Market Day at Hollow Bridge

MixCache.com

Table of Contents

Introduction

Hollow Bridge is a town designed around a bargain. It was laid out that way long before anyone now living remembers: a river bent like an elbow, a low iron span that gave the place its name, and the market green pressed up close to both, so goods and stories could pass in the same breath. On Market Day the air hums with argument and laughter, with the slap of hands closing deals, with the discreet arithmetic of neighbors measuring what they can afford to give and what they dare to take. Prices here are not just numbers; they are weather reports, confessions, small brags, and occasional lies. It is a system as fragile and as stubborn as the old bridge itself, patched and repainted, trusted because it has held—until it doesn’t.

This story begins when the holding fails in quiet ways. Not with sirens or proclamations, but with a cough stifled behind a stall curtain, with a bruise that does not fade, with a tired man who does not stay buried. Fences are for keeping things in and keeping things out, but they depend on the living to mend them. In Hollow Bridge, the fences start to fail—not only the split-rail and cattle wire, not only the chain hooked across a service road, but the agreements between people that kept fear on one side and generosity on the other. When the dead will not stay put and the sick will not admit they are, bargains take on a new kind of risk.

Three people face that risk from different angles. Cole Mercer, a merchant whose name is half his job and half an old family joke, knows that trust is his only real inventory. His stall runs on memory—who paid late but paid honest, who always throws in an extra egg when times are lean. Ruth Darnell, retired from the classroom but not from the habit of keeping a careful ledger of the town’s character, understands how a community solves problems until it suddenly can’t. She has taught parents as gently as she taught their children, and she knows the difference between a mistake and a decision. Jamie Quill, a young mechanic with oil under their nails and an engine’s rhythm in their bones, can make a dead machine breathe again; that talent becomes a strange kind of hope when other resurrections begin to trouble the nights.

As the market becomes the center of the slow-burn outbreak, something else slicks the wheels of ruin: profit. Scarcity allows a few to weigh the town on their thumb, to change the currency from gratitude to fear. A profiteering ring grows in the shade of the stalls, camouflaged as neighborly convenience and helpful consolidation. Prices edge upward like a fever that no one mentions, and new scrip floods the green with promises stamped in ink but backed by nothing a person can eat. Cole, Ruth, and Jamie must learn to read a different kind of ledger—one that tallies moral compromises alongside bread, parts, and medicine.

This is a thriller, but it is not always loud. Much of what matters happens in the pauses: a hesitation before truth, a glance toward the bridge where the river carries yesterday’s news away, a hand that hovers over a scale and then—only then—comes down. When people change, they rarely announce it; they slide inch by inch toward the person they will be when the test comes. In crisis, every ordinary choice picks up extra weight. Do you round up a neighbor’s tally because you can, or round it down because you should? Do you tell the truth and narrow your circle, or keep silent and make room for more?

The dead here are not metaphors, though they will carry some of the town’s secrets on their silent shoulders. They walk the edge of the green as the sun goes down, testing rails and gates, testing patience. They turn Market Day into a map of hazards: which path is safe, which neighbor is safer, which price is disaster with a smile. The threat does not gallop; it crawls. It asks you to ignore it today and pay tomorrow. It teaches that collapse is not a cliff but a slope, greased by convenience and made steep by hunger.

Market Day at Hollow Bridge follows people who have never thought of themselves as heroes through choices that no longer fit the old scales. It is about money when money is not paper but favor and breath. It is about how a town can be both an embrace and a chokehold, how kindness can be rationed or manufactured, how betrayal sometimes arrives dressed as efficiency. It is about the social cracks that show up as prices first, then as wounds, then as graves. And it is about the stubborn human impulse to repair—to nail an extra plank, to share a wrench, to teach one more lesson—when the fence won’t hold.

If you come to this book for its turns and revelations, take them as you find them, but read also for the texture of the marketplace itself, the ledger of small decencies, the quiet inventions that let people get through another day. Every chapter is a stall on the green, and behind each table is a choice being weighed. In the end, what we keep will not fit in pockets or jars. It will be the memory of who stood still when the line broke, who crossed the bridge when it mattered, and who understood that in a failing market the rarest commodity is not grain or fuel, but the courage to be fair.

CHAPTER ONE: Market Day

The bridge came first. Everyone in Hollow Bridge knew that, the way they knew their own names and the direction of the river's pull. The iron span arched low over the water, black with age and streaked with rust that bled orange streaks after every hard rain. It connected nothing grand—two muddy banks, a pair of rutted roads, and the green where the market sprawled every Saturday from dawn until the light went thin. The bridge was not beautiful, but it was honest, and in Hollow Bridge that counted for more than people let on.

