

Chapter One

By the time the fourth person went missing, Detective Clara Reeves could no longer pretend the town of Briar's Rest was just having a bad year.

The files lay scattered across her desk in a fan of glossy photos and typed reports, each one a snapshot of a life cleanly severed. A missing hikers' form. A grainy security still of a teenager leaving a gas station. A printout of an email from a retired teacher to her sister that ended mid-sentence. Four different lives, four different stories, all disappearing into the same blank space.

Clara rubbed at the knot forming between her brows and leaned back in her chair, listening to the low murmur of the station behind her. Phones ringing. Radios crackling. The coffee machine hissing its tired sighs. It was all so familiar, and yet the weight in her chest made everything feel slightly out of tune, as if someone had picked up the town and turned it a few degrees off center.

She pulled the last sighting reports closer, lining them up side by side.

A hiker, Jacob Miller, last seen on a trail that skirted the base of Hollow Hill.

Teenager, Lily Vargas, caught on a security camera walking down Hollow Hill Road, earbuds in, hood up.

Store clerk, Daniel Cho, whose car had been found abandoned just off the service lane that ran beneath the hill's shadow.

Retired teacher, Agnes Holt, whose final phone call to her sister had been placed from a landline located at a cabin near the old quarry—directly adjacent to the hill.

Hollow Hill.

Clara had grown up hearing about that place in bedtime warnings and campfire stories. Kids weren't supposed to climb it. Parents said it was unsafe, that the ground was unstable—that old mines or cavern mouths yawned beneath the soil like sleeping mouths. The older kids whispered about lights underground, voices in the rock, people who went inside and came back wrong—or didn't come back at all.

She'd laughed it off as superstition. Folklore. A small town's way of making its one geographical feature sound more interesting than it was.

Now, the name appeared in every one of her files.

Her pen hovered above her notebook. She drew a circle around "Hollow Hill" in neat, precise strokes, then drew four arrows from it, one to each victim's name. When she sat back again, the pattern stared up at her with quiet accusation. She watched it for a long time, waiting for some other explanation to present itself. None did.

"Working late again, Reeves?"

The voice came from over her shoulder. Clara turned to see Officer Mitch Daugherty leaning against the cubicle wall, a paper cup of coffee in one hand. His tie was loosened, his sleeves rolled up, the end-of-shift slump in his shoulders.

"Looks that way," Clara said. Her own coffee had gone cold an hour ago.

"Missing persons?" He peered at the files, then quickly looked away, as if they were something contagious. "Chief says we're stretching ourselves thin. Folks wander. People do dumb things in the woods. You know how it is."

"Four people," Clara replied softly. "All roads lead to the same place."

Mitch shifted, uncomfortable. "Yeah, well. Hollow Hill's always been... weird. Maybe don't let it get under your skin more than it has to, huh?"

She watched him walk away, the word "weird" hanging uselessly in the air. It wasn't a word. It was an excuse.

Clara looked back down at the map she'd tacked to the wall earlier that week. Tiny red pins marked the last known locations of each missing person. Individually, they were scattered. Together, they made a crescent curve, hugging the base of Hollow Hill like a drawn bowstring.

Her phone buzzed. A weather alert, some fog rolling in overnight.

Clara stood, grabbed her jacket from the back of her chair, and slid the files into a manila envelope. Logic had always been her anchor—even when witnesses lied, even when evidence refused to make sense. Patterns meant something. Patterns were the closest thing to truth.

If that truth waited at the foot of Hollow Hill, then that was where she needed to go.

Outside, the evening had already deepened into a bruised purple sky. The town's main street glowed with scattered pockets of warm light: the diner's neon sign flickering, the pharmacy closing its blinds, a group of teenagers laughing too loudly as they crossed the street with milkshakes in hand. It all looked so normal.

Clara drove past it all, the tires of her sedan humming softly over worn asphalt, until the houses thinned, and the road narrowed. Hollow Hill rose ahead, a dark, hulking silhouette against the twilight. Its slopes were dense with trees, bare branches scratching at the sky. For the first time in a long while, Clara felt something she refused to name as fear, pressing the back of her throat.

