

# THE HOLLOW

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## **The Stirring Spoon**

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Crumpled newspaper and a slain army of cardboard box carcasses littered every room. Half-eaten fast food lay across an already cluttered coffee table. Melanie sat on the same couch she'd abandoned at the stairwell, wearing matching yellow tank top and boxers. She pulled a box into her lap. David watched from the other end of the front room. Scrunched beneath the computer desk, he had worked diligently untangling cords and figuring out which connector went to which hole. He had finished plugging in the printer, and now he mustered the energy to get back to his feet.

Staring at Melanie he realized he was in no hurry. She was removing framed photos from the box, taking her time to examine each one. He couldn't see which photos she pulled out, but he saw her face. A different expression shaped her features with every photo. On one she wrinkled her nose, probably wincing at an old haircut. On the next she chuckled to herself. But a black frame stopped her completely. Her face went slack. She leaned back on the couch, bringing the photo closer, scrutinizing it. A slow smile spread across her face, the kind that transcended beauty and actually made David's heart hurt. How long did he have before that smile would be off at college and missing from his life? The unfairness of it was staggering until he realized how unfair it would be to Melanie if she didn't leave. He couldn't keep her caged by his love forever. At times he wondered if he already had.

"What ya lookin' at?" he asked softly.

Melanie peered up. "Oh, nothing. Just a picture."

David crawled out from under the desk and turned on the computer. As it whirred to life he stepped closer to his daughter. He would've plopped on the couch next to her, but if he did, exhaustion

would take over and he'd never get up again. He had too much to do. He leaned over instead, looking at the photo.

Christmas 1994. Melanie was one. She took up most of the photo, her pudgy frame lunging forward. David remembered taking it. Melanie had only learned to walk a month earlier, and she constantly ran back and forth between Mom and Dad, using their legs as goalposts. In the photo she had been waddling from Elise to him when he snapped her in mid-flight. She held a plastic teething toy in one hand, and her head was plastered with brightly-colored bows from all the presents she'd ripped open. But her eyes made the picture. Melanie's baby blues were wired with excitement. She looked two seconds away from spontaneously combusting with happiness.

David chuckled. "I told Elise to stop lacing your formula with cocaine, but she never listened."

"You're funny." Melanie elbowed him. "I wasn't looking at me. I was looking at Mom."

She was right. There was Elise, barely visible beneath the crook of Melanie's fat little arm. She was in the background, holding back a laugh. Her hands were out and ready in case the toddler took a spill. Now a sixteen-year-old Melanie ran her finger around Elise's outline.

"I have her smile, don't I?" she said. "She curls her upper lip the same way I do, or I curl my lip the same way she does. You know what I mean."

"Sure I do. You two are a lot alike: same eyes, same smile, same hair. I see her in you every day." He patted her on the shoulder and went back to the computer. The startup process was almost finished. He sat at the desk and waited to get online.

"Does that make you sad?"

He looked at Melanie. "What?"

She shifted on the couch, looking like she wanted to return his gaze but something held her back. Her eyes remained on the photo. "Does the fact that I look like Mom make it harder for you? Is that why you're always being careful with my feelings?"

"Careful with your feelings? Isn't that what a good parent's supposed to do?"

She shrugged. "I guess. You're kind of extreme about it. You're always walking on eggshells around me. Other kids' parents yell at them when they do something wrong. I haven't heard you yell in, well, I can't remember the last time."

David tried to smile. "Of course I don't yell at you. You never do anything wrong. You're that prototype of the perfect child. God only made one."

"I'm not perfect. I'm too busy walking on eggshells around you too."

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“Where’re all these eggshells coming from?” David clicked on the Outlook button, which took him directly to his email. “You know you don’t have to walk on anything around me. I’m a big boy. I can take whatever you can dish out.”

“Yeah, right.” She got up and went to the kitchen, leaving the black-framed photo on the couch. She returned with a hammer and nail. Stepping onto the couch, she went about propping the nail on the wall.

“Don’t ‘yeah, right’ me,” David said, keeping his voice light. “I’m serious. You want to talk, let’s talk. Tell me about the boy you like at school or your menstruation cycle or which gang you’re getting initiated into. I’m not going to freak out on you.”