Beneath it, the river muttered over stones. It carried things downstream—leaves, bottles, the occasional boot—and it did not carry them back. That suited the town. Hollow Bridge had always been a place of one-way traffic: goods in, stories in, trouble in. Getting things out was harder. Ask anyone who'd tried to leave, or anyone who'd tried to forget, and they'd tell you the same thing. The bridge lets you cross, but the town holds.

Cole Mercer set up his stall before the sun crested the church steeple. He unfolded the canvas awning—faded green, patched twice along the left edge where a winter wind had found its weak spot—and drove the corner poles into the soft ground with a rubber mallet he kept in a belt loop. The sound was a market-day metronome: thwack, thwack, thwack, joining the other merchants who were staking their claims along the green like flags on a playing field.

His table was secondhand, a farmhouse affair with legs of unequal length that Cole had shimmed with a folded magazine page. It worked. Stability, he believed, was a matter of improvisation, not perfection. He laid out his wares: jars of preserves lined up like soldiers, a basket of onions still dirt-caked from Morrow's field, bolts of cloth in three patterns that his wife had picked before she passed, and a row of tin cups whose origin he never fully explained to anyone. People asked sometimes, half-joking, and Cole would just smile and tap the side of his nose. That was the merchant's way. Let them wonder. Curiosity paid better than answers.

He was not tall, Cole, but he had a particular density to him, the kind that made him seem rooted wherever he stood. Gray at the temples, steady hands, eyes that tracked movement across the green with the practiced ease of a man who counted heads because heads meant customers, and customers meant bread on the table—not just his table, but the tables of a dozen people who depended on the market being what it had always been: the center of Hollow Bridge's gravity.

Ruth Darnell arrived at her usual spot near the east end of the green, the bench

beside the old stone sundial where she could see the entire market without looking conspicuous. She carried a canvas tote that held a notebook, two pencils, a thermos of tea, and a pair of reading glasses in a case beaded with cat hair. She was seventy-one, and she moved with the careful economy of someone who had learned long ago that energy was a finite resource and should not be wasted on spectacle.

She had retired from Hollow Bridge Elementary seven years ago, but retirement had not silenced the teacher in her. She observed. She catalogued. She noted which stalls were doing well and which were conspicuously empty, which merchants traded with ease and which seemed to be waiting for customers who had already decided to spend their money elsewhere. The notebook was her ledger of the town's pulse—not financial, exactly, but something deeper. Character. Reputation. The invisible currency that moved through Hollow Bridge faster than any coin.

Ruth sat, poured tea, and opened to a fresh page. At the top she wrote: *Market Day, the fifteenth of October. Warm. Too warm for mid-October.* She underlined *too warm* twice. The weather was a small thing, but small things had a way of becoming large in Hollow Bridge, and Ruth had lived long enough to respect the signposts that others stepped over.

She watched Cole set up, watched the efficient geometry of his display, and allowed herself a small smile. Cole was one of the good ones. Not perfect—no one was—but the kind of man who remembered that a customer's child had a birthday coming up, or that someone's mother was ailing and might appreciate a jar of something soft and sweet. He ran his stall the way he ran his life: with attention, and with the understanding that the market was not merely a transaction but a conversation.

She wrote in her notebook: *Cole's display strong. Turnout uncertain so far.*

The turnout would come. It always did. Saturday market was not just tradition in Hollow Bridge; it was infrastructure. Without it, the town's informal economy would seize like an engine without oil. People traded what they grew, what they made, what they had too much of and couldn't bear to waste. A dozen eggs for a bushel of apples. A repaired hinge for a bag of flour. Favors and promises and the understanding that today you might give more than you got, because next week the balance would tip the other way. It was a system built on trust, and trust, in Hollow Bridge, was the most valuable commodity on the green.

Jamie Quill arrived last, as always, because Jamie's hands needed to stop turning wrenches before they could fold a tablecloth or count change. The old flatbed trailer hitched behind an ATV rattled into the gravel lot at the south end of the green at half past eight, forty-five minutes after Cole, and Jamie tumbled out in a denim jacket two sizes too big and boots that had been resoled more times than anyone wanted to count. A toolbox the size of a small coffin thumped to the ground, and Jamie set up

shop beside the flower vendor who had long ago stopped asking why a mechanic needed a stall at a market.