She parked where the road widened just enough for a small shoulder. The smell of cold earth and pine rushed in as she opened the car door. For a moment, she stood there, listening. The night answered with wind, distant and low, moving through the branches like a long, slow exhale.

Flashlight. Notebook. Phone. Sidearm.

She checked each instinctively, then stepped off the road, boots sinking slightly into the soft leaf litter. It didn't take her long to find the narrow, barely visible trail. The old path, the one kids once dared each other to take and parents warned them about.

It was only after she'd walked for several minutes that she saw it—a depression in the ground, half concealed by a tangle of roots and fallen branches. Up close, it resolved into a stone-framed opening, the arch of rock slick with moisture and crawling vines. An old entrance, maybe to one of the mines people had always whispered about. A breath of air drifted out from inside, damp and cool, smelling of limestone and old secrets.

Clara raised her flashlight, the beam cutting into the black.

Rough-hewn stone swallowed the light.

She swallowed once, her throat dry.

"Okay," she murmured to herself, the sound small and steady in the dark. "Let's see what you've been hiding."

And with that, Clara Reeves stepped beneath Hollow Hill.

Chapter Two

The darkness swallowed her after just a few steps.

Outside, the moon had been bright enough to silver the tops of the trees. In here, there was nothing. Clara's flashlight beam carved out a narrow tunnel of pale yellow light, illuminating slick stone and packed earth, the ground uneven under her boots. The air changed almost immediately—cooler, heavier, an underground cold that seeped through her jacket and settled along her spine.

She moved slowly, her shoulder grazing the rough wall every few steps. The tunnel smelled of damp rock, rust, and something older, like dust trapped for decades. Water dripped somewhere in the distance with slow, patient insistence, each drop echoing faintly down the passage. The sound made the tunnel feel much longer than it looked.

She paused once to glance back. The entrance was a pale smudge of gray, already shrinking behind her. Beyond it, the night sky was a distant suggestion. She could still turn back. Claim it was unstable, unsafe, not worth the risk.

But four faces hung in her mind, hovering in the beam of her flashlight: Jacob, Lily, Daniel, Agnes. People with routines and futures and stubborn habits they probably never thought twice

about. People who had walked into their ordinary days and vanished like they'd fallen off the edge of the map.

Clara turned forward again.

Her flashlight grazed the wall, revealing faint markings in the rock. At first she thought they were scratches from tools—old mining equipment carving its way through stone. But as she leaned closer, she saw lines that curved deliberately, intersecting at right angles. Letters, maybe. Numbers.

Someone had been down here with a purpose.

Her boot scuffed something metallic. She reflexively stepped back, then angled the light downward. An old flashlight lay half-buried in the dirt, its casing cracked, battery hatch open like a broken jaw. It was coated in a thin film of dust, as if it had been here for years. Nearby, a plastic water bottle, crushed, the printed logo worn away.

Clara crouched, bringing the light closer. The flashlight's rubber grip was worn down, smoothed by fingers long-gone. There was no blood. No obvious sign of violence. But the thought of someone else standing where she stood now, their light failing, their water gone—it wormed its way under her skin.

“Jacob Miller?” she murmured, though she knew there would be no answer. “Lily? Daniel? Agnes?”

Her voice traveled down the tunnel and came back to her faintly warped.

She rose and kept walking, counting her steps to keep the world anchored to something familiar. Twenty. Fifty. A hundred. The tunnel sloped gently downward, the air growing cooler, the smell of wet stone intensifying. Threads of roots pushed through cracks above her, pale and thin like veins.

At one point, the ceiling dropped low enough that she had to duck, her shoulder scraping rock. Her heart picked up, thudding hard enough that she could feel it in her ears. Images flashed behind her eyes: cave-ins, suffocation, being trapped beneath tons of earth with nothing but darkness for company. She forced herself to breathe evenly, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Fear, she reminded herself, was information. Useful if listened to. Deadly if obeyed blindly.

The passage widened suddenly. She stepped into a small cavern, the ceiling arching high overhead, rough stone sparkling with damp mineral deposits. Her flashlight beam swept across the rocky walls and came to rest on a collapsed wooden support brace, the wood dark and rotted. Old, she thought. Older than she was. Maybe older than the station building itself.

