

# THE HOLLOWES

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## **The Interview**

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David Alders missed the apartment complex the first time he passed it. Driving his red Ford Ranger pickup around a bend on the four-lane street, he sped by the front gate without noticing it in the periphery. He was admiring the large medians filled with overgrown bushes. The medians were so wide it made the other two lanes a different road entirely. He bet the local traffic cops had fun on this strip. There was no way to see a radar-toting officer until you passed him. The tickets would be plentiful. At least they would be if he worked the beat.

Two minutes later he hit a cross street he wasn't expecting and knew he had gone too far. With knitted eyebrows, he rechecked the online map page he had printed out and made a U-turn around the capacious median. This time he was watchful and still he almost missed it. As he rounded the bend he caught a glimmer of metal through the wall of median bushes and barely slowed in time to catch the turn-off. With the median out of the way, the other side of the street came into view. He brought the Ranger up, surveying the scene with cloudy blue eyes and thinking this

couldn't be it. No one would hide an apartment complex behind so many trees, not if they wanted to attract tenants.

But there was the sign—WHISPERING HOLLOWs—in block gray letters on a black background. The sign wasn't big and the wrought iron front gate had a dull sheen in the midday sun. Shrubs squished together on either side, and behind the bushes were rows of trees. Past the trees the buildings began, little more than silhouettes in the distance. The place was about as hidden from the world as a place could get.

David shrugged and toed the gas. "Maybe that's not a bad thing," he mumbled.

Getting into the complex involved hitting a button on a keypad and talking to a fizzling male voice coming from a speaker box.

"How can I help you?" squawked the speaker.

David leaned out the window but stopped himself. He was about to identify himself as an officer because that's what he had always done at these type of places. Back then, the only time he went to apartment complexes was when he was out on calls. He had never actually lived in one before.

"I'm David Alders, here for a twelve o'clock interview," he said. "I might have spoken to you on the phone."

The speaker-man didn't reply. A second later, the gate rumbled as it cranked open. David slid on in, finding the front office on his right. He parked in one of three spaces. One other car was parked next to him, a little white Kia. He got out, taking time to scan the buildings facing toward the front. They were all two-story

complexes, probably twelve apartments in each tan brick building, all of them connected to one another by quaint breezeways with ivy-strewn canopies. The view wasn't spectacular, but it wasn't tempting him to hop back in the pickup either. Whether it was the greenery or the nice, low-80s temperature, the overall atmosphere gave him a pleasant feeling.

He'd wait to see how the interview went. Feelings often turned out wrong.

He heard voices as he entered the lobby. Taking a seat on a small couch he breathed in the faint scents of peppermint and coffee and listened to a couple in the next room explain how they wanted a two-bedroom place in three month's time. That was when the wife was due and the extra bedroom was for the baby. The voice that responded was the fizzle-free version of the man in the speaker.

"Well, young sir. I'd like to help ya, but I only got two-bedroom openings. And they're on the second floor. I ain't too keen on a newborn being that high. The chance for stairwell accidents would nag at me endlessly. If someone with a baby should trip and fall down a flight of stairs with a baby in their arms, I'd never forgive myself."

David lifted an eyebrow, surprised at the guy's honesty. He must have the worst sales record in the office.

The couple continued talking, sounding defensive about their untested parenting skills. David stopped paying attention and picked up a brochure from the end table to flip through.

There were a few different floor plans, none bigger than 1,500 square feet. He studied the two-bedroom outline, imagining how it could look with all the Alders' junk inside. The sound of footsteps made him look up to see the couple emerge from the office, moving swiftly for the exit. A portly, white-haired man wearing faded blue coveralls appeared in the doorway behind them.

"Y'all're welcome to call in a couple months," he said, giving a rosy-cheeked smile. "I might have something open for you then. I just can't make reservations that far in advance. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course we do," the younger man said, tightly. "We'll call you then."

The couple headed outside. Soon the white Kia was at the front gate, waiting for its motion sensor to detect them and set them free. David watched through the window with a slight grin. The white-haired fellow approached with a sigh.

"Don't think I'll be hearing from them again," he said, and not sounding too sorry about it either.

"Don't suspect you will," David agreed. He turned away from the window and held out his hand. "David Alders."