Because Jamie fixed more than engines. That was the thing outsiders never understood. In Hollow Bridge, a person's reputation was their stock-in-trade, and Jamie's reputation was: if you brought it broken, Jamie could make it work. Stoves, generators, pocket watches, children's bicycles. If it had moving parts or a loose connection, Jamie Quill could diagnose it with a glance and a tap of the knuckles, the way a doctor might press a stethoscope to a chest. The mechanic's stall was less a place to browse and more a place to arrive with your problem and leave lighter.

Today's first customer was Delia Mott, who brought a pressure canner with a stuck valve. Jamie took it, turned it over, listened to it with an ear cocked like a bird dog on point. "Spring's corroded," Jamie said, holding it up so Delia could see. "You've been boiling at the wrong pressure for three batches. That's why your pickles went soft."

Delia winced. "All of them?"

"All of them. New valve's fifty cents if I cut it from brass stock." Jamie grinned. "Or you can buy a new canner for twelve dollars at the hardware store in Bellham, which is forty miles away and doesn't carry canner parts anyway, so here we are."

Delia paid with a jar of honey and two apples. Jamie logged it in a grease-stained notebook that served as both ledger and scratch paper. The math worked if you didn't think about it too hard, and Jamie had stopped thinking about it years ago. Hollow Bridge didn't run on dollars, or at least not entirely. It ran on a barter system so deeply embedded in the town's DNA that even the children understood its grammar. You gave what you had, and you took what you needed, and you kept a mental tally that might or might not balance by year's end. Most years, it did. That was the unspoken miracle of the green.

By midmorning the market was in full voice. The air smelled of fresh bread from the Rossi stand, of damp wool from the clothing bins, and of the faint chemical sweetness that rose from Jamie's soldering iron when someone needed a wire joined. Children darted between stalls clutching coins they'd been sent to spend with strict instructions not to waste. Dogs lay under tables with the practiced resignation of creatures who knew that market days were long and hard floors were unforgiving.

Cole sold three jars of plum preserves to a woman from the east ridge before nine o'clock, which was unusual. Plum season had been poor this year—a late frost had killed half the crop—and normally preserves from the Mercer stall didn't move that fast. But the woman, whose name was Harriet Sovek, was not buying preserves. She was buying certainty. Plum preserves meant that someone had fruit, and fruit meant the orchard had survived the frost, and if the orchard had survived, then maybe the

season would not be as lean as everyone feared. People bought symbols in Hollow Bridge as often as they bought goods.

Cole rang up the sale with a pencil mark in his ledger—not because he didn't trust his memory, but because he believed that writing things down made them real. If it wasn't in the book, it didn't happen. That was a lesson from his father, who'd run the stall before him, and it was a lesson Cole extended to every part of his life. Clarity was kindness. Ambiguity was how friendships ended.

He glanced up and saw a face he didn't recognize. A man in a gray coat standing near the bridge approach, watching the market with the attentiveness of someone cataloguing it, but not participating. No stall, no goods, no easy nod to passersby. Just standing. Watching.

Cole's hand drifted to the stack of price tags on his table. He'd seen that posture before—not at the market, but at funerals. The careful stillness of someone deciding whether to enter or turn around.

The man didn't approach Cole's stall. He moved along the green, slow and deliberate, pausing at the fence posts that marked the market's perimeter. Then he was gone, around the bend toward the south road, as if the market had briefly held his attention and then released him.

Cole watched him go, then made a small mark in his ledger beside today's date. A dot. Just one. He'd developed the habit after his wife died—marking things he couldn't yet name. Not superstition, exactly. More like a promise to himself that he would pay attention, that he would notice, that the ordinary vigilance of a market trader extended to the things that didn't yet have words.

Ruth, from her bench, had seen the man too. She had written nothing about him yet. She was still waiting to see if he mattered.

Across the green, Jamie was explaining to a teenager named Otis Kettering why a spark plug could not be sharpened with a file. Otis held the plug in his palm like a dying bird, and Jamie spoke with the patient precision of someone who had given this explanation many times and would give it many more. "It's not the shape, Otis. It's the gap. You can reshape a thing, but if the gap's wrong, the engine doesn't know what it's doing. It fires blind."

Otis nodded, not because he understood but because Jamie's tone invited agreement. That was one of Jamie's skills—not teaching, exactly, but making people feel like learning was possible. Which, in Hollow Bridge, was its own kind of currency.

Jamie glanced up as a murmur passed through the market. Not panic—not yet,

anyway—but the kind of ripple that travels through a crowd when something has gone wrong and no one has decided how serious it is yet. Near the north edge of the green, by the fence where the market met the creek-side path, a woman was sitting on the ground. She had been standing at the Morrow vegetable stall a moment ago, and then she had folded. Not dramatically, not with a cry. She had simply lowered herself to the earth as if her bones had decided to stop cooperating.