Clara pivoted slowly, tracking the light across the floor. Boot prints. Several sets, some overlapping. Some faint, their edges blurred by time and damp. Others sharper, more recent. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted.

Someone had been using this path.

She followed the prints toward the far end of the cavern, where the tunnel narrowed again into a throat of darkness. On the right-hand wall, her light picked up something else—graffiti, painted in faded black. A crude, blocky rendering of Hollow Hill's silhouette, and beneath it, shaky lettering:

WE DON'T ALL COME BACK.

Clara stared at the words until her eyes stung.

"This is ridiculous," she whispered to herself, more to hear her own voice than anything. "You're a grown woman, not a campfire ghost story."

But she couldn't deny the tightness in her chest, the way her skin prickled with the instinctual awareness of being somewhere people weren't meant to go.

She checked her watch. Time had lost its meaning in the darkness; she'd been down here longer than she thought. She mentally mapped how far she must have traveled under the hill's bulk. A few hundred yards? More? She tried to align herself with the town above, picturing the streets and houses layered on top of all this stone. People eating dinner. Kids watching TV. Oblivious to the veins of tunnels running beneath their lives.

The idea that the missing might still be down here—not their bodies, but the evidence of them, their final choices, their last moments—gnawed at the edge of her composure.

The tunnel ahead waited, patient and black.

Clara tightened her grip on the flashlight, feeling the familiar weight of her sidearm at her hip—a small, solid promise at her side.

"All right," she murmured. "Let's see how deep this goes."

She stepped forward, leaving the cavern and its warning behind, and disappeared further beneath Hollow Hill.

Chapter Three

The tunnel seemed determined to shake her sense of direction.

Sometimes it angled left, sometimes right, occasionally splitting in two before rejoining itself like a river loop. Clara tried to mark the branches as she went—small chalk lines on the walls, a habit she'd picked up in training, more for building searches than underground labyrinths. Down here, though, it felt less like procedure and more like leaving breadcrumbs in the mouth of something that could swallow them whole.

After another stretch of steady walking, the passage opened again.

She stepped out into a larger chamber and halted, her light sweeping wide.

This room was different.

Where the first cavern had felt like an accident of geology, this one bore the deliberate marks of human interference. The floor had been roughly leveled, clearing away jagged rocks. Old crates sat stacked against the far wall, their wood grayed with age. A rusted lantern hung crookedly from a nail, the glass long gone. A thin film of dust coated everything, disturbed only by a few tracks and a small, circular clearing in the middle of the space.

Clara's footsteps sounded too loud as she crossed the room. The air felt heavier, as if this place held memories like humidity. Her light drifted over the crates—no labels, just flaking metal bands. She tried the top one; the lid held for a moment before splintering apart beneath her hand. Inside, she found brittle scraps of paper and a coil of hose, stiff with disuse.

Her boot brushed against something half-buried near the base of the crate. She crouched, moving the light down.

It was a book.

At first she thought it was another old record, but when she pulled it free and brushed off the dirt, she saw the worn leather cover, the spine cracked with use. Her fingers found the edge and opened it gently. The smell of old paper rose up, mingling with the damp stone.

The handwriting inside was small and cramped, ink faded to a soft brown. Dates marched down the top corners of each page in neat numbers—entries spanning months, then years. Some were short, just a few lines. Others spilled across margins, words crowded together as if the writer had been racing their own thoughts.

She angled the flashlight so the beam slanted across the paper, making the faint writing easier to read.

I can still hear them above. They walk and talk and laugh, and they have no idea what runs beneath their feet.

Another page.

We were told this was for the town's future. For progress. For protection. But the more I see, the more I think we're building a lie and calling it safety.

Another.

Emily asked questions. Too many. She came down here once, you know. Said she wanted to see the truth for herself. I told them she got too close. They said they would handle it.

Clara froze.

Emily.

The name was common enough, but the way it sat there on the page, tied to secrets beneath Hollow Hill—it punched a breath out of her lungs.

Her pulse beat in her ears. She flipped ahead.

They bring them in through the back roads. No records. No questions. They say it's all necessary. That some people have to be... given up for the greater good. But when I look at their faces, all I see is fear.

