

THE HOLLOWES

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# 3

## The Bigger Picture

May 13, 2009

Texas History AP had settled into a lull, broken by scattered murmurs and the bored whispers of teenagers running out the clock on the last period of the day. Twenty minutes earlier, Mr. Shandling had handed out study guides for next week's test and gave everyone the remainder of class to peruse them. Melanie Alders glanced through hers, quickly realized she knew the answer to every question without needing to look in the book, and went back to staring out the window. The classroom was on the second floor, and from her table, she had a good view of the front parking lot. She saw her dad's pickup pull into the lane for parents waiting to pick up kids, also dubbed Loser Lane by the students who already drove cars of their own.

"Anyone interesting out there?" asked Vera Adams, who sat next to her at the same table. Melanie smiled inwardly. The only time Vera ever talked to her was when she got window envy. There were always a few groups in the parking lot worth watching during the last hour. The guys liked to ogle the drill team as they practiced choreographed moves in tight-fitting spandex. The girls eyed the football team as they jogged laps around the campus in sweat-soaked t-shirts and wind shorts. Mr. Shandling had been wise enough to change the assigned seating after the first six

weeks' grades were tallied. He knew the view of the parking lot was a constant distraction to his less motivated students so he moved all his best students to the "window seats." Melanie could understand the strategy. But it hadn't cured the grade problems. Now the rest of the class looked at her as an obstacle, blocking their view of people that mattered.

Melanie didn't mind. She was used to people not seeing her. The ones who made her nervous were the ones who did notice her.

"Not really," she answered, leaning back so Vera could get a better look. Vera leaned across her, scanned the parking lot and frowned. No dancing or jogging today, not even any couples making out in the cars. "What a dead zone," she confirmed. Then Vera's cell phone buzzed on the tabletop and she scooped it up, returning to her seat and giving Melanie back her personal space.

Vera smirked as she read the text message and immediately started typing a reply. Melanie watched her, mystified. This was at least the thirtieth text message Vera had received in the course of this period, a slow day for her. Melanie didn't own a cell phone. She hadn't yet caught onto the whole texting craze. But part of her knew if she had one, the desire to text anyone would be minimal. She couldn't grasp why anyone would spend all day conversing in abbreviated snippets. Then again, maybe Melanie didn't get it because she never had a close friend she'd want to text. Maybe she had text envy.

Vera hit SEND and turned her attention back to the window. She leaned across Melanie again, as conscious of her as a gentle

breeze, and peered outside. This time her eyes snagged on something that caused her to sneer dramatically.

“Oh, please,” she said, sounding exasperated. Melanie knew Vera only said “please” when she felt put out.

“What?” Melanie asked, not because she was curious but because she wanted Vera to notice that she was almost in Melanie’s lap. It only worked a little. Vera stood and sat on the table, her right butt cheek on Melanie’s study guide.

“My mom,” Vera explained. “I’ve told her over and over again not to park in Loser Lane, but she never listens.”

Melanie followed her gaze to the champagne-colored Lexus parked two spots up from her father. The woman inside was also on a cell phone, looking very animated as she waved her free arm and swished her finger to make some unknown point. Melanie already felt sorry for whoever was on the receiving end.

“That’s my dad,” she said, pointing to the pickup and hoping Vera would be put at ease by the knowledge that her parent wasn’t the only one in Loser Lane. It had the opposite effect. Vera blanched before she could stop herself, disgusted by the idea that she was on the same level as Melanie Alders, at least in terms of parking arrangements. Melanie didn’t say anything else.

Vera studied the two vehicles and their drivers. “They’re so different,” she said, possibly to comfort her own fragile ego. “I mean, look at them. My mom’s having a freak-out on the phone, and your dad’s sitting there like a deserted island or something.”

“Yeah, he is,” Melanie admitted, sounding guilty although she knew there was no reason to be. She should be thankful that her

father wasn't a neurotic phone-screamer. The "deserted island" description bothered her. It hit a little too close to the truth.

"Melanie," Mr. Shandling called from his desk. He stared at a pink sticky-note. "You're wanted at the guidance counselor's office. Go ahead and take your stuff. We're through for the day."