“Believe me, I know,” she said, aiming the hammer over the nail. “You never freak out, and I never know when that dam is going to burst. I’m constantly afraid I’m going to do or say something that’ll send you over the edge.”

“Wow. I never knew I had such a Norman Bates reputation with you.”

She tapped on the nail. “You have for a while now.” The nail-tapping stopped as her shoulders drooped. “Ever since you sent me over to Uncle Cal’s so you could spend the night in the basement.”

David stiffened. Melanie turned toward him with baleful eyes. She dropped the hammer on the floor with a thump. “What were you doing that night, Dad?”

He tried to meet her gaze and found he couldn’t. He looked back at the computer screen without actually seeing it. God, why did she have to be so damn intuitive? “I was...I needed some time.”

“Dad!” Melanie threw her arms up in exasperation. “You’ve had ten years. How much time do you need?”

David stared at her, realizing his next words were going to be pivotal. Mel had always been a tough girl. She knew when she was being lied to. If there was one thing that had kept them afloat this long, it had been that sense of openness. She was straight with him, and he tried his best to be the same for her. He got up, walked into the hallway, found a box marked KITCHEN DRAWER, and opened it.

“I guess you’re not going to answer me.” Melanie shook her head. “I thought you said you could take whatever I could dish out.”

“I can,” he said, rifling through the box. “I need something first.”

He found what he wanted and came back to the front room, holding a wooden stirring spoon in one hand. “What’s that for?” Melanie asked.

“It’s for you.” He held it out. “You’re going to want it in a second, and I’d rather you have this than the hammer.”

She sighed and took the spoon. “Okay, why do I need it?”

“Because I have to tell you something.” His insides buckled but he forced himself to hold her gaze. “I was contemplating suicide that night.”

Melanie’s eyes bulged for one speechless second. She hit him in the shoulder with the wooden spoon. “See?” David said. “Told ya you’d want it.”

But Melanie wasn’t through. She hit him again, this time on the scalp. “Mel, ow!” And again several times in the chest. “Mel, will you stop?” And then she clipped his nose. “Okay, Mel! That’s enough! Enough!” He caught her wrist before she could land another blow.

“No, it’s not enough!” she erupted, her eyes full. “You stand here and tell me you almost left me on my own and expect it to be enough? How could you, Dad!”

“Come on, Mel. Think. Why would I tell you something that dark?”

“Because you have a serious mental imbalance,” she said, her voice quavering.

“No...because that darkness is behind me now. I faced it that night. I realized I wanted to live. I wanted to move on.”

She struggled in his grip, trying to go at him with the spoon again. “You’re saying that to get me off your back.”

“No, I’m not, and I can prove it.”

“How?”

“You know the file cabinet in the basement?”

“Of course. You spend more time with that thing than you do with me.”

“I left it at the house.”

He released her wrist and waited, but the spoon didn’t come at him. She was frozen in place, looking at him in a disconnected way. “You left it?”

He nodded.

“What about the files?”

David shrugged. “I burned them this morning. The smoke woke you up.”

She lowered the spoon as another tear slid down her cheek. Her tear-clogged voice cut through him. “You burned Mom’s files?”

“Mom’s not in those files.” He leaned in close to her. “Truth is she never was. Once I figured that out, the part of me that had invested the whole last decade in those files felt like dying. But a bigger part of me realized I had been looking in the wrong place.” He touched her chin, where a stubborn tear dangled. Melanie gazed through glassy eyes. “Mel, you think that your resemblance to Mom makes it harder for me...The reality is, your resemblance to Mom saved me that night.”

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Melanie sniffled and wrapped her arms around him. David pulled her tight, trying not to let his vision grow foggy as well. They held each other until Melanie's sobs quieted and the tension in their grips relaxed. David felt one more wooden whack against the back of his head.

"That's for taking ten years to figure it out," she whispered.

"I guess I deserve that."

She patted his arms and pulled away, letting out a huff. "I thought I was exhausted before you brought up the whole suicide thing."

David chuckled. "You look like you're ready to fall over."