She swallowed hard. Her hand had started to tremble, a fine, betraying shake. Who had written this? When? Was the author still alive, walking aboveground, carrying all this in their chest? Or were they one of the town's ghosts now, folded into the hill like everyone else who dug too deep?

The chamber seemed to close in around her, the walls leaning closer under the cone of her light.

Above, the town continued its ordinary life. Bills paid. Meals cooked. Kids ferried to and from school. Down here, a stranger's secret history sat moldering in a forgotten room, telling a story no one had asked to hear.

She tucked the journal against her chest for a moment, feeling the worn leather press against her jacket. It was a fragile thing, this record of someone's conscience. But in a town that had nothing but rumors and fear, it was also more evidence than she'd had in weeks.

Clara slipped it carefully into her bag, between her notebook and a spare flashlight battery. Her fingers lingered on it for a second.

"Who were you?" she whispered.

The silence replied with a distant drip of water, as patient and indifferent as ever.

She straightened, sweeping the light across the room once more. Newly aware of the chamber's exits, she noticed a narrower passage in the far corner, its opening half-concealed behind two

stacked crates. Unlike the main tunnel, this passage was ringed with old timber supports, thick beams bracing the stone above.

A deeper vein, she thought. The kind that didn't make it onto the town's tourist pamphlets.

The journal in her bag felt heavier than paper had any right to be.

Clara took one last look at the abandoned camp—the crates, the lantern, the ghost of whoever had once sat here hunched over those pages—and moved toward the supported passage. The beam of her flashlight slid over the wood, catching on splinters and rusted nails.

She ducked under the low beam and stepped into the throat of the tunnel.

Air stirred against her face, cool and unnatural, as if something ahead of her had just breathed out.

Chapter Four

The timber-lined passage swallowed sound even more completely than the raw stone tunnels had. Clara's footsteps felt muffled, as if the earth itself were trying to smother any hint of movement, to keep its secrets from echoing too far.

She walked with one hand trailing along the wooden supports, fingers tracing rings of age in the grain. Some of the beams had splintered, leaving jagged edges. Others bore old hooks, empty now, swinging slightly as she brushed past. A faint electrical hum crawled along the edge of her hearing, too low to place.

The journal pressed against her side with each step, a constant reminder of the voice she'd briefly glimpsed. A whistleblower? A coward? A survivor? Whoever they were, they had confirmed what her gut had only feared: Hollow Hill wasn't just a backdrop to the town's disappearances. It was an engine. A mechanism.

Her mind replayed the entry mentioning Emily, the unnamed "they" who had promised to "handle it." The cheerleader from '87 hadn't just run away. She'd stepped into something.

The floor dipped. She followed it down.

A low rumble vibrated through the soles of her boots, faint but distinct. Not geological—too rhythmic for that. For a second she thought of underground trains, then dismissed it. Briar's Rest was barely large enough for a bus line, let alone a subterranean system.

The rumble faded. She kept going.

Eventually, the passage widened. The timber fell away, replaced by bare stone once more, but the walls here were smoother, as though someone had taken time to shape them. Her flashlight beam caught on conduits running along the ceiling—metal piping, cables held in place by brackets. Some had corroded, greenish and flaking. Others looked... newer.

She stopped.

Newer meant someone had maintained them. Not decades ago, but within the lifetime of the very people who now told her she was wasting her time.

Her chest tightened, not with fear this time, but with anger. Quiet, heavy anger that settled low in her gut. All the times she'd been told she was reading too much into things. The friendly warnings to "let this one go." The sideways glances at her board of missing persons on the station wall.

They knew something.

They might not know everything, but they knew enough to fear this place.

The floor leveled out again, and ahead, the tunnel opened into a rectangular cut that looked distinctly unnatural. The edges of the doorway were lined with poured concrete, the stone around it cut back in a clean, deliberate frame. There was no door, but a set of grooves in the threshold suggested there had once been one—sliding, heavy, like something from a bunker.

Clara stepped through.

The room beyond stopped her in her tracks.

It was larger than any chamber she'd seen yet, and unlike the others, it was unmistakably constructed. The walls were concrete, smooth and gray, interrupted by metal shelving bolted into place. In the center of the room stood a table—sturdy, industrial, scarred with use. A bank of dark, lifeless monitors lined one wall, their screens dusty, cables trailing behind them like dead snakes.