"Okay." She got up and started gathering her things. She had to stare at Vera for a long moment before the girl got the hint and dismounted Melanie's study guide. She lugged her backpack over her shoulder and headed for the door. There were no goodbyes from Vera or anyone else, not that Melanie expected any.

She started down an empty hallway, wondering if every student felt like a ghost in school sometimes. She almost asked her dad about his high school experience a few times but always stopped herself. Mom and Dad had been high school sweethearts. They had started dating at sixteen, the age Melanie was now. Married at nineteen and a child by twenty. For her parents, the tumblers had magically clicked into place. The path to their future had been lit with high beams, and Melanie desperately wanted to ask her dad how to up the wattage on her own path. But asking Dad to recall the good old days would send him into a spiral of depression. Melanie had seen the stony stillness of his eyes as he focused on the past. He didn't seem like a person taking up real space in those moments. The past physically drew him away from the present. The color faded from his face and his breathing became shallow. One night she actually coughed loudly to snap him out of it, afraid he might literally fade away. His whole body jerked like someone coming out of a deep trance. The past was a form of hypnosis for

him, a form Melanie wasn't convinced was good for him or even safe.

No. Asking Dad to dip into yesteryear was out of the question.

That left Melanie without any precedent on which to base her experience. She could look to TV and movies, but they never got it right. She'd seen her share of John Hughes flicks from the '80s, usually when curled up on the couch next to Dad on a Saturday night. In each film the cliques were clearly defined between the nerds and the jocks or the cool kids and the outcasts. It was kind of accurate, but also way too narrow. Her school had over 1,300 students with cliques upon cliques upon cliques, most of which fell beyond easy labeling. Rivalries between groups happened but only if they were looking for trouble. The vast majority were happy to keep to themselves, happy to simply survive high school. And everyone assumed that everyone outside of their clique had found another one to belong to.

Melanie hadn't, and it wasn't hard to find where and how it had happened. She had always been a quiet kid, ever since elementary. When her mom disappeared, it made all the local news stations. A year later, her second grade class went on a field trip to the animal shelter to learn how stray cats and dogs were put up for adoption. Their chaperone had gotten distracted when a cat got loose. As she chased it around the kennels, the kids happened upon a cage they were never supposed to see. The dog was a terrier, or at least had been at one point. What they saw was a crusty scab with four legs. When the chaperone got back, she noticed the kids' white faces and looks of amazed disgust and reluctantly explained that

sometimes owners abuse their pets. This one had been doused in gasoline and set on fire. They wanted to save it but it wasn't looking good for the little guy. She tried to move the class on, but the kids were hard to pull away. They wanted to see the end. They wanted to watch the scabbed-over monstrosity die.

That was how they looked at her.

It wasn't until middle school that everyone forgot about her and stopped staring, and that was fine with Melanie. She had been happy to be the invisible student. But now she was in high school and the longing to be seen again had slowly resurfaced. She had analyzed the different cliques, looking for one she might insert herself into. But what if she fit in perfectly? What happened next? She would become like every other American teenage girl in existence. She would hang out with her friends. They would call her every night at home. They'd ask her to come along to places that required coming along. They'd text her and she would text back. LOL, OMG, LMAO. And she'd be out and about and part of something bigger than herself.

And Dad would be left alone in an empty house.

No, she couldn't do that. Dad was alone enough as it was. To continue Vera's clumsy analogy, if she got rescued by the good ship Peer Pressure, Dad really would be a deserted island. That put a lot of responsibility on Melanie's shoulders, but she didn't mind. Dad was a good man and a whole lot more. A lot of adjectives described him without describing him: kind, funny, selfless, smart—he was all these things effortlessly, even if tinged

by a constant and permeating sadness. If Mom was around, she'd be the one who got to admire those qualities every day.

But she wasn't. And that left a huge, gaping hole in the middle of everything.

Melanie jostled down the staircase and paused when she reached the bottom. There was a woman in the hallway that appeared to be waiting for her. Her hair was so light blonde it was almost white, a polar opposite of Melanie's dark brown mane. The woman's baby blue eyes were so vivid Melanie couldn't help but stare, the same thing she did the last two times she saw the woman. Both of those times had been in the hallway during the past week when she was on her way to the next class and the corridor was filled with bustling teenagers moving in packs. Melanie had caught glimpses at the far ends of the hall, but they had stayed in her memory. Each time the woman had stared back at her, as if picking her from the crowd. And once their eyes connected, the woman smiled, her eyes *knowing*. What she knew, Melanie had no idea, but the notion that it could be something about her made her squeamish.

