

THE HOLLOWES

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## **Moving Day**

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The moving truck was having a tumultuous time making the turn into the Whispering Hollows entranceway. Melanie watched from behind the wheel of the Ford Ranger, waiting until her dad found the right combination of reverse and drive. She watched the truck back up, shifting into a new angle. She glimpsed her father through the glare on the windshield. He looked perplexed but determined, and when he noticed her watching, he flashed a self-deprecating smile. She threw her hands up in mock-agitation. David chuckled and went back to checking his mirrors. Two readjustments later, he had it. The truck was pointed straight into the bottleneck opening. He rolled down the window as he eased up to the keypad and flashed the plastic card Mr. Rickett had given him earlier in the morning. The gate rattled to life, sliding backward like a curtain opening on a stage.

Melanie glimpsed the tan buildings and the lush, ivy-covered canopies before the moving truck lumbered into her line of sight. Her heart swelled. This was it. This was their new home. It was so totally different from their old house. And different was good.

She remembered restraining her excitement last month when Dad broke the news after school. He had almost gone to tears explaining how the only way to survive was to sell the house. His eyes had become giant moons of insecurity as he talked about downsizing, the message hidden in those plaintive looks: Please don't hate me.

Not surprisingly, Dad didn't understand. Melanie wasn't upset about switching schools. No one was going to miss her or even notice she was gone when school started up again in the fall. Well, that strange guidance counselor would, but the lady with the dazzling blue eyes hadn't reappeared since that meeting in the hallway. She must have turned her attention to other unsuspecting students. It was just

as well. A new school meant new cliques and new possibilities, even if she had to wade through a long, lonely summer to get to it.

But that wasn't the only thing Dad didn't get. He thought she would resent him for leaving the house behind. He looked at 2204 Meandering Way and saw the family home, saw Mom. Melanie saw Mom, too, but she also saw those first weeks after the disappearance. She saw an emptiness in those rooms that threatened to suck the air from her lungs. In the back of her mind, she had already decided the house was cursed.

Now the house was officially behind them, a glowing ember of hope in her heart began to spark. She hadn't allowed it to so before today. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. As they boxed up essentials and sold off everything else in weekend garage sales, she waited for the house to retaliate. Any minute now it would realize they were plotting an escape route and move to block them. She felt six-years-old again, fearing the boogeyman under the bed at nights, waiting for her mother's captor to return. She barely slept at all last night, finally dozing off on the couch during the wee hours. Moments later she had popped awake to the smell of smoke. It was daylight, but she thought the whole house was on fire, getting its revenge by taking them all down in a fiery blaze. But Dad walked out of the kitchen, moving like a zombie.

"Dad," she said. "Is something on fire?"

He looked up like a deer caught in headlights. "Oh, no, honey. I disconnected the stove. You don't want to leave a gas line connected in an empty house."

Melanie gave him a strange look. How can disconnecting a gas line leave a smoky smell? But Dad was already on his way to load boxes. "Get dressed, baby," he had said. "We've got a long day ahead of us." She didn't understand, but she did as she was told. After that, they never stopped moving.

It took a while with only the two of them. As the morning progressed, her spine began to feel like an accordion and Melanie wanted to ask Dad to call someone to help. They had lots of relatives on Mom's side of the family, like Uncle Cal and Aunt Kelly. Why not call a few to handle some of the larger pieces of furniture? But the look on Dad's face kept her from voicing the thought. He moved from the house to the truck and back again in a quiet, hurried way, like a mouse sneaking food off the table. She thought all of his creeping meant he didn't want to wake the spirits of the past, or moreover, he didn't want to wake the house itself. She ignored the ache in her back and persevered. Because what if Dad *did* understand? What if he understood perfectly?

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The moving truck rounded a corner ahead, motoring between two buildings. The apartment complex opened up to Melanie, and as soon as she was past the gate, she braked to let herself take it all in. She saw an elderly woman on a third floor balcony watering her azaleas. A man with a large, undulating belly jogged down the sidewalk with his German shepherd barely keeping up. A lady in a business suit slipped a rent check through the slot in the office front door. All of these people, just living and breathing and moving forward. Melanie had forgotten what that felt like—as if God had pressed a huge PAUSE button ten years ago and forgot to un-press it.

