

THE HOLLOWES

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## The Hearing Aid

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The alarm clock blared. Melanie jerked upright, preparing to shriek as she sucked in a frantic breath. Her eyes focused on a bedroom she didn't recognize. The eggshell white walls were blank. The ceiling fan spun lazily. But familiar cardboard boxes lined the walls. A body shifted next to her. Melanie threw the covers back, ready to bolt from the room screaming, and then she heard her father's muffled grunt.

"Can you hit the alarm, honey? Sorry. I left it on your side."

She looked back and exhaled so hard she nearly deflated. This was Dad's bed. She was under his covers. He lay on top of them, his face buried in a pillow. He had on the same t-shirt and work jeans from yesterday.

This was their new apartment, their wonderful, terrifying new apartment.

She hit the alarm button. "What happened last night?"

David picked his head off the pillow, although his eyes were barely open. "You tell me. You started screaming, and then you fainted. I know you haven't slept in Dad's bed in years, but it didn't feel right to leave you alone so I carried you in here."

"I screamed?"

"Yea-ahhh," David said through a yawn. "Something about a burnt man."

"That's what I'm talking about. What happened to him? Did the police come? Is my room a crime scene now?"

David wiped the crust from his eyes. "Honey, there was no one in your room."

Melanie punched his shoulder. "Yes, he was! He bled all over my mattress."

"Go see for yourself, honey. Your mattress is blood-free."

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“Fine!” She darted off the bed and into the connecting bathroom. She slowed as she reached her bedroom door because Dad was wrong. She would open the door and see a corpse splayed across her bed, the sheets dyed crimson, and a dark puddle surrounding the whole thing like some deadly moat. Awful or not, her sanity was at stake. She grabbed the knob and pushed the door open.

The bed was empty. The light blue sheets were unstained. The blanket was balled up on the floor, thrown aside during her dramatic escape.

David stepped into the room and patted her shoulder. “That was some nightmare.”

Melanie spun on him. “He was in here, pinning me down, saying some crap about Noah’s Ark, and...” Her shoulders slumped as she saw the look on his face. “It was all a dream.”

Her father nodded. “Keep going. I’ll be passing all this along to your therapist.”

She smirked back. “I don’t have a therapist.”

“You do after last night. Obviously all my talk of suicide sent your undeveloped brain into a tailspin.” Melanie chuckled, so David kept going. “Do you need the wooden spoon? Take out some aggression?”

“I’m upgrading to the rolling pin.”

“I don’t think my skull could take it.”

“No, but I’ll feel loads better.”

David laughed. “Well, that’s all that matters.” He rubbed her arm. “You know, I’m only half-kidding. You scared me last night, and I’m pretty sure it’s my fault.”

“Dad, I can’t even begin to explain what brought that dream on last night. But you weren’t the cause of any of it.” Melanie massaged her forehead with both hands. She wasn’t sure it was a dream either, but she wasn’t about to say that. “I was exhausted and moving here has been a big deal. I guess my subconscious was getting me back.”

David pulled her into a hug. “We can call someone,” he offered. “I know therapy stinks, but it could help.”

“You know what stinks? Your clothes. I can’t believe I slept next to you all night.”

He let go of her and sniffed his shirt. “I don’t know. I could get some more mileage out of it.”

“You need a laundry therapist.”

“Touché.” He stepped into the bathroom, but glanced back from the doorway. “I don’t have to leave today. I can always start work tomorrow or the next day.”

“I’ll be fine, Dad. No more screaming fits, I promise. As long as you promise to take a shower.”

David smiled, looking reluctant. He was concerned, and Melanie couldn't say anything to ease his mind. The burnt man would haunt her for the rest of her life. But he had to return to work for his own sake. If step one was moving to a new home, step two was getting back into the workforce. After a decade of unanswered questions he needed to feel productive. He must have understood that too.