"Yeah." The portly man bypassed his hand and squeezed his shoulder instead. "I know who you are. Come on back. Let's talk."

"Sure," David said, resisting the temptation to glance down at the man's hand. The guy gave him a friendly tap and finally pulled away. He turned without a word and ambled back to the office. David watched him, and then followed, wondering if all apartment

complex associates were this strange.

“The name’s Charlie Rickett,” he said once they sat down at either side of the desk. Clasping his hands over his tummy Charlie leaned back and propped his worn leather work boots on the desktop. David guessed the man’s age circled the fifty mark. His hair was white, but his face had a youthful glint. He smiled in a way David thought of as purely Texan: slack jawed with a few pearly whites showing in the middle, and only the left half of his mouth curled upward. They surveyed each other a long moment. A small fan on a file cabinet swiveled their way, making the papers on Charlie Rickett’s desk flutter impatiently.

“So ya needing a perch to plop on?” he said, crinkling his nose.

“You could say that,” David replied.

“I did say that. How old are you? I should tell ya up front I don’t usually take anyone who ain’t old enough to run for president. It ain’t a hard and fast rule, mind ya, but it is a guideline I tend to stick to. We got a lot of older folks in this place who aren’t keen on all-night keggers or skinny-dippin’ in the community pool.”

David smiled, wondering if the man was trying to scare him off the same way he had the previous couple. “I guess we’re safe then. I’m thirty-six and I’ve never been a big drinker or nudist.”

Charlie nodded noncommittally. “Are ya looking for yourself or is there a missus in the equation?”

“Well, me and my daughter.”

“Ah, single parents. No apartment complex would exist without them. I take it you’re trading her back and forth with the ex, so

you'll need that office-slash-spare bedroom handy."

"No ex," David corrected. "Just me and my daughter."

Charlie frowned. "Don't see many of those these days. I reckon she either runned off on ya or did something so heinous y'all won't get near her with a ten-foot cattle prod. Am I right?"

David glanced feebly toward the lobby. "I'm sorry. Is the normal staff on vacation?"

"Ha!" Charlie slapped the desk in time to keep one of the papers from flying off in the fan breeze. "Lucky for you, I am the normal staff. And the maintenance man. And the guy who'll be giving you hell if the fourth comes 'round and I ain't got rent in my palm. I'm a full-service operation."

"Wow," David said, almost as a sigh. "The owner must have a lot of faith in you."

"That he does, seeing as he's me too." He crossed his pudgy arms. "Bought 'er up in '88. The old owner was some conglomerate that felt Whispering Hollows was not in an attractive location, meaning we ain't near no highways. So they let it go to pot over time. By the time I came along, they were willing to take anyone who'd bring her up to code without too much haggling. Rest is history."

"I see," David said. "And has this been a profitable enterprise for you?"

Charlie's sly smile widened. "Meaning: can people stand to live here under the Rickett regime? Apparently they can. I keep a full load most times. Openings come along now and then, but they

don't stay open long. Truth is I keep the place from looking like crap, and I don't bilk 'em on the rent. Whatever else I lack, I make up for with my considerable charm."

David tilted his head in that *touché* kind of way. "How about the crime rate? You get a lot of burglaries?"

Charlie studied him, never losing the smile. The fan took another pass, finally tossing a paper to the floor where it rested against an old bookshelf. The old man looked like he was holding back a chuckle. "Why don't you tell me, officer?"

David found himself copying Charlie's smile. For a Southern redneck, Charlie Rickett was surprisingly astute. He leaned back and propped his feet on the desk next to Charlie's. "You have one burglary and one attempted arson on file, both from the late nineties. You actually have the lowest apartment complex crime rate in Tarrant County."

This time Charlie did chuckle. "Wait 'til they find my meth labs."

David chuckled with him. "I'll keep it on the down low if it'll lower the rent."

"You're a cop. That'll take fifteen percent off right there."

"Let me guess. In exchange I work security."

"Nope. People get to know there's an officer living in the complex. Makes 'em feel a little safer."

"Sounds like this place is safe enough without me."

"We've been lucky," Charlie admitted. "I don't honestly know how we managed to stay under the radar all this time, but I don't

wanna start resting on my laurels either. Within the year I'm installing security cameras and putting some extra bolt locks on the doors. I figure it's better to be prepared than sorry. You never can be too careful."