Behind her, a horn honked. She wasn't the only one eager to move forward.

"Sorry," she said, although the windows were up and no one could hear her. She pulled forward, following the moving truck's route. She slid up the narrow roadway and turned between the two buildings. She let out a squeal and hit the brakes.

The Ranger's tires screeched and came to an abrupt stop. Two feet from the hood stood a very old man with a cane. His bald, pear-shaped head pointed downward. His cloudy eyes, unnaturally magnified by thick eyeglasses, stared at nothing but his scuffed leather shoes. He hadn't noticed the screeching and had yet to notice the pickup that nearly mowed him over. His entire focus was on his feet as if the only way he could perform the delicate act of walking was to supervise their continual progress. Melanie glanced in the mirror, glad to see that the car behind her had taken a different path. She didn't think this roadblock was going to clear itself quickly.

The codger shuffled onward obliviously. Melanie watched and waited. After a full minute, he finally cleared the bumper. She was about to toe the gas when the old man's head snapped upright. He looked over his shoulder and gazed at her with owl-eyed surprise. She almost laughed at his look of pure confusion. But his shock melted into a grandfatherly smile. His cheeks became bags of wrinkles as he beamed at her. He lifted a blue-veined hand and flapped it, waving. She waved back, chuckling now, and then drove forward to catch up with her father. As she rounded the curve into the back parking lot, she peeked in the mirror, and there he was, enthusiastically waving at her like a parent seeing off a child on the first day of school.

\* \* \* \*

"You never said it was a second-floor apartment."

David looked at his beleaguered daughter at the other end of the couch. They were at the halfway point of the staircase where the

platform curved back to the second floor landing. David had taken the tail end of the couch, bearing the lion's share of the weight. Melanie had to navigate this elephantine barge. Getting around the curve was proving to be a bitch and a half.

"Sure, I mentioned it," David said, sounding lighter than he felt. "I told you every single detail about this place."

"No," Melanie huffed. "I would've remembered you telling me about the second floor part. I would've remembered because I would've made my Last Will & Testament before taking this couch up the Staircase of Doom."

"Come on," David said, barely keeping from wheezing. "It's a few more steps."

"Yeah, famous last words."

David pondered their situation. If he switched places with her, he could lift and revolve the couch until it cleared the railing. But for that to work, she'd have to hoist the back end at the same time, and it was as plain as the redness on her cheeks that Melanie was out of juice. He wasn't even sure she could help him bring the couch back down the staircase again.

"What's all this racket?"

They looked up at the second-floor landing to see a silver-haired man in a terrycloth bathrobe. He held a Chihuahua in the crook of one arm. Somehow both man and dog carried the exact same frown.

"Just trying to move in," David said. "We're a little stuck."

"Oh," the man said, checking his watch as if to time them.

David put on a friendly smile. "You must be Mr. Morton. Charlie told me about you."

The man's eyes widened, full of dread at the possibility of having to engage in conversation. "Yes, I am," he said succinctly. He and his Chihuahua spun around and traipsed to Apartment 212.

Melanie shot David a look. "That's our new neighbor?"

David watched the man disappear into his apartment. "Charlie made him sound a lot nicer."

Mel rolled her eyes. "I'm sure he did."

"Can I help?" said a man's voice behind him.

David struggled to look backward, but the man moved past, leaving the smell of suntan lotion in his wake. A lanky man with a blond mustache and goatee made his way up the staircase, squeezing between the couch and the railing to get to Melanie.

"Hi. You look like you could use a break. My name's Braun."

Melanie nodded. "Mr. Braun, you have the perfect name for couch-lifting. Be my guest."

The man called Braun sidled next to her. The moment he had a grip

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on the couch, Melanie dipped and pulled away.

“Hey, honey?” David called. The unspoken question on his voice: *Honey, are you abandoning me with a total stranger?*

“Dad,” Melanie shot back. “You need to get acquainted with your new neighbor. I need to go to my new room and pass out. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Braun.”

“Braun’s my first name,” he said, but Melanie skipped up the stairs and over the landing with a lighter step than someone who claimed to be tired. The man with the mustache watched her go and turned to David. “Braun N. Becker. Apartment 312.”

