

THE HOLLOWES

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*THE CLOCK STRIKES*

**TWO**

I sit alone and wait  
as seagulls scream  
above the eternal tide  
that turns its back  
again and again.

***The Eternal Tide***  
*Rachel Brower*

# 8

## The Grandfather Clock

May 13, 1949

Tess Buckner stood in the kitchen, back against the wall, her thumb in her mouth. She hadn't sucked her thumb in years, not since she was a toddler. The nine-year-old didn't know when the thumb had found its way into her mouth. Sometime during the last seven hours it had crept up on its own. She hadn't even noticed.

Her eyes moved over the kitchen, scanning Momma's china cabinet, the washboard jutting out of the sink, and the fruit bowl filled with oranges and apples. She stared out the back window, her gaze lost somewhere between the laundry rising and falling on the line and the forest beyond.

The forest beyond...

Papa had told her to wait at home while he searched for Momma. Tess did as she was told. She left Abner Buckner in that darkened cellar without looking back. Her heartbeat had sounded like steady gunfire crackling in her veins. Once she reached her bedroom she collapsed onto her bed, crying until exhaustion overtook her.

The next time she looked at her wind-up clock three hours had passed, and Tess wondered if it had all been some terrible dream, brought on by Momma's *Nawlins* stories. Even if the cellar was there, nothing had happened to Momma. There was no blood on the cellar steps. No blood meant Tess had made the shadows worse than they were. No blood meant Momma was alive.

But hours passed and Papa didn't come back. The picture in her mind—the one where Papa came through the front door hand-in-hand with Momma, both laughing at the joke they played on a child who needed to stop spreading ghost stories around the schoolyard—began to falter. She went downstairs, floating slowly from room to room. The stillness worked on her nerves. She felt alone and in the presence of

unseen company. Eyes watched her, observing each movement. Tess finally couldn't move anymore. She stopped in the kitchen, leaned against the wall, and sucked her thumb.

Was Papa alive? Was he down in that cellar, fighting for his life? Did he need her help?

The radio in the kitchen window still played. Fiddles echoed into the house as Hank Snow sang *I'm Movin' On*. Tess couldn't keep up with the lyrics, but she heard the part about a baby wanting her daddy but daddy didn't want her because she'd stayed away too long. Like the thumb sneaking into her mouth, Tess's feet inched toward the back door. The door grew closer and she considered turning around. Then she pictured Papa ripped to shreds on the cellar floor. She remembered the dead quiet of the house. She couldn't decide which was worse. Moving was better than not moving. That much she knew.

She reached for the doorknob and paused. Papa's oil lantern sat on the china cabinet. Momma always pestered him about keeping it in a better place, but the cabinet was closest to the back door and he stubbornly sat it there every evening when he came in. Tess picked it up. Yes, she thought, whatever was in the cellar couldn't hide in the shadows this time. She opened kitchen drawer after kitchen drawer, searching for matches. She finally found a matchbook in the silverware drawer. She took it with her, and grabbed one of Momma's carving knives.

That was for whatever was in the cellar.

Walking into the forest this time was a different experience. Elm trees basked in the late afternoon sun, and everything felt deceptively calm. Birds chirped in the canopy above. Squirrels chattered and raced each other through the branches. Up ahead was a copse of trees, grouped together like hoodlums planning their next dirty deed. Behind the trees was the door in the ground, but Tess stopped before it came into view.

"Papa?" she called. "Papa, did you find Momma?"

Nobody answered. In her heart she hadn't expected him to. She walked farther, taking slower steps. Droplets of sweat slid down her face. She scanned the area but only saw trees in every direction. If Papa was combing the forest, even the edges, she would've seen him. But he wasn't out here. He was down there, where Tess had to go.

The opening appeared as she rounded the copse. The ancient door lay on the ground next to steps that led to a much darker place. Tess fiddled with the matchbook. She lit the first match and realized she didn't know how to open the lantern. By the time she figured it out the match had puffed out. The next three matches didn't spark at all. One sparked only to flameout two inches from the lantern. Tess feared she

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would waste them all. But then one ignited and remained lit. Tess carefully directed it into the lantern's opening. The wick caught, and Tess breathed easier.

The nine-year-old approached the stairs one precarious step at a time. She held the lantern out before her while the carving knife stayed close to her side.

“Papa, if you're in there, I'm coming to you.”

The steps barely creaked as she started down, sounding like grunted whispers. Sunlight gave way to the lantern glow as she went deeper. Her heels clicked concrete and Tess took a moment to register the room she had only seen in a panicked frenzy earlier.

Cobwebs hung from everything like ghostly curtains. The walls smelled like the muddy banks of the Trinity River. Decaying shelves lined both sides of the room, sagging but not broken under the weight of the wooden crates they held. She moved closer to a crate with no lid and held the lantern above it. What she saw made her gasp.

