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The Vanishing Archive of Hollow Ridge

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Introduction

The first breath of Hollow Ridge met Nora Quinn with salt and iron, as if the ocean itself had laid its hand across her mouth to keep her quiet. Fog pressed low over the harbor, cottoning the masts and smudging the lighthouse into a pale thumbprint against the sky. She eased her car along Water Street, past clapboard storefronts with hand-lettered signs and shutters painted in once-bright colors, and tried not to count how many years it had been since she'd last come home for longer than a day. The town hadn't changed much. Or maybe it had and she didn't trust her eyes; grief was a lens that warped even the straightest lines.

Nora's life had been measured for so long in paper and cloth and thread that she couldn't help reading the town the way she read a book. The curling paint on the ferry office door—age hardened by weather, not neglect. The blackened brass knob on the Darrow House Museum—touched constantly, a beloved entry. The way the fog beaded against the library's mullioned windows—salt air eaten into old glass. In her lab in Boston, she could lose hours mending a seventeenth-century binding, coaxing torn vellum back to itself with wheat-starch paste and patience. It was order, and it was mercy. Here, no repair felt possible or simple. The call that brought her down the coast—the neighbor's careful voice, the words we lost him—had split something that would not take paste.

Her father had belonged to this shore the way some men belong to a church. Harbormaster's son. Volunteer docent. A man whose pockets always had a folding knife, a stub of pencil, a coil of twine. To Nora, he had been a map of contradictions: present and absent, tender and distracted, keeper of stories and the best at dodging her questions. He'd put books in her hands before she could read, tracing the margins as if they held a second text only they could see. He called it the hum—the way old paper remembered. Even when she left for school and then for work and built a life built around other people's histories, he remained a voice on the phone with weather reports and the names of migrating birds, with small talk hiding something he wouldn't or couldn't name. In the last week, that voice had thinned to a whisper, and then the line had gone silent.

The Quinn house waited on the rise above the harbor, gray-shingled and shouldered against the wind, its porch groaning in the damp. A casserole from Mrs. Bell sat cooling on the steps with a note tucked under its foil, and the key was where it had always been—inside the tin with the cracked blue rooster. In the kitchen, the clock over the stove had stopped at 2:17, as if it, too, had decided enough was enough. Her father's desk in the small back room was tidied in a way that wasn't his style: ledger closed, pens capped, a bundle of index cards squared and rubber-banded. There was a

sealed envelope beside them with her name, the loop of the Q in her father's hand as familiar as a heartbeat. She didn't open it. Not yet. Grief made even good news cruel, and whatever it contained would not be good.

She unpacked by rote, as if fitting her few clothes into the old dresser drawers could keep her from thinking about the service, the faces she would have to greet, the polite invasions of sympathy. Hollow Ridge did sympathy theatrically, with flowers from every porch and pies enough to feed a regiment. It did politics more quietly. In the florist window was a tastefully small card announcing a new grant for the Ridge Historical Society courtesy of Crane Marine Development. The name was a rumor said out loud; Elias Crane had been busy while she'd been gone. She felt a tightening, an instinctive conservator's caution: money could save a collection, or it could claim it.

The Historical Society sat three blocks inland, a red-brick box with an oculus window and a plaque that told you what mattered if you didn't already know. Nora had run through its rooms as a girl, the way some children took to fields or rivers. She could see the reading room in her mind with its green-shaded lamps and faded rugs, the glass cases full of ship manifests and sea charts and letters tucked between weights of polished stone. They'd called the stacks the archive as if it were a singular creature—The Archive—half myth, half filing system. It held the town's paper bones. She hadn't planned to visit it the minute she arrived. Now the thought of not going felt like leaving a wound unattended.

She stood at the kitchen window and watched the fog breathe in and out over the harbor, watched gulls make their aimless sacrament over the pier. The introduction they would expect from her would be simple—daughter of Patrick Quinn, conservator in Boston, back for a few days. She would shake hands, accept condolences, say the right things. But in the back of her mind, the habit of work had already woken. It was reaching for a pencil to the margins, hunting for pattern in the scatter of a life ended: the envelope on the desk, the card in the florist window, the old door that always stuck at the Historical Society if you didn't lift while you turned the key. Nora didn't believe in omens. She believed in evidence, in the story that paper tells when someone finally listens.