“David Alders, abandoned father. Nice to meet you.”

Braun chuckled. He wore a white short-sleeve polo, which contrasted with his heavily-bronzed skin. David thought he was the type of guy who spent weekends in the tanning booth but then noticed Braun’s biceps as he effortlessly lifted the couch. No, David realized, this guy works outside for a living.

“We’re in apartment 214,” David said. Braun nodded and started the ascent, moving much faster than David was ready for. He nearly lost his footing trying to keep up. They were already on the landing and heading to the door before he spoke again. “So what do you do for a living, Mr. Becker?”

“Oh, call me Braun. Only clients use my last name, and you’re no client. You’re part of The Hollows family now.”

*The Hollows family?* David smirked. Charlie hadn’t even sounded that cheesy.

They rotated the couch as they reached the door to 214, left open by Melanie. Braun barely slowed. He walked inside, stepping backward, and found the perfect angle for the couch on the first try. They continued down the hallway into the front room, where they gingerly set the couch in the corner.

“Wow, thanks,” David said, looking at the couch and wishing he could nap on it for a while. “I thought I was going to take up residence on that staircase.”

He turned to find a business card in his face. In cerulean blue Serifa font, the card proclaimed: BRAUN N. BECKER, Organic Food Supplier.

“Have one,” Braun insisted. “I’m always passing them out.”

“Thanks.” David took the card.

“Well,” Braun said. “Let’s get back down there. I’m betting you have a good bit of furniture waiting in that truck.” He started back up the hallway.

David followed. “Oh, you don’t have to—”

“Nonsense. If you don’t mind my saying, you look ready to drop. A

little help and you'll be done in no time. Besides, you're apartment has the same layout as mine. I can show you some very Feng Shui ways to make the whole place come to life."

David grimaced as he stared at Braun's back. As they walked along the second floor landing he wished he could make Braun N. Becker understand how David W. Alders had stared at his old kitchen this morning—the last place he ever saw Elise—now barren and empty. He wished he could describe the feeling of finality that came over him. The abrupt knowledge that one portion of his life was over slapped him hard. If he could tell Mr. Organic Foods that, Braun wouldn't try to Feng Shui anything.

But Braun continued blithely along. "And what's your trade, Mr. Alders?"

David wanted to say "unemployed," but that changed tomorrow. "I'm a cop," he replied, hoping the words didn't sound fake.

Braun glanced back. "You don't say. We have a real justice of the peace living among us?"

"I guess so."

"I almost went into the criminal justice field myself in my younger days."

"Oh, yeah?" David clomped down the staircase. "What kept you from it?"

"My wife at the time," Braun said without looking back. "She didn't like the idea of being a policeman's wife. I guess you've run into the same problem."

"I'm sorry?"

Braun stopped, shaking his head. "Forgive me. That was incredibly rude and tactless. I assumed your situation since I only saw you and your daughter moving in."

David was quiet, unsure how much he wanted to tell this stranger. Braun held up his hand. "Please. You don't have to explain anything. Just forgive a slow-witted man for thinking all single men are divorced like him."

David nodded. "Fair enough."

Braun nodded, too, and continued walking. David followed, wondering if he should give the guy a break. After all, he was nice enough to help a stranger unload a moving truck. As they rounded the corner to the parking lot, David saw the truck and had something else to worry about. A young black man in a blank red basketball jersey stood on the loading ramp, rifling through a box David had left near the lip of the opening.

"Hey!" David yelled and ran past Braun. The black man jerked upright and leapt off the ramp. He turned as if about to run, but

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thought better of it. He leaned against the side of truck innocuously.

“What the hell are you doing?” David said as he reached the truck. The black man—who was just a kid, really—glanced his way.

“Oh, me? I was heading to the court with my basketball when it slipped, you know. I went after it but it went into that box, so I was, you know, fishing it out.”

David’s voice hit a level of sternness he hadn’t used in years. It was his cop voice, and it came naturally. “Your basketball fell into a box that was completely taped shut five minutes ago?”

The young man’s brow furrowed. He stopped leaning on the truck and stepped closer to David, going chest-to-chest with him. “Yeah. You got a problem with that? You need to pay me back for the ball. How much cash you got?”