Pistols and small boxes of bullets.

They gleamed dully in the lamp glow, their sheen diminished by the thick blanket of dust covering them. Tess wanted to touch one of the pistols. She considered exchanging one for the carving knife, but she had no idea how to insert the bullets.

She moved to the next crate. Its lid sat askew and Tess nudged it the rest of the way off. Inside was something different. The whole crate was full of corked bottles. Papa sometimes drank from bottles like this, although she doubted he'd want these. Something resembling milk was in them. Milk soured after a couple weeks. These were probably really, really sour.

Tess went from crate to crate, checking them all. Most were nailed shut, but some of them popped open easily. She found more guns, more bottles, and other supplies like rope and screwdrivers. One box contained pretty, colored, plastic coins and a whole bag of dice. Another had stacks of old license plates. On the bottom shelf she found a smaller crate full of what appeared to be brown sticks. They looked glued together, or something had spilled on them. To Tess, they appeared to be sweating. She reached out to touch one but stopped. She noticed something on the floor and swung the lantern closer to see.

A footprint in the dust. Papa's footprint.

There were more of them, heading to the back of the room. Tess's grip on the knife tightened. She swallowed the lump in her throat and followed the prints. They didn't go far. The room went another ten feet where it dead-ended in a wall of cracked bricks and protruding tree roots. One thing was propped against it, and Tess's heart stopped,

because that was a coffin for sure. The dark wooden box leaned upright against the wall, and Momma was inside it, maybe Papa was, too, because his footprints ended a foot shy of it. They stopped there, no turning back, not even a messy print where he turned on his heel. He walked to that point and what? Either he climbed the roots or something took him, the same something that took Momma.

Tess felt a tremor inside and thought about turning back. But what if Papa was in there and alive? What if he was hurt? She could help. She could help him out, or if he was too heavy, she could ring the operator and demand every police car, fire truck, and even the army people out at Carswell. The idea sounded so perfect she almost turned to run home. But she didn't. Papa hated it when anyone did things out of order. He yelled at Momma when she forgot to pour his coffee before serving breakfast. He sent Tess to her room without supper when she forgot to wipe her shoes on the mat. He called it skipping steps, and if there was a more shameful act Tess didn't know what it was.

Papa didn't abide whiners, and if she rang the police without permission, she would look like one. No, even worse, *he* would look like one. They would all think he had his daughter call the police because he wasn't man enough to handle his own business. Then it wouldn't matter if the police found whatever took Momma. It wouldn't even matter if they found Momma. Tess would have dialed without permission, an unforgivable sin.

Tess closed her eyes, gathering herself. She lifted the lantern toward the dark box against the wall. Her eyes opened. "Papa? Tell me if you're here...please?"

She took another step. Now her feet were inside her Papa's footprints, the coffin close enough to touch. But it wasn't a coffin. Tess raised the lantern and saw a dust-coated glass disk set into the upper portion. With shaky fingers she reached up and brushed the grime away. Beyond the glass were Roman numerals and two spindly pointers, a big one and a little one.

A clock face. And it was staring back at her.

The hands were frozen in place. Tess had to count to herself. They had worked on telling time in class, of course, but she had never been good with Roman numerals. The small one was pointed at the X, which Tess was pretty sure was ten. The big hand was stuck between the XII and the I, and Tess wasn't quite as sure what that meant. But the small hand was the hour, so this clock had stopped somewhere after ten o'clock. A chill came over her. Wasn't that about the time she found the door in the ground? Had that been the hour Momma screamed and spat blood?

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Tess pulled the lantern away and examined the door beneath the glass. It stretched the length of the clock's body. She had seen similar doors in other grandfather clocks. But other clocks had glass doors where you could see the pendulum inside. The one at her schoolmate Francine's house had a shimmering bronze pendulum that Tess could stare at for hours. This door was made of the same blackened wood as the rest of the clock, and it revealed nothing.

There was a single wooden knob. Tess reached for it, more unnerved now than when she thought the black box was a coffin. She couldn't shake the idea that she would open the door and see her parents stuffed in its cramped little interior. She would hold up the lamp and witness limbs jutting outward herky-jerky. There would be bloody arms, bloody legs and a bloody face sticking out in the middle of it all, eyes opened wide with terror but seeing nothing. They would fall over her like a tidal wave. She'd be buried in sticky, smelly body parts, her voice lost in the confusion. She would hear a door sliding shut. Not the clock door, but the shelter door lying on the ground outside. Someone would push it back into place. The sunlight on the steps would turn into blackness and Tess would be trapped forever with the corpses of her parents.

