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Bloodline of the Forsaken

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Stranger at the Edge of Town
- Chapter 2: Ghosts in the Cornfields
- Chapter 3: The House That Waited
- Chapter 4: Letters Never Sent
- Chapter 5: Family Ties, Frayed Ends
- Chapter 6: Shadows on Hollow Road
- Chapter 7: Old Blood, New Wounds
- Chapter 8: Marks of the Forgotten
- Chapter 9: Beneath the Roots
- Chapter 10: Voices in the Night
- Chapter 11: Digging Up the Past
- Chapter 12: Tangled Alliances
- Chapter 13: The Whispering Woods
- Chapter 14: An Unquiet Grave
- Chapter 15: The Founders' Pact
- Chapter 16: Eyes in the Dark
- Chapter 17: Chasing the Watchers
- Chapter 18: Bloodlines Revealed
- Chapter 19: Threats and Warnings
- Chapter 20: The Gathering
- Chapter 21: The Ritual Begins
- Chapter 22: Shattered Trust
- Chapter 23: Fire in Ash Hollow
- Chapter 24: The Last Oath
- Chapter 25: A Name Written in Blood

Introduction

Grace Talbot never thought she'd see Ash Hollow again—not after all these years, not after everything she'd fought to leave behind. The town was a shadow she'd outpaced, a life she'd shed like a worn skin the day she walked away from the creaking porch of her family's farmhouse. Chicagoland had become her sanctuary, the city's clamor a soothing white noise that drowned out haunting memories of her childhood and the steady disapproval of her father. Time and ambition had pulled her miles away, yet neither had managed to sever the invisible cords binding her to home.

The call came on a bleak Thursday morning, slicing through the monotony of paperwork and midday coffee. A badge on her desk, a name they invoked with an edge of dread: Detective Talbot—your father's dead. They said suicide, but the word pinched at something deep in Grace, something halfway between guilt and suspicion. Her father, Calvin Talbot, was as stubborn as the ancient trees that marked their land. The thought of him taking his own life felt like a story told in the wrong language.

Grace's relationship with her family could charitably be described as fractured. She and her father had disagreed on almost everything, from her decision to join the police to her refusal to inherit the worn-out farmhouse and its secrets. When her mother had died, the distance between them had only grown—a slow ache turned to something jagged. Her younger brother Wes drifted between loyalty and resentment, anchored to the family legacy she'd rejected. Ash Hollow itself, with its tight-knit suspicion and unchanging rituals, seemed to preserve every scar, every whispered slight, like pressed flowers between the pages of a book no one dared open.

Reluctance tangled with responsibility as Grace booked her ticket north. She told herself she was coming for answers, for closure—a final reckoning she'd postponed for far too long. But the truth was knottier, darker. Even as she prepared to face her past, she knew that some doors, once opened, could never be closed again. The thought chilled her.

Arriving in Ash Hollow was like stepping back into a memory she'd spent years forgetting. The cornfields sprawled under a haze of dusk, the air thick with the scent of soil and old secrets. Every familiar face seemed marked by the passage of time and something darker—an unease rippling through the fabric of the town. Her father's death wasn't just a personal tragedy; it was a tremor that set old fears whispering through the streets, rousing rumors that had long lain dormant.

Now, as Grace stands on the porch where everything began, she feels the weight of generations pressing on her shoulders. The Talbot name carries burdens she never

understood, and Ash Hollow is a place where the past refuses to stay buried. Steeled by grief and a detective's instinct, Grace is prepared to dig—no matter what she unearths. But some truths, she is about to learn, are more dangerous than lies.

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CHAPTER ONE: Stranger at the Edge of Town

The rental car, a practical but uninspired grey sedan, felt like an alien object as it cut through the familiar landscape of Ash Hollow. Grace's hands tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles white, as the flat expanse of cornfields gave way to the first smattering of houses. Each one seemed to eye her, a silent sentinel of a past she'd tried to outrun. The air, heavy with the late summer scent of drying harvest and something else, something vaguely metallic and earthy, prickled her skin. It was the smell of home, a scent she simultaneously craved and reviled.