David nodded, losing the smile. His gaze dropped and for a moment the only noise was the whirr of the fan. Charlie prodded David's foot with his work boot.

"I guess all that security talk is about as interesting as oatmeal to a man who carries a gun. You came to see the apartments. What say we grab a beer out of my mini-fridge and go take a look-see?"

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The apartment had new mauve carpet and a fresh coat of eggshell white paint, but its age stubbornly came through regardless. David stepped into the master bedroom, his hands deep in his pockets as he examined the ceiling. There was one large crack shaped like a question mark stretching out from the light fixture. He opened the closet, not because he cared how big it was, but because Charlie was watching.

That's what Elise would've done. Closets always captivated her, though David was at a loss as to why. Perhaps it had to do with the way people tucked away their most private belongings. He only knew that he needed her to tell him how this closet rated. He smirked. He needed her. What else was new?

"The other bedroom is a mite smaller than this one," Charlie

ventured, leaning against the doorframe. “The closet’s the same size.”

David stopped staring into the closet, realizing he was lost in his thoughts again. He shut the door swiftly. “That’d be fine.” He turned and headed into the bathroom that connected the two bedrooms, wondering if Melanie would have a problem sharing a bathroom with her old man. She’d never had to before, not in the family house.

“I spackled everything that needed new spackling last month,” Charlie explained. “The toilet seat’s new too. The last tenant left it in a state of, er...disrepair.”

“Who was the last tenant?” David opened drawers and checked beneath the sink. An uneasy chill took hold, making his heart flutter. What surprised him was how long the feeling had taken to arrive. He’d expected it sooner, like after he’d arranged the interview last week. Instead, he had sleep-walked through the days, ignoring what was ahead. Now he was looking at a barren apartment, and the reality of the situation sent icicles through his ribcage. This was actually happening. Life moved on whether he wanted it to or not.

“A crusty old fart named George Mason,” Charlie answered. “He musta lived here since they opened the place. Sometimes I thought he would stay until it closed. He finally keeled over two months ago.”

“Did he die in the apartment?”

Charlie shrugged. “Depends. You a superstitious fella?”

“Nope.”

“Then yeah, he died in the front room sitting on his easy chair.” Charlie glanced over his shoulder, as if expecting to see the body. “It took us a few days to figure it out. George’s easy chair smelled like wet dog to begin with.” He stiffened a little as David turned to gape at him. “Don’t worry. We aired it out and replaced the carpet completely. You can sniff all you want—no stiff stink in here.”

David smiled, amazed by Charlie Rickett’s sales pitch. He turned and went through the other bathroom doorway, walking through to the smaller bedroom. Melanie’s room. Man, that was hard to picture. Not that Melanie couldn’t fit her things in here. But he only saw Melanie’s room the way it was—the way it had always been. Even the carousel wallpaper Elise had labored to put up during her sixth month of pregnancy remained behind the mirrors and Johnny Depp posters. But it wouldn’t much longer. New homeowners usually didn’t take a shine to faded horses on poles.

He realized how quiet the apartment had become and sucked in a breath through his nose. He looked back at Charlie. “You’re right. No stiff stink at all.”

Charlie smiled back, but the smile didn’t touch his eyes. “This is gonna be a difficult transition for you, ain’t it.” It wasn’t a question.

David wandered into the hallway and then into the kitchen. It was awfully small compared to the old one—two countertops with barely enough room to hold a microwave and a coffee maker. The

pantry closet could qualify as a medicine cabinet. Still, how much room were they going to need for groceries? He and Mel had never been big eaters, especially in the last few years.

“We’ve never lived in an apartment before.”

“It is a different lifestyle,” Charlie said from the hallway. He plodded into the kitchen with downcast eyes. “Sometimes you hear things through the walls—usually thumps or someone playing their stereo too loud. Other times you hear more than you want, like couples arguing or children crying. I’m pretty good at weeding out the wrong kind of applicant early on. Most of ’em never make it to the apartment tour. so we don’t have much in the way of troublemakers. But for people who spent their whole lives in nice quiet houses, it’s unsettling to hear a voice coming through the wall and not know who it belongs to. You sure your daughter’s up for it?”