When the church bell tolled noon—twelve slow notes that stitched the fog and the water and the hill into a single piece—she set the casserole in the fridge and the envelope in her bag. She told herself she would sleep that night, that she would open what her father had left her with a clear head, that she would go to the Society tomorrow and offer help without stepping on toes. She told herself many reasonable things. Outside, the tide turned, and the town turned with it, revealing shapes below the surface that weren't there an hour before. The past was like that, too: obedient to its own pull, waiting for the moment it could show its face.

Nora pressed her palm to the cool glass and, without meaning to, made herself a

promise. She would keep her head down. She would let the town remember her father the way it needed to. She would not go searching where she wasn't wanted. She held the promise between her teeth like thread, felt its strength, and then—because she knew herself and knew Hollow Ridge—felt the first soft fray. The margins here had always whispered to her. And somewhere, in the hush and salt of this place, they had already begun again.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming to Hollow Ridge

The memorial service for Patrick Quinn was scheduled for three o'clock on a Friday, a time Nora knew her father would have considered profoundly inconvenient for anyone with a boat to mend or a tide to catch. Yet, by a quarter to, the small parking lot of the First Congregational Church of Hollow Ridge was overflowing, cars spilling onto the narrow shoulders of Lighthouse Road. Nora, having driven the familiar route from the Quinn house, felt a familiar tightness in her chest. It wasn't just grief; it was the suffocating weight of expectation, of a town turning out en masse to acknowledge a loss that, to them, felt shared.

She parked her rental car behind a beat-up pickup truck adorned with a peeling "Hollow Ridge Lobstermen" bumper sticker, the kind of vehicle her father might have driven if he hadn't been so particular about engine maintenance. Stepping out, the air was still thick with the lingering scent of damp earth and salt, a perfume unique to this stretch of coast. Overhead, the sky had begun to clear, patches of brilliant blue emerging from the dissolving fog, giving the day a deceptive lightness.

As she walked towards the church, Nora noticed the familiar faces. Old Mr. Henderson from the hardware store, his stooped posture even more pronounced now, talking animatedly with Martha Bell, the same neighbor who'd left the casserole on her porch. Mrs. Bell, ever the town's unofficial social director, spotted Nora and her face softened, a well-rehearsed sadness taking hold. Nora braced herself for the inevitable embrace, the murmured condolences that would feel both genuine and utterly exhausting.

Inside the church, the air was warmer, hushed. The scent of old wood and beeswax mingled with the faint, cloying sweetness of lilies from the arrangements clustered around the altar. Nora saw her Aunt Carol, her father's younger sister, sitting stiffly in the front pew, her usually vibrant red hair pulled back in a severe bun. Aunt Carol had never approved of Patrick's reclusive tendencies, his quiet obsession with history and paper. Their relationship had always been fraught, a delicate dance of unspoken resentments.

Nora slid into the pew beside her, offering a quiet "Aunt Carol." Her aunt turned, her eyes red-rimmed but dry. "Nora. You made it." The words were clipped, more a statement than a question. "I suppose your father would have appreciated the irony of everyone being on time for him for once." It was a typical Carol observation, sharp-edged with affection, or something close to it.

The service began, a predictable progression of hymns, a eulogy from Reverend Miller that painted Patrick Quinn as a pillar of the community, a quiet scholar, a dedicated

father. Nora listened, her gaze drifting to the stained-glass window depicting a schooner battling a storm, its colors vibrant even in the muted light. She wondered if the Reverend truly knew her father, or if he was simply reciting the eulogy template for a respected, if somewhat enigmatic, town elder. Patrick Quinn had been more complex than a series of well-meaning adjectives. He was the man who taught her how to recognize a first edition by the feel of its paper, who could spend hours explaining the nuances of a ship's manifest, yet remained stubbornly opaque about his own past, his own feelings.

During the reception held in the church hall afterwards, the condolences began in earnest. Hands grasped hers, faces offered sympathetic smiles. "He was such a good man, Nora." "Your father had such a way with stories." "Hollow Ridge won't be the same without Patrick." Each platitude, however well-intentioned, felt like a tiny chisel chipping away at her composure.

She found herself gravitating towards the edges of the room, seeking refuge in the clatter of teacups and the murmur of conversation. It was there, near a table laden with finger sandwiches and plates of homemade cookies, that she overheard a snippet of conversation between two older women, their voices hushed, almost conspiratorial.