She'd left Chicago at dawn, the city's roar fading into a quiet hum that now felt miles away. The four-hour drive had been a blur of highway hypnosis and an increasingly tight knot in her stomach. It wasn't just the grief, though a dull ache for her father, Calvin, gnawed at her. It was the place itself. Ash Hollow wasn't a town you left behind easily. It clung to you, burrowed into your bones, even when you swore you'd scraped it clean.

Her phone, stubbornly clinging to a single bar of signal, buzzed. It was Wes. She let it ring, her guilt a bitter companion. Her brother had been the one to call her, his voice tight with a mixture of shock and accusation. He'd stayed, anchored to the farm, to their father, to the dusty legacy Grace had shed. She knew her arrival would be a fresh wound for him, a reminder of her desertion. He'd always seen her departure as a betrayal, not a flight for survival.

The road curved, and the faded sign for Ash Hollow appeared, its paint peeling like an old wound. *"Welcome to Ash Hollow: Rooted in Tradition."* Grace snorted. Rooted in secrets, more like. The traditions here were whispered behind cupped hands, passed down like heirloom silver tarnished by unspoken tragedies.

The first person she saw was Mrs. Gable, tending to her petunias outside her meticulously kept Victorian. The old woman's head snapped up, her eyes, sharp as a hawk's, locking onto Grace's car. A flicker of recognition, then a slight stiffening of her shoulders. Ash Hollow hadn't changed. News traveled faster than the speed of light here, and Grace's return would already be the day's main topic. She imagined the phone lines buzzing, cups of coffee steaming in kitchens as the town dissected her every move.

Grace drove past the town square, a patch of green dominated by a weather-beaten gazebo. Memories, unwanted and vivid, flickered: summer festivals, awkward teenage dates, the suffocating feeling of everyone knowing everything about everyone else. She saw a few familiar faces, older, more weathered, but the same underlying

suspicion in their eyes. Small-town greetings were a complicated dance here, a mix of forced politeness and quiet scrutiny.

She made her way to the Ash Hollow Sheriff's Department, a small, brick building tucked behind the county courthouse. Sheriff Brody's patrol car, a dented Ford, was parked out front. Brody. Another ghost from her past. He'd been a fresh-faced deputy when Grace left, a nervous energy about him that had probably been beaten out by years of small-town politics.

Inside, the air was thick with the scent of stale coffee and disinfectant. The fluorescent lights hummed, casting a sickly yellow glow on the cluttered desk of the dispatcher. The dispatcher, a woman with kind eyes and a name Grace couldn't quite place, looked up, her expression shifting from routine boredom to a careful sympathy. "Grace? Is that really you?"

Grace offered a tight smile. "It's me, Debbie. Here to see Sheriff Brody."

Debbie nodded, her gaze lingering for a moment too long on Grace's face. "He's expecting you. Go on back."

Sheriff Brody's office was small and cramped, filled with overflowing files and a slightly crooked framed photo of him shaking hands with a state senator. He looked up as Grace entered, his face a roadmap of fine lines that hadn't been there ten years ago. His hair, once a sandy blond, was now streaked with grey. He stood, a little awkwardly, and extended a hand.

"Grace. I'm sorry about your father." His grip was firm but brief.

"Thanks, Brody." Grace took the seat he gestured to, a worn visitors' chair opposite his desk. She skipped the pleasantries. "So, the official report. Suicide?"

Brody sighed, leaning back in his creaky chair. "That's what it looks like, Grace. Found him in the barn. Rope. Note."

"A note?" Grace's eyebrows shot up. Her father wasn't one for sentiment, much less written goodbyes. He preferred actions, blunt truths.

Brody picked up a file, flipping it open. "Yeah. Short. To Wes. Said he was tired. That he couldn't go on." He didn't meet her eyes as he spoke, instead tracing a finger along a line of text.

