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The House on Hollow Ridge

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Introduction

Claire Mercer pulled the rental car off the narrow road and let the engine tick into silence. Hollow Ridge rose before her the way it always had in childhood memory: the slope dark with pines, the Mercers' house set back from the lane like it had turned its shoulder to the town long ago. Late light slid off the windows and left them black. She could smell damp needles through the cracked window, the metallic breath of rain coming, and, underneath, the faintest thread of lemon oil that only ever lived inside her mother's house. The air here always felt thicker, as if it had to press past things unsaid.

Inside, the house greeted her with the quiet of rooms that had learned to keep secrets. The entryway was smaller than she remembered, the runner flattened by years of footsteps that had stopped last week with Ruth Mercer's heart. Claire touched the wall and felt the roughness under the paint where her mother's hand had once smoothed a nail hole. Family photographs marched up the staircase—school portraits, holidays, the wedding that had come and gone before she was old enough to remember it—but years of sun had silvered the glass, dimming faces into silhouettes. She paused at one frame and saw only her own reflection laid over the figure beneath, as if the past had decided to keep its features to itself.

The attic door waited at the end of the upstairs hall, as it had in every bad dream since she was fifteen. It was plain wood, painted the same dull white as the trim, but the lock was old iron, a dark oval like an extra eye. When she pressed her palm to it, the wood was colder than the rest of the house. The key was not in the usual clay dish on the hall table. It was not on the nail behind the frame where Ruth hid spare keys for people who followed rules. Claire tried the knob, gentle at first, then harder, and felt the bolt hold. Behind the door, the house made that soft settling noise old houses make when they decide they are listening.

She had told herself she was here for signatures and boxes: an estate to close, a life to fold and stack and pass along to someone else. But Hollow Ridge did not believe in clean exits. At the funeral home, the town came in their good clothes and murmured the right phrases. Sheriff Evan Drake shook her hand with the careful warmth of a man who watched more than he said. Jonah Hale, who still lived on the next property, lifted his hat and offered to carry a casserole to her car, his eyes catching and slipping away like a fish in shadow. Near the coffee urn, two women Claire did not recognize compared versions of her sister's last week of life with a fluency that suggested rehearsal. Accident, one said. Poor Mags, careless as ever, said the other. Then a third voice, low and certain: She was scared, you know. She told me that in the aisle at Finch's. Scared of what? Claire asked, but the woman only pressed her lips together,

as if the answer was a currency she might spend later.

Back at the house, the scent of lemon oil was stronger in Ruth's study, clinging to the walnut desk and the careful, labeled folders. Claire switched on the green-shaded lamp and watched the circle of light rest on her mother's handwriting. Deeds. Taxes. Letters. Rules in manila. Ruth had kept the house and its stories filed where she could reach them; she had kept her daughters at arm's length in a different way. The quiet buzz of the lamp felt like a presence. Claire slid open a drawer and found her own name on an empty envelope. Beneath it, an indentation marked where something thicker had once lain. It was such a small absence. It made her think of everything else that had gone missing without a note.

Night came fast in Hollow Ridge. Wind moved through the pines and made the siding creak, a familiar conversation between wood and weather. Claire carried a suitcase to the old blue room and set it on the quilt Ruth had pieced from dresses no one wore anymore. She sat on the bed and let the weight of the day take shape in her chest: grief, yes, but something narrower too, a wire pulled tight. She closed her eyes and saw Mags standing on the porch years ago, hair wild, mouth set to a dare. The memory came like a photograph with a seam across it, two halves not quite meeting. Claire tried to push it away and failed.

Her phone hummed in her pocket. Lena's text lit the dark: You okay? Want me up there tomorrow? Claire stared at the words until the letters blurred and she could almost make them say something else. She typed, I'm fine. It's a lot. Come if you can. Then she added, There's a locked door. Because even in text, even to a friend who did not believe in ghosts, it felt like a confession that mattered.