"Fine, I'll take a shower." He pulled the door shut behind him, shouting, "But I'm not using soap!"

Melanie laughed, hoping he heard, and a moment later pipes groaned as the shower kicked on. She stared at her room, feeling like everything looked both plain and alien to her. No matter what happened last night, there were only boxes around her feet and they would have to be unpacked today. If Dad had to reenter the real world, she did too. She grabbed the balled-up blanket from the floor. The first thing she was going to do was make her bed. She took two corners and snapped the blanket upward, unfurling it.

Something small flew out of it, falling behind a box.

The blanket fell to the bed and Melanie reached behind the box. Her fingers touched something plastic. She picked it up and examined it with bulging eyes.

A hearing aid. Small, misshapen and scorched black.

Something clattered in the front room. Melanie opened her door and dashed out to see David regaining his balance after tripping on a kitchen box. "Damn," he mumbled, glancing at her. He had changed into a gray t-shirt and navy blue police pants.

"Dad, look!" She held up the hearing aid, the proof that she wasn't crazy.

David started to scoop up the items that had fallen from the box, but gave up and turned to the front door, hanging on to a utensil. "Just a second, hun. I forgot to get something out of the truck."

"But Dad, I found this in my—"

"Yeah, Mel, I hear you," he stammered as he reached the door. "Let me go to the truck first and I'll look at it."

David popped open the front door and was outside in a flash. The door nearly slammed shut behind him. Melanie drifted back to her room, examining the hearing aid. It was blackened and crusty, but did it prove anything? She put herself in her father's place and imagined what he would say: *It probably belongs to the former resident, or it's Braun's. You know he spent all afternoon helping us.* She didn't believe either explanation, but she knew Dad definitely wouldn't believe it belonged to a disappearing burn victim. Melanie took one last look at the lumpy piece of plastic, and then opened the top drawer

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of her dresser and dropped it inside. She would keep this one to herself—for now.

Melanie closed the dresser drawer and paused. Dad was whistling a Tom Petty tune in the shower. It was off-key and upbeat as usual. She never heard him come back from the truck. She shook her head. Maybe she was going crazy.

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Rennie Scoville pinned his nametag to his Flannagan's polo shirt as he stepped from his bedroom. The TV was on in the front room but no one was watching it. He flicked it off as he passed into the kitchen. Dontae sat at the table, his face hidden behind the classifieds section of the paper.

Dontae usually grabbed the paper first, although he hardly ever did anything but make a show of reading the classifieds when Ma was around. Rennie normally waited until Dontae had finished his performance and went for the crossword puzzle, the New York Times version. He couldn't explain why and hoped no one ever asked, but he dug the hell out of them. Not that he could finish them all. He could knock out Monday's through Wednesday's in no time flat. Thursday's was a little trickier, and Friday's was near impossible. He had only finished a Saturday puzzle once, and he remembered the last clue to fall into place: in a poem, it "perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door." He had shown Ma that puzzle, beaming with pride. Erma Scoville had beamed back, the way she did after every report card and school game.

But there wouldn't be any crossword puzzles today. He had other business to attend to.

"Hey," Rennie said as he grabbed a bowl from the dishwasher. "I go in early today. You're going to have to take Ma to her appointment."

Dontae didn't answer. Typical. Rennie finished pouring his cereal and tried again. "You got Ma today, right?"

Nothing. Rennie poured the milk over the cereal and sat down at the other end of the table. Part of him knew to stop pressing his brother, but a larger part didn't care. Yesterday's encounter with Mr. Becker had reminded him how useless his brother could be. A month had passed since bailing Dontae out, and he hadn't received a nickel back. That didn't mean anything to Dontae, but to Rennie it meant he could push back when needed. And this morning would require some pushing.