"Tired of what?" Grace pressed, a cold tendril of suspicion beginning to uncoil in her gut. "My father was a stubborn man. He didn't give up. Not on anything."

“People change, Grace,” Brody said, his voice flat. “He’d been... withdrawn since your mother passed. You know that.”

Grace knew. But withdrawn wasn’t suicidal. Calvin Talbot had been a man of immense, if often misplaced, strength. He’d weathered financial hardship, the death of his wife, and the estrangement of his daughter with a stoicism that bordered on granite. To imagine him despairing to the point of a note and a noose felt like a deliberate lie.

“Was there an autopsy?” Grace asked, her voice calm, professional. It was the only way to keep the rising tide of emotion at bay.

Brody hesitated. “Not... full. The county coroner ruled it a clear suicide based on the scene and the note. No signs of struggle. Standard procedure for a straightforward case.”

“Standard procedure? Brody, you know me. You know what I do.” Grace leaned forward, her gaze unwavering. “You’re telling me you didn’t push for a full autopsy? For a man like Calvin Talbot, in a town like Ash Hollow, where everyone knows everyone’s business and grudges run deeper than the roots of your oldest oak trees?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Grace, there was nothing to suggest foul play. The scene was... undisturbed. It was tragic, but it was clear.”

“What about the rope? Any unusual knots? Did you check for fibers on his clothes that didn’t match the barn? What about the note itself? Handwriting analysis? Was it actually his handwriting?” Grace fired the questions, each one a hammer blow. This wasn’t just a personal tragedy; it was a crime scene, and Brody was treating it like a discarded grocery list.

Brody’s jaw tightened. “Grace, you’re looking for something that isn’t there. We did our due diligence. The family identified the body. Wes identified the note. It was Calvin’s hand, all right. He was alone in that barn.”

“Was he?” Grace murmured, more to herself than to Brody. “And how did you confirm that? Did you interview neighbors? Anyone who might have seen him? Was there anyone else on the property?”

Brody stood, pacing the small space. “Look, Grace, I understand this is hard for you. But you can’t come in here and armchair quarterback a police investigation from Chicago. Ash Hollow isn’t Chicago. We don’t have random street violence. We don’t have serial killers running rampant. People here... they handle their business, their sorrows, in their own way.”

The implication hung in the air: *Your father chose his way, Grace, and you should respect it.*

Grace stood too, her detective's shield, a mental one, firmly in place. "And sometimes, Brody, 'their own way' involves a lot of things that don't make it into official reports. You know Ash Hollow. You know what goes on, or at least, what used to go on."

She saw a flicker in his eyes, a momentary loss of his carefully constructed composure. A memory, perhaps, of the stories that haunted this town, the ones that never quite made it into the police blotter.

"I'm just asking for a thorough investigation," Grace continued, her voice softer now, but no less firm. "My father didn't commit suicide. Not like that. Not without a damn good reason, and 'tired' isn't good enough."

Brody ran a hand over his face. "The case is closed, Grace. There's nothing more to investigate."

"Then I'll investigate it myself," Grace said, the words hanging in the air, a declaration and a warning. She saw the surprise, then the weary resignation, in Brody's eyes. He knew she would. He knew her well enough to understand that the daughter of Calvin Talbot, the Chicago detective, wasn't going to accept a convenient story, especially not about her own father.

"Just... be careful, Grace," Brody said, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "Some things are better left buried."

Grace felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cool air-conditioning. It was a premonition, a dark whisper against her ear. "I intend to dig them up, Brody. Every single one."

She left the Sheriff's Department with a sense of grim determination. The outside air felt sharper now, the sunlight less welcoming. Her rental car felt less like an alien object and more like a necessary tool. She wasn't just here for answers anymore; she was here because she had to be. Her father's death was a riddle, and Grace Talbot had always been good at solving riddles. But something told her this wasn't just a riddle; it was a trap, and she had just walked right into it. The town of Ash Hollow, with its quiet streets and watchful eyes, was about to become her new, terrifying crime scene.

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