Cole was already moving. He crossed the green with the efficiency of a man who had spent years navigating between stalls without spilling a full cup of coffee. Behind him, two others fell into step without being asked: Ruth, abandoning her tea, and Jamie, leaving Otis with the spark plug.

The woman was in her fifties, maybe older. Her face was the gray of unglazed pottery, and her hands gripped the fence post with a strength that seemed to come from somewhere other than her own intention. "I'm fine," she said, though her breathing said otherwise. "Just the heat."

"It's October," Ruth said gently, kneeling beside her. She placed a hand on the woman's forehead and withdrew it quickly. "That's not heat. That's a fever."

"Margaret," the woman gasped. "Clara Morrow. I walked here. I'll walk home. I don't need—"

"You need to sit down and drink water and let us think," Jamie said, producing a canteen from the trailer with the practiced ease of someone whose supply bag was always closer to a field kit than a lunch pail.

Cole stood back, taking in the scene with his merchant's eye. Three faces concerned. A small crowd beginning to gather at a careful distance—the respectful radius Hollow Bridge residents maintained around trouble. A sense, settling over him like damp, that this was not the last time something like this would happen. That the green, which had always been a place of plenty, was about to ask something harder of them all.

Clara Morrow was escorted to a shaded spot near the sundial and given water and a damp cloth from Jamie's kit. Ruth took her pulse with two fingers pressed to the wrist, a habit from the first-aid courses she'd taught at the elementary school. Cole dispatched Otis Kettering—who had forgotten his spark plug entirely—to find Doc Pritchard and to ride by the Kester farm on the way back to see if anyone there was feeling similarly ill.

"I'll be fine," Clara insisted again, and this time her voice carried the brittle edge of someone who was not fine but had long ago learned to say otherwise. "Slept wrong. Ate something."

"You ate something," Ruth said softly, "that something ate back."

Clara looked at her, startled. Then a cough broke through her composure—wet, rattling, and deep. It echoed off the iron bridge and seemed to hang in the air far longer than it should have.

The crowd shifted. Not away—Hollow Bridge was not that kind of town—but subtly, like an animal sensing a change in barometric pressure. Shoulders drew in. Voices dropped. Jamie placed a hand on Cole's arm and nodded toward the south end of the green, where a second figure had appeared: a man leaning against the fence, motionless, his hat pulled low, his posture wrong in a way that was hard to articulate but easy to feel.

"He's been there since before I opened," Jamie said.

Cole looked again. The man was not watching the market. He was watching the bridge. And as Cole watched, the man slowly raised one hand and pressed it flat against his own chest, as if checking whether something inside him was still running.

Ruth had seen it too. She pulled her notebook from the tote and opened to a fresh page, and for the first time that morning, her hand hesitated above the paper. She wrote: *Clara Morrow ill. Fever. Market disrupted.* She paused. Then: *Strangers on the green. Two, maybe more.*

And beneath that, in smaller letters: *Something is wrong. Pay attention.*

Cole Mercer looked from the sick woman to the strange man by the fence to the iron bridge beyond, where the river ran its one-way course, carrying yesterday's water toward a sea no one in Hollow Bridge had ever seen. He thought of his father's ledger, full of careful marks and columns that always balanced. He thought of the phrase his wife had used to describe a bad bargain: *A deal that looks square but leans.*

"Otis," he called out, not taking his eyes off the man by the fence. "When you find Doc Pritchard, tell him we need him here. Tell him it's not just Clara."

Otis nodded and jogged off, his boots crunching on gravel. Jamie stayed with Clara, whose breathing had slowed to something thin and labored. Ruth wrote, her pencil moving faster now, filling the page with observations that read like dispatches from a war no one had declared.

The market continued around them. Bread was sold. Deals were struck. Children chased dogs and dogs slept and the Rossi stand did a brisk trade in sourdough loaves. But beneath the ordinary commerce of the morning, something else had begun—not

loud, not sudden, but present the way a crack in a foundation is present: invisible until the weight shifts, and then impossible to ignore.

Cole took a breath, straightened his awning, and returned to his stall. He would sell preserves. He would make change. He would smile at the people who came to his table and remember their names and ask after their families. That was what he did. That was who he was.

But he would watch. He would pay attention. And if the green, which had always been a place of abundance, was becoming something else—something edged with unease—he intended to be the one who noticed first.

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.