"Vertical is such a cruel concept. I'm going to bed." She blindly tossed the wooden spoon into the kitchen and turned toward her door. Then she stopped herself. "Oops, almost forgot." Melanie went back to the couch and grabbed the black-framed photo. She carefully hung it on the nail over the couch, making sure it was level. "Okay, now I'm done."

"Looks good, honey. Makes the place feel like home."

She looked back, smiling. "Yeah, it does." She moseyed past him, bumping his shoulder purposely. "Don't tell me you're going to be up all night."

"Nope, I'm out of gas too. But I have to send out an email to the rest of the family."

"So they'll have the new address and phone number?"

"You could say that." Melanie gave him a look. David thought about letting it go, but he had just discussed suicide with his daughter. One more confession wouldn't make a difference. "I haven't exactly told anyone we were moving."

Melanie clenched her jaw. "Yikes."

He nodded. "Exactly."

"Well, you have fun with that." She headed to her room.

"Goodnight, Mel. Love you."

She tried to respond while yawning. "I loo-awwww—yaaa—whatever. G'night."

Melanie nearly fell through her bedroom doorway. The door shut behind her and a second later David heard bed springs creak. He sat down at the computer again, not realizing his right hand was over his heart. He stared at the screen, feeling the rhythmic beat in his hand and in his temples.

A minute later, Melanie screamed.

Melanie dropped as if gravity had kicked into high gear. The pillow felt wonderfully cool against her hot face. She wiped her cheeks against it, hoping she didn't wake to find her face as puffy as the mattress. She wanted to replay the whole conversation, not believing Dad had said the things he'd said. But her brain was winding down for the night. She almost heard lights flipping off in different parts of her mind. She could analyze later. For now, she knew the only thing she needed to know. Dad was genuinely okay. Nothing else mattered.

She turned when she heard the noise. Perhaps she was dreaming because she already felt less than awake. The noise grew quickly, filling the room so fast she thought it had to be in the room with her.

Ticking. That damn ticking was back.

Melanie rolled over. The room was pitch-black, which was the only way she ever slept. The ticking lashed at her from all sides like a tribal chant. Her hand darted to the bedside lamp as she tried to remember if she plugged it in earlier. She twisted the switch. If it clicked, the sound was lost in the booming metronome.

Dim, orange light blanketed the room. Melanie looked up—and the man standing at the foot of her bed peered down at her.

The air in her throat halted. Melanie froze as the man came around the bed. He was a brownish-red blob, his skin twisted and disfigured. Smoke came off of him in waves. The smell of burnt flesh assaulted her. He dipped in close, blood seeping from his eyes and nose. Muscles and tendons lay uncovered across his cheeks and hairless scalp. He reached out with paper machè fingers but grabbed her jaw in a vise and held her. With their faces only inches apart, he spat out a slur of rasped words.

“You thhhink you can take my ark fromm meee? That there's noooo place you c-c-can hide? I'll find you. You can't hiiiide. Not on Noah's Aaaark. I'll smash your ark to splinters.”

He pressed against her, pushing her head against the backboard. The ticking stopped. His strength left him., and his grip went slack. One last breath spewed out of him before his melting body fell over her, limp and lifeless. Blood dripped from his open mouth onto her shoulder in a steady drool. Melanie felt it slide over her like a worm. She squeezed her eyes shut and sucked in a breath involuntarily. When she exhaled, her scream filled the room.

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David leapt from his chair, not thinking, only reacting. He threw open the door and saw her in bed, backed against the headboard, her

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eyes sealed and her fists clenched. She had stopped screaming, but her mouth hung open in silent terror.

“What, baby?” he yelled. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Dad!” Her eyelids flew open. She jumped out of bed and ran to him, eyes blazing. She almost knocked him over as she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. “Make him go away!” she wailed. “Make the burnt man go away!”

“What burnt man? What are you talking about?”

But Melanie didn’t answer. She couldn’t stop crying. David pulled her back into the front room, but took one last glance at her bedroom. He didn’t know what he was looking for. The room was cluttered with boxes and clothes, but otherwise empty. Even the bed sheets were spotless.

**LOOK OUT FOR CHAPTER 8 ON 15<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER!**

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