No, David wanted to say. No, I don’t think she is. Now that I think about it, I’m not either. In fact, this was a ludicrous idea. I’m sorry to waste your time.

What came out was: “She’s going to have to be.”

Charlie leaned against the small counter, his gaze tracing the tile patterns on the floor. “I have a confession to make,” he said.

“Let me guess,” David said, leaning against the dishwasher. “George Mason is in here somewhere. You stuffed him in one of the cabinets.”

Charlie didn’t share the joke. His eyes lifted to David. “I’ve read the articles...about you...about your wife.”

Something inside David crumpled. “Oh,” he said dully. “I guess that’s how I made it to the apartment tour. Nothing like a charity case to get you the perks.”

“It’s not like that,” Charlie said. “To be honest, it didn’t hit me ’til we got in here. You’ve had a storm cloud over your head ever since I said, ‘You never can be too careful.’ It took me this long to figure out why.”

David smirked. “You’d make quite a detective.”

Charlie struggled to proceed, mentally choosing his next words with care. “How long’s she been missing now?”

“Ten years,” he said quietly. “Ten years this month.”

The apartment manager whistled in awe. “I’m surprised I remember reading about you. It doesn’t seem like it’s been that long.”

David nodded, a small part of him feeling the same way. The larger part—the part that desperately wanted her back—that felt like it had been much longer. An eternity.

“I’ve got a friend at the *Star-Telegram*,” he said. “He writes a new article every couple years to keep her name out there.”

Charlie’s head bobbed slowly. David could tell what kind of questions floated behind the other man’s hound-dog eyes: What kind of leads have you gotten? Are there any suspects? Has the case made any progress? All were variations on the one question everyone wanted to ask: What do *you* think happened to her?

“Look,” David said, deciding to forego any further awkwardness. “I’ve spent the last decade trying to find her. I’ve

taken time away from work and used up most of my savings. Now I'm at a dead end. I have to go back to work. And I have to sell the house if I want to pay off the bank loans. Mainly, I have to make a life for my daughter. That's the only reason I'm here. Otherwise..." His voice trailed off.

"Otherwise you'd spend the rest of your life searching for your wife," Charlie finished for him. "Going door-to-door and yelling from every mountaintop. Yep, I see it in your eyes. You ain't one to quit." He gave David's shoulder another grandfatherly squeeze. "Hey, you haven't seen the patio yet. Come on."

The apartment manager walked through the small dining area into the front room. At the other end was a sliding glass door. Charlie slid the blinds back and opened it. David followed him onto a small concrete porch surrounded by a wooden railing. He thought Charlie would point out the extra storage closet outside. Instead he propped his elbows on the railing and stared out at the view. It was a decent one too. From their second-story perch they had full view of the center courtyard, which looked more like a small town park. There were scattered picnic tables and a little goldfish pond with a pretty wooden bridge crossing it. The community pool was to the right, sparkling serenely in the morning sun. Close to the mail foyer several elderly people sat at a table, eating sandwiches and drinking lemonade.

Charlie snorted. "Good old Eldon. He likes his weekly get-togethers with the other cronies. They spend the whole afternoon playing poker—at least 'til their bladders get the best of them." He

glanced at David, who had planted his elbows on the railway next to him. “See, no one ever plans to while their days away in an apartment complex. But once you get here, you find a sense of community. You meet people, like Eldon, who keeps a conversation going for hours on end without putting a lick of effort into it. Or Fred Morton, who lives next door with a ten-year-old deaf Chihuahua. Loves that dog like a son too. Mrs. Phuong on the other side of you is from Vietnam but cooks the best lasagna you’ve ever tasted. You’ll meet ’em all in time, and before long, they care about you. Then you start to care about them too. And then you realize that’s not something you’re in any hurry to part with.”

David stared at the elderly people gathered around the picnic table and the surreal Norman Rockwell vibe coming from them, and then he looked at Charlie and couldn’t help but smile. The old coot had some effective sales tactics after all.

“I’m not sure I buy that,” he said to the apartment manager.

Charlie smiled slyly. “I don’t expect you to buy it. Just rent for now.”

**Look out for Chapter 3 on 5<sup>th</sup> November!**

**The first ten chapters of THE HOLLOWES are being serialised online for free!**