The air smelled different here. Less of earth and more of chemicals—old disinfectant, oil, the faint ghost of something antiseptic beneath the stronger scents of dust and neglect.

Clara's heart gave one sharp, startled thud. She'd expected more rough tunnels, perhaps another forgotten cavern. This was... a facility.

Her flashlight swept the room. Clipboards lay scattered on the table, some still holding curled pages. A metal cabinet stood half open, empty shelves yawning into the beam. On the far wall, a faded sign clung crookedly askew, its lettering barely legible: HOLLOW HILL RESEARCH STATION.

Research.

Of what?

She forced herself to move slowly, methodically. For all the resemblance to a horror-film set, this was also a crime scene. Or at least the memory of one. She needed to see, not just feel.

The first clipboard held a checklist with columns labeled SUBJECT ID, ENTRY TIME, EXIT TIME, STATUS. The entries stopped abruptly halfway down the page; the ink line trailed off like a thought interrupted. She flipped the page up. The sheet beneath was blank.

Her mouth went dry.

On another clipboard, she found a diagram of the tunnels, more detailed than any map she'd seen at the station. Lines crisscrossed, some marked with codes—T1, T2, CHAMBER A, CHAMBER B. One section near the bottom was circled in red, the ink bleeding slightly into the paper. Next to it, a hand-written note read: ACCESS RESTRICTED AFTER INCIDENT 14.

Incident 14.

She swallowed, her throat clicking audibly in the quiet.

The rumble she'd felt earlier vibrated faintly through the room again, this time accompanied by the softest shudder in the floor. Old machinery, maybe. Or something further underground, still alive even after this place had gone dormant.

Her flashlight drifted to a row of metal drawers along the back wall. They looked like the kind used in morgues—long, narrow, each with a single handle. Goosebumps prickled along her arms.

"Don't jump to conclusions," she whispered to herself. "Evidence first. Horror later."

Still, it took effort to cross the room and wrap her hand around the cold metal handle of the top drawer. It squealed softly as she pulled it open, resisting her, then giving way.

Inside, she found boxes. Simple cardboard file boxes, labeled in the same neat hand as the journal.

RHODES, EMILY – SEE ALSO RH-87.

HAYES, MICHAEL – CLERK ACCESS.

MILLER, JACOB – HIKER.

VARGAS, LILY – UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY.

She stared at the names, her breath coming faster now.

They weren't just statistics pinned to her board. They were files. Cases someone had known about and categorized, while the town above chalked them up to bad luck or poor choices.

A tight, building pressure formed behind her eyes.

She reached for the first box, the one marked RHODES, EMILY. The cardboard rasped softly under her fingers. As she lifted it, dust motes rose in the beam of her flashlight, swirling slowly like disturbed ghosts.

“Emily,” she murmured, not sure if she was speaking to the girl or to herself. “We’re going to find out what they did to you.”

The journals, the research station, the drawers—it all coalesced into a single, terrible certainty: Hollow Hill wasn’t random.

It was planned.

And Clara had just stepped into the center of that plan.

Chapter Five

By the time Clara carried the first box to the central table, her hands had started to shake in earnest.

Not from fear—at least, that’s what she told herself—but from the sheer magnitude of what she was holding. Each box felt like a coffin compressed into cardboard; a life reduced to paperwork and whatever callous notes these people had thought to leave behind.

She set Emily Rhodes’ file box down with more care than its former keepers had probably ever given it and slid onto the metal stool beside the table. The seat was cold, grounding. The flashlight lay on its side, its beam fanned out across the tabletop, turning the dust into a soft, hazy glow.

For a moment, Clara simply sat there, breathing.

She was a detective. She’d seen crime scenes that hollowed people out, accidents that made no sense, suicides that rippled through families for years. She had walked into houses that still smelled like dinner while a body lay cooling in the next room.

But this was different.

This wasn’t one tragedy. It was a pattern of them, layered and deliberate and stretched across decades.

Clara pressed her palm flat against the metal table until the cool bite of it steadied her. She focused on her breath: in through her nose, out through her mouth. The tunnel’s heavy silence seemed to lean in, listening.