What had she thought earlier? The ones who made her nervous were the ones who did notice her. That definitely applied here.

As she entered the hallway, a new idea hit her, one that took her from squeamish to nauseous. What if she was a reporter? She certainly looked the part. She was in her early thirties and way too VIP. The cream-colored business suit she wore screamed camera ready. All that was missing was the crew, which was probably waiting for her signal. They would want to do a

Whatever-Happened-To style story on Little Melanie who was so darn precious the first time they covered the Elise Alders story. But they would have another thing coming. That six-year-old cutie pie was now a teenager never again to be a car wreck to be gaped at. She swallowed and continued toward the smiling woman, ready to get this over with.

“Can I help you with something?” Melanie asked, more than a little harshly.

“I’m hoping I can help you,” the woman said, flashing pearly white teeth. She did have a beautiful smile, Melanie hated to admit. “Specifically, with your future.”

Melanie was about to pass her but paused. The nausea gave way to embarrassment. “Oh, my gosh,” she said. “You’re the guidance counselor, aren’t you?”

“What guidance counselor?” the woman said, looking back and forth playfully. “I don’t see any dumb old guidance counselors.”

Melanie chuckled. “Sorry, I thought you were...someone else.”

“Like whom?” the woman asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Melanie said, feeling foolish. “I’ve seen you watching me before. I didn’t know you were on the faculty.”

The woman crossed her arms but kept the warm smile. “You’re right, Melanie. I have been watching you. I’ve kept tabs on you for some time. Your grades are very impressive.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re already a junior when you should be a sophomore. With a little summer school, you could probably graduate in less than a year.”

“That’s okay,” Melanie replied, remembering the last guidance counselor who had suggested the same. “I’m not in any race to finish high school.”

“Maybe,” the woman conceded. “But I bet you have big plans away from here, don’t you? I bet you know exactly where you’re going after high school.”

Melanie shrugged before she could stop herself. She smiled sheepishly. “I guess.”

The woman quietly scrutinized her. Melanie felt those brilliant blue eyes taking her apart, piece by piece. She waited apprehensively, wondering if the lady saw what she did when she looked in the mirror: a thin, slightly bony girl with eyes half-hidden behind dark chocolate hair. The reflection usually made her cringe, but the woman’s gaze didn’t seem nearly as critical. She actually looked pleased, and she nodded. “I think I understand. You’re more of the one-day-at-a-time type. The type that doesn’t spend much time looking at the bigger picture.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Melanie asked, finding herself worried about the opinion of a guidance counselor whose name she didn’t even know.

The woman laughed. “Of course not. Way too many people spend their lives absorbed by the prize at the end of the race. What they fail to see are the little day-to-day goals that must be completed to earn that prize. If you can handle those, it doesn’t matter if you see the bigger picture or not...The bigger picture sees you.”

Melanie wasn’t sure if she understood, but she nodded anyway.

“Let’s stay focused on the days ahead of us,” the woman continued. “You’ve got end-of-semester tests coming up. Are you ready for them?”

Melanie could smile a little easier now. “I think so. Yeah.”

“I’m sure you are,” the woman agreed. “After they’re over we’ll talk again. You know, there are big changes ahead for you.”

“You mean college?”

“I mean everything,” the woman said, blue eyes sparkling. “Your whole life is going to be twisted and rearranged until it doesn’t look like your life anymore.” She leaned in closer. “But remember that it is your life, and no one can take that away from you. Just hang on and enjoy the ride.”

Melanie stared back, unsure how to reply. Did she talk to all the students this way? It felt like a pep talk, but it also sounded vague and a little cryptic. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she admitted.

The woman stepped forward and put both hands on Melanie’s shoulders. “I know you don’t, Mel. But trust me, you will.”

Melanie couldn’t keep the dismay out of her expression. Why was this woman calling her Mel? Only family used that name. If the woman noticed her frown, she didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, she patted Melanie’s shoulders.