David looked him in the eye, the young man gazed back unflinchingly. Braun approached casually from the side, his hands in his pockets.

“Hello, Dontae. How are you today?”

“Man,” the young man snarled. “Don’t be telling this bitch-ass my name. Who the hell does he think he is, fronting on me like that?”

“I don’t know,” Braun said lightly, as if they were discussing the weather. He smiled and looked at David. “Officer Alders, who *do* you think you are?”

The kid flinched, and David repressed the urge to grin. Dontae backed up a step. “You can keep the ball,” he grumbled magnanimously.

“And you can keep away from my truck,” David countered. The young man’s eyes flared. They watched each other in silence for a few seconds before Dontae turned and stalked away, heading toward Building Four.

Braun chuckled under his breath. “That’s Dontae Scoville,” he explained. “The closest thing we have to a criminal element.”

David pulled his eyes to the back of the truck, examining its contents. Besides the one box that had been opened, everything else appeared untouched. “I hope that’s the closest I ever see him.”

“I’m sure it will be,” Braun said, sounding unconcerned. “The Scovilles are here out of charity. The Hollows family took them in four years ago, after Hurricane Katrina.”

“Oh,” David said, feeling guilty but not sure why.

“They were from that district in New Orleans that got the worst of it. I forgot the name of it.”

“The Ninth Ward?”

“Bingo. That’s it. I knew it was a number.” He scratched at his forehead absently. “Anyway, they were one family out of many that

needed quick homes after the storm. I told Charlie we had to be choosy about whom we took. After all, Houston got quite a spike in crime after they took on so many victims.” He leaned against the truck, looking downcast. “But Charlie’s a kind, gracious man. He found the Scovilles, and once he told me their story, I couldn’t help but agree that he had made the right choice.”

He paused as if waiting for David to ask. But David wasn’t biting. “Their family is made up of a mother and two sons,” Braun continued. “It used to be three. The oldest son didn’t make it through the storm.”

“Yep, that’s sad,” David agreed. He hated the way people had passed his wife’s story along casually like an interesting conversation piece. He stepped up the ramp and started stacking boxes to carry. With a grunt he lifted three boxes and started out of the truck. Braun got the hint and climbed in the truck and started gathering boxes too. David reached the end of the ramp and nearly bumped into a person he couldn’t see from the load in his arms.

“Only child coming through,” Melanie announced before he hit her. He stopped abruptly, trying not to lose the box on top.

“Hey, honey,” David said from behind the boxes. “Are you done resting?”

Melanie chuckled. “You wish. I had to ask Mr. Braun something.”

“That’s Braun N. Becker,” Braun said as he appeared on the ramp with two boxes. “But you can call me—”

“Yeah, when does the ticking stop?”

David shifted his boxes to look at Melanie. Her blue eyes were on Braun, and they looked agitated. He turned from her to Braun, but the organic food supplier looked as confused as David. “Excuse me?”

“The ticking,” Melanie said. “I’ve only been here an hour and it’s already driving me bonkers. When does it stop?”

“I’m sorry,” Braun said, coming carefully down the ramp. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“The ticking,” Melanie insisted. “The nonstop ticking! Don’t tell me you can’t hear it. Dad, do you know where it’s coming from?”

David couldn’t shrug with all the boxes in his arms so he said, “Sorry, Mel. I haven’t heard a single tick.”

“Oh, come on. It sounds like a drum solo. The whole apartment complex must be hearing it. It’s almost inside my head it’s so lou—” She paused, her eyes widening as she took a deep breath. “It stopped...this very second. You heard that right?”

David snorted. “I didn’t hear it when it was going. How am I going to hear it *not* going?”

She stared at him, looking lost. Then she put her hands on her hips. “Fine, I get it. You two have only been buds for three minutes and

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you're already coming up with practical jokes to play.”

“Melanie—”

“No, Dad.” She turned back to the stairwell, walking fast. “I can manage without the sarcasm. But I’ll tell you one thing. If I find that clock, it’s going down.”

She stomped up the stairs as Braun approached him from behind. He sighed. “Could be a hormone thing. You never know. That’s the beauty of parenthood.”

“Yeah,” David mumbled. “It never gets old.”

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