"Such a shame about the archive," one woman, her white hair a halo around a surprisingly sharp face, said to the other. "Right after Patrick passed, too. Almost feels... connected."

The other woman, portly and wearing a purple shawl, nodded slowly. "Indeed. He was always so careful with it, wasn't he? More than anyone, Patrick understood what that collection meant to Hollow Ridge."

Nora's ears perked up. *The archive*. Her father's beloved repository of town history. She felt a prickle of professional curiosity, overriding her grief-induced haze. "Excuse me," she interjected, surprising herself with the directness of her approach. "What about the archive? Is something wrong?"

The two women, Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Jenkins, recognized her instantly. Their expressions shifted from hushed concern to polite awkwardness. "Oh, Nora, dear," Mrs. Peterson began, a little too quickly. "We were just saying how much your father cherished the Historical Society. Such a dedicated volunteer."

Nora didn't relent. "You mentioned something about 'the archive.' Has there been an issue?"

Mrs. Jenkins wrung her hands. "Well, it's not really... official yet. But there's been a bit of a... disturbance. At the Society. Maya found it this morning. Things... gone."

Gone. The word echoed in Nora's head, sharp and immediate. The conservator in her recoiled. Collections didn't just go *gone*. They were meticulously cataloged, carefully stored, often under lock and key. "What exactly is gone?" she pressed, her voice tighter than she intended.

Mrs. Peterson shot a quick glance around the room, as if worried about being overheard. "Well, the vault, you see. The one in the back, where they keep the really old things. It was... open." She lowered her voice further. "And some of the things inside... they aren't there anymore. Maya's quite upset, poor girl."

A cold knot formed in Nora's stomach. A forced vault. Missing items. This wasn't a casual misplacement or a temporary loan. This sounded like a theft. And the timing, so close to her father's death, was unnerving. Her father had spent countless hours at the Ridge Historical Society, cataloging, preserving, tending to the fragile paper heart of the town. If anyone would know about its most vulnerable contents, it would be him.

She excused herself from the two women, her mind already racing. The envelope in her bag, the one her father had left for her on his desk, suddenly felt heavier, imbued with a new, unsettling significance. Had he known something was amiss? Had this "disturbance" been on his mind in his final days?

As she navigated the crowded hall, the low hum of conversation faded for her, replaced by an internal monologue of questions. What kind of items were in that vault? How secure was it? Who would want to steal from a small-town historical society? Her father had always emphasized the intrinsic value of history, the stories contained within the brittle pages. But to a thief, value usually meant monetary.

She caught sight of Aunt Carol again, now deep in conversation with a stern-looking man in a tweed jacket whom Nora vaguely recognized as a member of the town council. Carol's expression was unreadable, but the set of her jaw suggested a topic of some gravity. Nora decided against approaching her, knowing that pressing her aunt for details in this public setting would only be met with a rebuff. Carol had always been fiercely protective of family secrets, especially those she deemed best left buried.

Nora stepped outside for a moment, needing the cooler air. The sun was now fully out, glinting off the water, and the fog had retreated to a faint haze on the horizon. The town, in the bright light, looked deceptively peaceful, its colorful houses a cheerful array against the deep blue of the sky. But Nora felt a different current beneath the surface, a tremor of unease.

She thought of her father's last days, how he'd seemed more distant, even for him. His phone calls had grown shorter, punctuated by long silences. He'd often spoken of the

"Custodians," a vague reference she'd always dismissed as one of his quaint historical anecdotes, about the founding families who supposedly watched over Hollow Ridge. Now, the name felt less like a story and more like a whispered warning. He had talked about the importance of protecting the town's true history, not the carefully curated version presented in tourist brochures.

Before she could dwell on it further, a voice broke into her thoughts. "Nora? Is that really you?"

She turned to see Jonah Blake, the local journalist, striding towards her, a notebook tucked into the back pocket of his faded jeans. Jonah, with his rumpled brown hair and perpetually curious eyes, had been a childhood friend, a co-conspirator in various ill-advised adventures that often involved trespassing in abandoned buildings. He'd gone off to journalism school, promising to expose corruption wherever he found it, and had returned to Hollow Ridge a few years ago, settling into his role as editor of the *Hollow Ridge Chronicle*.

"Jonah," Nora said, a genuine smile touching her lips for the first time that day. It was a relief to see a familiar, friendly face that wasn't layered with performative sympathy. "It is. I suppose you're here for the story, or just to pay your respects?"