“I think this was a good meeting.” The woman let go of her and turned down the hallway.

“Wait,” Melanie said. “That was the whole meeting?”

The woman with the white-blond hair looked back at her smiling. “Like I said, Melanie, we’ll talk again...after the tests have passed.”

The woman continued around a corner. Melanie listened to the heel-clicking fade, feeling dumbfounded. What just happened? She shook herself from her stupor, wondering if she should go back to class until the bell rang. Mr. Shandling wasn't expecting her. Melanie left the stairway behind and continued down the hall, following the same path as the woman. She didn't run into her again, but as she reached the front doors of the school she smiled. This had to be some sort of reverse psychology trick the guidance counselor was trying out on her. Motivate the student by confusing the hell out of her or something like that. She paused at the front door and then came back to the counselor's office. She poked her head through the doorway and saw one of the older counselors she recognized sitting at a desk.

"Hey, Mrs. Stanwell" Melanie said. "Your new guidance counselor is a little strange."

The old lady looked up from her desk, blinking. "What guidance counselor?"

Melanie chuckled. The old lady was in on the joke, too, apparently. "Good one," she replied. She turned to the front door and stepped outside as the bell rang.

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As Vera Adams commented that Melanie's father looked like a deserted island, David rested his head on the seat cushion, playing one of Tom Petty's more recent efforts. Petty warbled to his woman that she was flirting with time as David scanned the high

school parking lot. A few students were wandering out before the bell, but not Melanie. That was okay. He was early and not in any hurry to start the conversation they were about to have.

Ten years. In three days it would be ten years exactly, and he already knew how the day would unfold. An eerie silence would take hold of the house from the moment the alarm clock quit beeping. David and Melanie would move around each other in the hallway and the kitchen, saying everything with their eyes. The moments their gazes connected would be mercifully brief and yet convey another year's worth of pain and failure. Their shoulders might brush as Melanie grabbed her backpack off the desk, and they might pause, letting that tiny bit of physical contact take the place of all the soul-shredding grief they didn't feel like acknowledging.

Then Melanie would go to school and David would sit in the front room, recalling again where he was ten years ago. He found he could easily recall so much about that day. He had been a detective for three months and every case had that new car scent. While other detectives looked overwhelmed and exhausted, David dived into each case with an unflappable sense of intrigue—another mystery waiting to be solved. He remembered the smallest details of the cases he worked that day.

But he couldn't remember anything specific about Elise from May 16, 1999. Every time he tried to pinpoint something it would fall into the general murkiness of all their memories together. Yes, they had breakfast that morning. Yes, they talked about what Melanie was doing in school and articles in the paper. Yes, they

laughed about something or other. And then he had kissed her and went to work. Of that he was positively sure. He couldn't remember exactly what they had laughed about. Or what she had said before she kissed him. Or how long their lips had touched. Or what the hell she had worn that morning. They had talked on the phone later that day. There were phone records to prove it. David could almost be certain she had said something about how he needed to take better care of himself. But the certainty always drifted away, falling into that pit of half-memories that were more wishful thinking than fact.

The Tom Petty song ended. David focused on his hands and the way they gripped the steering wheel with white knuckle fury.

He had a file cabinet in the basement jammed full of papers, clippings, and criminal profiles. Each page was memorized so well he could recite paragraphs word for word. The knowledge accumulated in that overstuffed cabinet represented everything he had accomplished over the last decade. All of it pointed to one central truth: on May 16, 1999, David William Alders came home from work at 11:35 pm and his wife wasn't there. His child was. Six-year-old Melanie was deep asleep in her bed, unaware that sometime after getting tucked in, Mommy disappeared from the face of the earth.

And that was it. Ten years of evidence in the file cabinet. Fingerprints lifted from every inch of their house that invariably came back belonging to family. Background checks on every neighbor who lived in the surrounding square mile. Even a transcript of a psychic who felt Elise was living with an old man

and raising his grandkids. All of it was entertaining to read. Rarely a day went by that he didn't stop at the five-drawer metal shrine to Elise and peruse a five-year-old report, hoping to connect a dot that he hadn't noticed the first thousand times. But he closed the cabinet for good. That had been the hardest moment of his life. Harder than the midnight hour of May 17, 1999.