Her hand hovered an inch from the knob. Papa's face suddenly flashed through her mind, his brow dipped low in anger, his cheeks a disturbing rose-red. If she alerted the police without being sure... No, she had to be sure. Tess grabbed the knob and pulled.

The door came open with a pop. Tess swung it wide, her eyes forced open, prepared for the worst. But she saw only darkness. She moved the lantern closer, only to be more confused. The inside of the clock was black as midnight. Even with the lantern almost inside the clock, she couldn't see the back of it. The light refused to delve into its wooden belly. She stared into the pitch, wondering if she should put the lantern all the way inside. She started to lean into the doorway when she noticed the sound.

Ticking—growing louder every second.

Tess took a step back and looked at the clock face. The hands didn't appear to be moving and yet the time had abruptly changed. The little hand was on the V and the big hand was between II and III. What time was that? Five-something? What time was it now? She had a terrible feeling. The ticking kept getting louder, like a heart on the verge of an attack. The vibration was in her skin, under her skin even. It made her insides fluttery. She took another step back.

Fingers touched the back of her neck.

The lantern fell. Tess screamed. Red panic filled her mind as she spun away from the cool touch. She lashed out and heard a growling

cry. Shadows rolled across the walls as the lantern slid across the floor and stopped next to a crate. The room crowded with a whole army of shadows descending upon her. Tess wailed into the cavernous room.

“Tessie! Tessie, it’s me! Your pa!”

A hand took her by the shoulder, shaking her violently. The scream cut short as she saw a hand and a familiar hairy forearm. The grimacing face floated above her in the darkness and her heart leapt. It was Papa. He was okay.

“Tessie, what the hell are you doing down here?”

She noticed his other arm, dangling off to the side and dripping. Tess couldn’t tell what color the dripping was, but she was all too aware of the small thing her fingers clenched around. She looked down at the carving knife. It was dripping too. Her stomach bottomed out.

“Papa, I’m sorry,” she sputtered. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I wanted to find you. That was all.”

Her father came closer and Tess braced herself for a beating. He reached down with his bloody hand and picked up the lantern first. He held it up between them and stared into her watery eyes. The grin on his face surprised her.

“I’m sorry, Sugar Pie,” he said. “I didn’t mean to sneak up on you.”

Sugar Pie? He hadn’t called her that in years, not since she could sit in his lap without blocking his view of the newspaper. The fact he called her that made her want to dissolve into tears and fall into his arms.

“Papa,” she whispered. “Where were you?”

“Walking through the forest searching for your mother.”

“Did you find her?” Tess had other questions, like which part of the forest had he been in? Or how did he get down the stairs without making a sound? But this was the most pressing question, so she repeated it. “Did you find momma?”

He shook his head without losing the grin. His lips didn’t even twitch and something about that unnerved her. “No, but I will,” he said. “I’ll find her soon.”

She tugged his free arm. “We can call other people to help. I bet all of Fort Worth would help if they knew she was missing.”

“Not yet,” he said. “I’ll call them myself once I know for sure she’s not playing a little game with us.”

“Playing a game?” Tess couldn’t hide the shock in her voice. “Momma’s not playing, Papa. I promise she’s not.”

But Abner Buckner headed toward the stairs. He put his hand back on her shoulder, leading her out. In his injured hand the lantern bobbed, making the shadows hop with each step. A line of blood dripped off the lantern in a steady stream.

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“Did you know Jesus was a carpenter?”

“What?” Tess said, trying to make sense of the last thing Papa said.

“Why do you think that is?” Abner continued. “Why would our Lord and Savior want to work with wood?” He glanced at her, grinning like a cat. Tess didn’t answer. She couldn’t even find the words. Abner didn’t press her on it. He gave her shoulder a slight squeeze. “Go on back to the house, Sugar Pie. I’ll find Momma and be home directly.”

The word “but” came to her lips and died. Papa’s tone was beyond debate. She started up the steps. Each foot weighed a ton. A terrible need to cry welled up in her, but she wouldn’t do that here, not in front of him. She looked back one last time, hoping to see a glimmer of understanding in his gaze.

But Abner Buckner had turned away. He ambled toward the grandfather clock, swinging the lantern absently at his side. The floor around his feet was well-lit, and Tess noticed one more thing that failed to make any kind of sense. Blood dripped from his hand to the lantern. She clearly saw the red lines glimmering in the lamplight.

But there weren’t bloodspots on the concrete floor. After the drops fell from the lantern they simply disappeared. Tess turned away. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, she was sucking her thumb.

**LOOK OUT FOR CHAPTER 9 ON 17<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER!**

**THE FIRST TEN CHAPTERS OF THE HOLLOWES ARE  
BEING SERIALISED ONLINE FOR FREE!**