Their mother saw the doctor every two weeks, and Rennie rearranged those afternoons to make sure she had transportation. The

doc kept track of her swollen ankles, or that's what she told Rennie. Ma never allowed her son into the examination room. But the district manager was coming to the restaurant today, which meant all hands on deck. And this hand needed to remain in the boss's good graces. Next week was his six-month evaluation and a potential raise. Even the Rougarou wasn't taking that away from him.

"Okay, I'm telling Ma you're taking her."

The classifieds crumpled inward. Dontae peered over the top with his usual dead-eyed stare. "I'm busy."

"Busy with what?"

"None a ya damn business. And by the way, stay out of my room. I'd make you clean up the CDs you dropped, but I don't wanna let you back in there."

"I didn't go in your room."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not the one lying." Rennie took a bite of wet bran flakes. "You ain't busy. You're lazy."

"Watch it, boy."

"Watch what? You sitting there staring at the paper all day? Because that's all you're going to do."

"Maybe I have a job interview."

"Do you?"

Dontae flicked the newspaper shield back up. "Maybe."

Overhead came a scattering of thumps as the upstairs neighbors clomped around. The ceiling creaked its way toward Rennie, and then crunched directly above him. That was Mr. Pickford taking a seat in his dining room. Mrs. Pickford was in the kitchen yelling something at her husband that Rennie couldn't make out. Mr. Pickford grumbled something back angrily and on it went. The Pickfords were always at each other's throats. At least they got it all out on the table. Rennie was stuck with a bipolar brother who hid behind excuses.

"You're lying," Rennie said. Dontae didn't reply, and Rennie shook his head. "You shouldn't lie, Dont. Our new cop will be all over you."

All last night Dontae had ranted about the new tenant who moved in yesterday. Rennie hadn't met him yet but already knew he loved him. Any man who could piss off Dontae that bad had his respect.

"Damn pig," Dontae grumbled. He wadded the classifieds into a ball and threw it across the kitchen. "Charlie brought him here to get in my face."

"You're right," Rennie said, smiling on the inside. "The only way to throw him off your scent is to take Ma to her appointment. She goes in at two."

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Dontae looked at him, his gaze simmering. “Take her your own damn self.”

“Can’t,” Rennie said between bites. “Gotta work today.”

“You’re not understanding. There might be a moment in time when the planets align and you get to tell me what to do, but that sure as shit ain’t this lifetime.”

Rennie stopped eating and looked at Dontae, who threw another of his patented stare-downs at him. Rennie knew to choose his next words carefully. This was the escalation point, and something he realized was inevitable. They were going to have it out, and it was going to be sooner rather than later. They were too old to chalk these tussles up to brothers being brothers. The height difference, which Dontae always laughingly pointed out, had disappeared over the last two years. And whereas Dontae was a collection of gangly but soft limbs, Rennie had a body tuned by high school baseball. He could throw a punch like he threw a pitch, fast and on target. While the idea of practicing pitching on Dontae’s face was tempting, he needed his brother today. Turning breakfast into a domestic disturbance wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“Remember that summer we went to Barataria Bay?” he asked, trying a different tack. “You were twelve and I was eight. You found that huge clear jug, and we spent the whole afternoon collecting seashells on the beach filling that jug with the baddest shell collection on the planet.”

“So?” Dontae said, but he grinned. Of course he remembered the jug. Dontae had kept the thing in his bedroom, at least up until the flood when the shells washed away along with the rest of their past.

“Then Shane took us fishing off the dock. We didn’t catch anything, but Shane snagged a trout. He let us clean it, although he knew we’d make a mess of it. But you and I took that fish apart. Our clothes got all stained with fish guts. I don’t think we ever laughed that hard before or since.”

Dontae chuckled. “You looked like a mini-serial killer with all that blood on your arms. That’s what got us laughing. Me, you, and Shane imagining how the newspaper headlines would read: *Buckwheat Goes on a Rampage.*”

Rennie laughed. “*Lil’ Bow Wow Chows Down.* That was the best.”