He had known it would be. Last year he had done the monthly utility bills and seen the writing on the wall. He couldn't afford not to work anymore. He made a couple calls to the detective he used to work with (No, I don't expect to get my old position back...Yes, a beat cop is fine...I know, it'll take a little time). Once he factored in the mortgage, the outstanding bank loans, and the money he owed his brother-in-law, he knew he had let the situation grow dire. Later, the mail came. David thumbed through it, looking at college brochure after college brochure—all for Melanie. With a tightening of the chest bordering on suffocation, he realized he hadn't put anything aside for her. He had been so busy digging in the past that he had forgotten her future. Melanie wasn't the type of kid to ask for things. She would quietly suffer through two jobs and a lifetime of debt to get through school, and if—no, *when*—Elise came back, she would be furious with David and with good reason.

That was the day he decided to sell the house. He made some calls and within a week the house was listed. He never expected anything to happen right away. The marketplace was far from thriving. He only hoped someone would bid on it within the next year. One month later, he got an offer. The conglomerate's name was unforgettable: Readds Valid, Inc. Their bid was the same as

his asking price, plus an extra five thousand to seal the deal. David gave his realtor an enthusiastic yes, hung up the phone and frowned, wondering if he had made the right decision. But it wasn't really a decision, was it? He had lived in the house with Elise, but it was just a house. Melanie meant so much more. Elise would understand.

The file cabinet was a different story. Going back to work meant he would have to let its metal drawers remain shut for days or weeks at a time. Something hard and sharp churned in his gut at the thought. That cabinet was his life. And without it...hell, without it, what was the point to anything?

The closing process began. Even as thoughts turned to where they would live next he couldn't get the file cabinet out of his mind. It was a sinkhole, a realization that their little family wasn't going to be whole again anytime soon. Another decade could pass before the search could be taken up again. Another decade without Elise—the thought was like needles in his heart. But the file cabinet would be there. It would be the pitiful consolation prize, the silent partner reminding him of his failure.

And then last week, he hit the low point.

That was the night he made Melanie stay at her Uncle Calvin's house, the same brother-in-law David owed money to. Melanie hadn't wanted to go, but David insisted. He waved as she drove away and then went inside. He plodded downstairs to the basement, took a seat at the table next to the file cabinet, and grabbed the bottle of vodka waiting for him there. He sat and he waited. He thought about the 9mm in its holster, lying on the

table. For the first time in his life he wondered if he would find Elise that much quicker if he pressed that 9mm to his head and pulled the trigger.

The rest of that evening was a deep shadow. David remembered the drinking. He remembered the wetness on his face from either tears or being sloppy with the vodka. There was that black hole too. He stared into it for a long time, and at times thought the pistol was staring back. As the night wore on that blackness grew, filling the edges of his vision. It took over everything, turning the world into sludge. He was happy to let himself drown in it.

But he didn't drown. He dreamed.

The diner was no place he remembered. It looked like a one of those Ma-and-Pa type places every small town in Texas had a few of. It must've been far West Texas, because the view outside looked downright barren. David wasn't looking at the view. He was looking at his brother, Scott, seated in the booth across from him.

"You should try the coffee here, Hop. It's pretty darn good."

Hop—the old family nickname. Elise had picked it up, too, no matter how much David tried to keep her from learning it. He found it didn't sound as condescending coming from her lips and in time he grew to love it when she called him that.

David smiled at Scott. It was something he fell into with his older brother. Scott looked at him with that *it's-my-God-given-right-to-make-you-miserable* gleam in his eye. So David smiled his *I-can-take-whatever-you-can-dish-out* smile. Naturally Scott wore his highway patrolman uniform, probably to

rub David's nose in the fact that at least one of them hadn't quit the force. But David didn't let that disrupt his smile. He leaned back and propped his arms on the top of the seat.

"Nice diner, Scott. Definitely has a homey ambiance to it."

Scott smirked. "That's what most people think." He took a sip of coffee, never losing eye contact. "Not many people come here...only the ones heading to the other side."

"The other side of what? Arizona?"

Scott held the coffee mug an inch from his grinning lips. "You could say that."

"So now you're showing up in my dreams," David said. "I guess this is your way of saying I don't call enough."