Before she turned out the light, Claire stood once more at the attic door and placed her ear to the seam. The house had cooled. The old iron breathed cold into her skin. From somewhere past the ceiling, the faintest rattle—pipes settling, or a draft fingering a loose hinge. She knew better than to make a promise to a place, but she heard herself anyway: Tomorrow. After the burial. We start. The lock did not answer. The house did not argue. It only kept the rest of its story on the other side, waiting for someone to decide which parts to believe.

CHAPTER ONE:

The morning after Ruth's funeral felt like a curtain falling on an empty stage. The last mourners had dispersed, their polite condolences echoing in the now too-quiet rooms. Claire stood in her mother's bedroom, the air still faintly perfumed with lavender and the metallic tang of old age. Ruth had been meticulous, a woman who believed in order, but even her careful system couldn't contain the sheer volume of a life. Boxes, labeled with Ruth's precise script—"Linens," "Correspondence (1990-2000)," "Holiday Decorations"—stood stacked like silent sentinels.

Claire pulled on a pair of latex gloves, a concession to the dust and the unsettling intimacy of touching her mother's things. She started with the dresser, opening drawers filled with neatly folded scarves, delicate handkerchiefs, and costume jewelry that glittered dully in the weak morning light. Each item felt like a small, mute accusation of her long absence. She hadn't been here for Ruth's last years, hadn't sorted through these treasures with her mother still breathing. The guilt was a familiar ache, dull and persistent.

On the top of the dresser, beneath a framed photo of Mags at her college graduation, lay a small, velvet-bound photo album. Claire hesitated, then opened it. It was a haphazard collection, not the carefully curated display of the living room. Snapshots of vacations she barely remembered, blurred landscapes, and candid moments. Most were of Ruth and her husband, Claire's father, a man she knew more from photographs than from memory. He had died when she was small, leaving a quiet, enduring void in the house.

She flipped through the pages, her gaze lingering on a picture of a younger Ruth, her smile less guarded, her eyes still sparkling with something approaching joy. Then, toward the back, she found it. A square, black-and-white photograph, slightly curling at the edges, slipped loose from its corner tabs. It showed Mags, perhaps in her late teens, standing on a grassy knoll. She was laughing, her head thrown back, hair a dark halo against the bright sky. But it wasn't Mags who caught Claire's attention.

Standing a few paces behind her, partially obscured by a wild rose bush, was another figure. They were blurred, as if caught in motion or perhaps deliberately out of focus. It wasn't a trick of the light or a developing error; the blur was too intentional, too uniform. Claire leaned closer, her breath fogging the surface of the print. The figure was tall, broad-shouldered, with what looked like dark hair. The angle of their body was turned slightly away, but there was an undeniable sense of presence, an impression of watching. A chill traced its way down Claire's spine. Who was this person? And why had Ruth kept a photograph where Mags was so vibrant, yet her

companion was so deliberately indistinct?

She tried to place Mags's age, the landscape. It wasn't the Hollow Ridge she knew, not the dense pines or the rock formations. The hill was gentler, open, with a distant glimmer that might have been water. A memory, fleeting and indistinct, tried to surface—a summer, a trip, an argument. But it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving only a residue of unease.

Claire tucked the photograph into her pocket, a small act of rebellion against her mother's carefully arranged world. She moved on to the desk, a heavy mahogany piece where Ruth had managed the family's finances and, Claire now suspected, its secrets. The surface was cleared, save for a blotter, a pen holder, and a small, leather-bound address book. The drawers were another matter.

The first three held predictable items: utility bills, insurance policies, a stack of blank stationery. The fourth, however, was stubbornly locked. Claire rattled the small brass handle, but it held firm. Ruth, ever the keeper, had hidden a key for every locked door in this house, but this one remained elusive. She ran her fingers along the bottom of the drawer above, then along the underside of the desk itself. Nothing. The locked drawer felt like a physical representation of her mother's reticence, a final, unyielding barrier.