Dontae smiled but didn’t laugh with him. He had a sad glint in his eyes. “Yeah, that was something. You cracked us all up that day.”

“That was a good day. Hell, an awesome day. We only argued once the entire time.”

“What was that about? Who had to hold the fish on the ride home?”

"No, it was over who would make a better lifeguard. I said I wanted to be a beach lifeguard when I grew up, and you thought you could do it better. You said if Ma was out there, tossing in the waves, you could pull her in twice as fast as I could."

"And I was right. What's your point?"

"My point is here's your chance to prove it." Rennie leaned over the table. "Dontae, these regular doctor visits she's going to aren't regular."

Up above them Mrs. Pickford yelled something at Mr. Pickford that ended with, "off your ass!" In reply, Mr. Pickford told her where she could stick it.

Dontae shrugged. "She's got swollen ankles."

"She wouldn't go every two weeks over swollen ankles. Something else is going on. Have you noticed how yellow her skin is looking lately?"

"Are you calling Ma yellow?" Dontae tried to sound outraged, but he knew what Rennie was talking about. His eyes gave him away.

"It's called jaundiced. That's what she is, and it's usually part of a bigger problem, like liver failure."

"You watch too much Discovery Channel."

"I found it on the Internet. That's why I gave up baseball this summer. You know Ma's not going to ask for help. Hell, she won't even tell us the real problem. We've got to be there for her."

"So be there for her and leave me alone." Dontae got up from the table and went into the kitchen.

"I can't give up work too. Ma's social security check barely covers the bills."

Dontae spun around. "Just cuz you got a job don't make you some—"

"Doesn't make him some what?"

They both turned to the silky soft voice coming from the front room. Dontae looked at Rennie, his eyes conveying what his words couldn't. But behind his angry gaze Rennie saw the same apprehension he felt. How long had she been standing in the front room listening to them?

"Nothing, Ma," Dontae said over his shoulder.

"Who turned off my shows? They're about to start the cooking segment on *Good Morning, Texas*."

"Sorry, Ma," Rennie called. "I didn't know anyone was watching."

Erma Scoville shuffled into the kitchen. She had a wide frame but a thin face that never had enough color. She had recently dyed her hair a fiery burnt orange. It didn't help. To Rennie, it only made it more obvious how much her inner fire had dwindled.

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“I swear,” she said, heading to the coffee pot to refill her empty mug. “A woman can’t go to the bathroom anymore without putting a ‘don’t touch’ sign on the TV.”

Her words sounded angry, but her voice didn’t. Erma Scoville always came across more amused than angry. Rennie thought it had something to do with her energy level. Anger sapped her strength in a hurry.

“I told him to leave it alone,” Dontae lied.

Rennie downed one last bite of cereal and hopped up. “Yeah, Ma.” Rennie took his bowl to the sink to wash out. “You know what else he told me? He’s gonna take you to the doctor’s appointment today.”

Erma turned and patted her older son’s face. “Oh, that’s sweet, Dontae. Thank you, honey.”

Rennie saw the dismay in Dontae’s eyes, but he wasn’t about to say anything, not with Ma watching. Rennie smiled at the fact. He pulled the car keys from his pocket and tossed them. “Think fast, Dont.”

Dontae turned to Rennie but wasn’t ready. The keys bounced off his chin. Dontae’s gaze burned, as if willing Rennie to spontaneous combust. But Rennie was already on his way out. He gave his mother a quick kiss on the cheek. “See ya this afternoon, Ma.”

Her plump hand caught Rennie’s bicep as he passed. “You be careful, child.” Her tone had softened. Rennie looked into her eyes, saw the glimmer of tears, and knew. She had heard them talking.

“I will, Ma,” he said, his throat feeling tight. “You be careful too.”

She smiled, and he saw a glowing ember behind those eyes. “I always am, honey,” she whispered, squeezing his arm. “I always am.”

**LOOK OUT FOR CHAPTER 10 ON 19<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER!**

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