"I didn't bring you here, Hop. You did. Which I guess means you're hanging by a thread." Scott put the coffee down. "You always could've found me on the other end of a phone line, you know. I would've listened."

"Apparently, I can find you on the other end of a bottle too." David rubbed his temples. "I'm going to have one hell of a hangover in the morning."

His older brother grinned. "You sure are."

David struggled to keep the smile from turning to a sneer. "So how's Michael these days? Still whining about the time Melanie gave him a black eye? You should remind him that was a good five years ago. He needs to move on."

At the mention of Michael, the gleam in Scott's eye extinguished. He broke eye contact with David, looking down at the tabletop.

“He is moving on...in his own way.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, because frankly he deserved it. You don’t ask a grieving kid if her mother’s ever coming back.”

Scott wasn’t listening. He stared at the silverware on the table, as if entranced by it. When he spoke again it was in a dull monotone that unnerved David.

“I remember, Hop. I remember when we were kids. I remember the house we grew up in, the room we shared. My bed was next to the window.”

“Don’t remind me,” David cut in. “Do you know how hard it was to climb over you without waking you up every time I wanted to sneak out?”

Scott ran his fingers lightly over the silverware and closed his eyes. His voice drifted out like someone under hypnosis.

“I never told you about the ghost I saw when I was ten. I always wanted to, Hop. Every day for a year I thought about asking you about it, as if you might somehow know why I saw what I saw.”

David let out a hollow chuckle. “Why would I be able to explain something only you saw?”

Scott continued as if David never spoke. “I happened to open my eyes that night. I have no idea what time it was, probably well after midnight. I rolled over, adjusting my pillow, and my eyes cracked open. I saw a face in the window. He stared at me as if he knew everything about me. Then he floated back into the darkness.”

“If this ends with a punch line about Elvis, I’m gonna slug you.”

Scott opened his eyes, gazing at David.

“It was you, Hop. It was your face.”

David let out a laugh. “I was probably trying to scare you, Scott. Did you ever think of that?”

Scott frowned, his eyes world-weary. “You don’t understand. It wasn’t the face of a five-year-old child I saw. It was you as you are now, even older.”

David rubbed his temples again. “Scott, it would take a whole team of experts to explain what’s wrong with you. But this is my dream so I guess I’ll be the one wearing the hospital gown.”

Scott did something so unlike his older brother that David shuddered to remember it. He reached across the table and took David by the hand. A feeling of peace washed over David, like anesthesia before a surgery. He looked down at their hands together and then at Scott, shocked to see tears standing in the highway patrolman’s eyes.

“I have to go now, Hop. I have to catch a bus.”

Something about the way he said it sent a pinch of fear through David. “Where are you going?”

Scott smiled sadly. “Somewhere you can’t follow. But you have to know that Elise isn’t there either...at least not in the way you think she is.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean? Do you know where Elise is? If you do, you have to tell me. You have to—”

Air brakes squealed outside. Scott’s grip tightened on David’s hand. David whipped his head toward the bus, sure he would see Elise on it. But he only saw light pouring through the window,

hitting his eyes with such atomic intensity that his whole body jerked in fear.

David fell backward. He heard a chair fall over in the distance. Glass broke close to his head. His head hit concrete and the light dispersed as quickly as it came. David rolled over and looked around wildly. He was back in the basement, staring at the table and the tall file cabinet looming over him. Broken bits of a vodka bottle clung to the arm of his shirt. His head was a load of bricks. Next to him on the floor was the pistol.

Later that day David got the call he somehow knew was coming. A freak car crash on the interstate. Scott Alders had died instantly. David hung up with tears in his eyes, crying though he knew with utmost certainty that Scott was okay. Scott was on his bus, and it was the right bus. What made him cry was the certainty Elise wasn't on the bus. She was alive, waiting to be found.

And he had almost left her alone by pulling the trigger.

The school bell rang, cutting through the air and David's thoughts. He looked up from the steering wheel. Teenagers hustled outside in droves. It only took a moment to pick out Melanie, because she didn't walk with the crowds. She was always by herself, and always made a beeline to his truck. David shifted the gear to drive and waited for her to reach him.

It was time to have their talk.

**Look out for Chapter 4 on 7<sup>th</sup> November!**

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