He shrugged, a wry grin playing on his lips. "A bit of both, I suppose. Your dad was a good man, Nora. Always had a story for me. And a fact-check for every story I ever wrote." His gaze was more direct than the others had been. "I heard about the... situation... at the Historical Society. My sources are a bit cagey, but 'a forced entry' and 'missing artifacts' are the current buzzwords."

Nora felt a flicker of hope. If anyone could get to the bottom of this, it was Jonah. He had a nose for trouble and a network of contacts that stretched through every corner of Hollow Ridge. "You heard correctly. Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Jenkins were just telling me. What exactly have you heard?"

Jonah leaned against the railing of the church steps, his arms crossed. "Not much detail. Maya Sen, the new archivist, found it this morning. Apparently, the old steel vault in the back room was jimmed open. The Sheriff, Miguel Ortega, has been called in, but he's keeping a lid on it. 'Minor incident, nothing to worry about the public,' is the official line." He snorted. "Which, of course, means the exact opposite."

Nora's mind was already sifting through the information. Sheriff Ortega. Miguel had been a year or two ahead of them in school, a quiet, serious kid who eventually became the steadfast, by-the-book lawman of Hollow Ridge. His loyalty to the town was legendary, and sometimes, she suspected, it bordered on a reluctance to disturb the peace. "Miguel's not going to want a fuss," Nora observed. "He'll want to handle this internally, quietly."

Jonah nodded. "Exactly. Which is why it won't get handled at all, if we let him. This isn't just a few old sea charts, Nora. That vault held some of the town's most sensitive documents. Original deeds, founder's letters... even some of the more unsavory accounts from the early days. Stuff that could rewrite a few family histories if it ever saw the light of day."

"Unsavoury accounts?" Nora repeated, intrigued. Her father had hinted at such things, at a darker side to Hollow Ridge's idyllic facade.

"Whispers," Jonah said, his eyes scanning the crowd, always on the lookout for a potential lead. "About certain land deals, about a fire that conveniently destroyed some records in the 1880s, even a rumored murder that was conveniently swept under the rug. All just folklore, of course, until you have actual documents to back it up." He paused, then looked at Nora. "Your dad, he knew more about that stuff than anyone. He practically lived in the archives. Did he ever mention anything to you, anything odd about the collection, or... warnings?"

Nora hesitated, thinking of the sealed envelope on her father's desk, still unopened. And the casual references to the Custodians, a name that felt less like a quaint historical society and more like a private club with a deep-seated agenda. "He left me something," she admitted, her voice low. "An envelope. I haven't opened it yet. But he always talked about the 'hum' of the paper, the stories hidden in the margins. He had a reverence for what was real, what was documented, even if it was uncomfortable."

Jonah's eyes lit up. "The hum. Yeah, he used to say that to me too. Said I needed to learn to listen to the whispers, not just the headlines." He straightened up, a newfound determination in his stance. "Look, Nora. I know you're here for your father, and I'm truly sorry for your loss. But this... this feels like it could be big. And with your background, your knowledge of rare books, you're uniquely positioned to understand what might have been taken, and why."

Nora felt the familiar pull, the professional instinct that had always guided her. The desire to mend, to restore, to understand the truth etched into the fibers of old paper. Her father's death had brought her back to Hollow Ridge, but this theft, this hint of a deeper, older secret, was beginning to tether her here in a way she hadn't anticipated. She had promised herself she would keep her head down, but the fraying edge of that promise was now fully unravelled.

"I was planning to visit the Society tomorrow," Nora said, her voice firming. "Offer my condolences to Maya, maybe see if I can help catalog a few things. See what I can learn."

Jonah nodded, a knowing glint in his eyes. "Good. Because I have a feeling this isn't

just about a few missing historical documents, Nora. This is about what Hollow Ridge chooses to remember, and what someone desperately wants to forget. And whatever your father left you... I have a hunch it might be connected.”

The conversation had shifted, subtly but decisively. The memorial was still ongoing inside, but for Nora, the focus had irrevocably moved. Her father’s death was the catalyst, but the vanishing archive was the unfolding mystery. And she, a rare-books conservator, meticulous and driven by a reverence for truth, was about to be pulled into the brittle pages of Hollow Ridge’s hidden history. The tide had turned, indeed, and beneath the calm surface, something dark and dangerous was beginning to emerge.

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