven't brought the past with you, packed tight in your pockets. I know the sound fog makes when it stops being weather and starts being a warning.

I step outside and let the cold take my face. The road to the Orchard is dark, but I've driven it enough times to know the way by feel. The cassette clicks against my thigh like a small, persistent heartbeat. I turn the key in the ignition and let the engine settle into its low, grumbling voice. Hollow Pines looks quiet, harmless, almost soft in the fog. I know better. I know that the quiet is only the shape of something else holding its breath. I drive toward it anyway.

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