She moved around the room, her eyes scanning for anything out of place. A loose floorboard? A slightly askew book on the shelf? The room was a monument to order, leaving no obvious clues. She even checked inside the large ceramic plant pot by the window, half-expecting a tiny key wrapped in tissue. The air grew heavier, the scent of lemon polish now seeming less comforting and more like a shroud.

Frustrated, Claire returned to the main living area, the blurred photograph still a prickle in her pocket. The house was settling around her, the old timbers creaking as if sighing. She remembered Mags's room, untouched since her sister had moved out years ago. Ruth, Claire knew, had never truly let go of Mags. Perhaps there, amongst her sister's forgotten things, she might find something.

Mags's bedroom was at the back of the house, overlooking the overgrown garden. The air was stale, the curtains drawn, casting the room in a permanent twilight. Claire flicked on the light switch, revealing a space frozen in time. A half-read paperback lay face down on the bedside table, a scarf draped over a chair, a poster of a faded rock band still clinging to the wall with ancient tape. It was Mags, messy and vibrant, echoing in every detail.

Claire started cautiously, respecting the ghost of her sister's presence. She opened the wardrobe, revealing clothes that smelled faintly of old linen and something sweet, like potpourri. She sifted through drawers filled with trinkets, old letters from friends,

and photographs of Mags laughing with people Claire didn't recognize. Nothing seemed out of place, nothing hinted at secrets or dangers.

Then, tucked beneath a stack of old t-shirts at the very bottom of a drawer, she felt something hard. Her fingers closed around a slim, leather-bound book. It was a diary, its pages thick with Mags's looping, energetic handwriting. The cover was plain, unembellished, but Claire could feel the weight of untold stories within it. A tremor went through her. This wasn't just a nostalgic keepsake; this was Mags, speaking directly to her from beyond the grave.

She pulled it out, her heart thumping a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The leather was cool against her palms. The first few pages were filled with mundane details, teenage angst, and observations about school. Claire skipped forward, past years of unread entries, searching for something, anything, connected to the blurred photograph or the locked drawer.

She found a page dated just a few months before Mags's death. The handwriting was more urgent, the words sprawling across the lines. "Heard something about the Ridge. Something big. Ruth knows. She always knows." Claire's breath hitched. The Ridge. Hollow Ridge. What had Mags heard? And what did Ruth know? The thought that her mother had kept secrets, not just from her, but from Mags too, was a bitter pill.

Claire continued to scan, her eyes devouring the words. "He warned me off. Said it wasn't my business. But it *is* my business. It's *our* business." He? Who was "he"? The blurred figure in the photograph? A new tremor, colder this time, snaked up her spine.

She flipped another page, then another, until she reached the very end of the diary. The last entry was short, scrawled in a frantic hand that looked nothing like Mags's usual confident script. "I found it. The proof. But now... I think they know I have it. I need to hide it. Somewhere safe. Somewhere *they* won't look. The old place..." The words trailed off, a jagged line that seemed to cut the sentence short. The date on the entry was three days before Mags's official date of death.

Claire squeezed the diary tight, its edges digging into her skin. This wasn't grief or paperwork. This was a message, a desperate plea from her sister. The house wasn't just filled with her mother's secrets; it was a mausoleum of Mags's last, terrifying days. And then, as she turned the last page, her fingers brushed against something—a loose piece of paper, folded precisely in half, tucked into the very back cover. It was a single, faded newspaper clipping.

The headline was old, yellowed with age: "Local Man Dies in Tragic Accident." The picture showed a grainy image of a car wreck, and beneath it, a name. A name that Claire dimly recognized from childhood, from hushed conversations and her mother's strained voice. The article went on to describe the victim, a respected member of the

community, and implied no foul play. Yet, the way it was hidden, the date of the clipping—years before Mags’s death, yet clearly connected to her last entry—suggested a link Claire couldn’t yet grasp. The blurred photograph in her pocket suddenly felt heavier, charged with a new, dark significance.

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