“Okay,” she whispered. “We do this the way we do everything else. One page at a time.”

She opened the box.

Inside, the contents were carefully arranged. Someone had taken pride in this order. Plastic folders, a small spiral notebook, a sealed evidence envelope with a brittle strip of tape yellowed at the edges. On the top, a photograph.

Emily looked back at her from the glossy paper with the kind of effortless brightness reserved for teenagers who still believed the future was inevitable. She was mid-laugh, head turned slightly, hair caught in motion. The cheer uniform was a white and green blur at the bottom of the frame. Someone had loved her enough to catch this moment, to freeze it.

Clara's throat tightened.

She laid the photo aside gently, then reached for the spiral notebook. Inside, she found notes written in two different hands. One, the neat, precise script she had begun to recognize as belonging to the unknown journal keeper. The other, a harsher block print—clinical, detached.

SUBJECT: RHODES, EMILY.

AGE: 17.

LAST SEEN: 10/14/1987, HOLLOW HILL ROAD.

CONNECTIONS: RHODES FAMILY (FOUNDER LINE), SCHOOL RECORDS, CHEER SQUAD.

Underneath, in a different pen:

Persistent. Curious. Asked about the old tunnels. Possibly overheard segment of conversation re: "trials." Recommend monitoring.

Trials.

Clara flipped ahead, her eyes skimming.

10/07/87 – Sighted near southern entrance. Redirected.

10/09/87 – Interviewed after school. Feigns disinterest. (Note: do not underestimate.)

10/13/87 – Spoke with subject alone. Advised to "stay away from the hill." Laughs. Says, "Maybe it's you who should stay away."

The last entry:

10/14/87 – UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY. Subject accessed TUNNEL 3 via quarry side path. Notified council. They will handle it.

A line had been drawn under those last five words. Handle it.

Clara closed the notebook sharply, the soft slap of pages giving the motion away.

The air around her seemed to constrict. All the times she'd heard people say Emily "ran off with a boy," the wistful stories about how teenagers just sometimes wanted bigger things than Briar's Rest. The candlelight vigils. The way the town had allowed time to erode the edges of her memory until she was just a cautionary tale about leaving without saying goodbye.

All the while, down here, Emily's life had been assigned a subject ID and filed away.

Clara's jaw clenched. She exhaled slowly, forcing herself not to slam the notebook into the wall.

This was why she did this job. Not for the commendations. Not for the neatness of a solved case. But for the scribbled lines in an old notebook that turned a "she must have just left" into "someone hurt her, and someone knew."

Her mind flicked, unbidden, to her own life—her childhood in this town, the way she'd once biked past Hollow Hill with friends, shouting jokes into the wind, the first time she'd heard the legend of the tunnels. It felt like remembering someone else's movie. Surface-level concerns. The safety of ignorance.

Down here, the hill's real story had been written in ink and silence.

She reached for another box—HAYES, MICHAEL—and felt a familiar ache begin in her temples. Sleep deprivation, pure and simple. She'd been running on caffeine and adrenaline most of the day. But the thought of going back up without at least skimming these files made her stomach twist.

Your mind is a tool, she reminded herself. Overuse it, and it breaks. Pace it, and it saves lives.

She chose a middle ground. One more look. One more pattern.

Clara drew out Michael Hayes' top folder and opened it to the first page. Photocopies of employment records, financial statements, and a handwritten note from the same neat script:

He is not like the others. He suspects. But he still believes in the system. That might be our advantage—or our biggest mistake.

Her reflection flickered faintly in the dark monitor screen across from her, a pale cut-out in the black glass. She barely recognized herself—shadowed eyes, jaw set, hair pulled back in a messy tie. A woman sunk beneath a hill, reading the receipts of other people's tragedies.

For a moment, a thought came, uninvited and sharp: If you keep going, you're not getting out. Not just physically. You can walk out under the sky again, but part of you will stay here. In this room. In these pages.

Maybe that was the cost.

Clara closed the folder gently and slid it back into the box. She took a pen from her jacket pocket and, on the outer flap of the carton, wrote in quick, firm strokes:

PROPERTY OF DET. CLARA REEVES
BRIAR'S REST PD.

A small act of reclamation.

"This doesn't belong to you anymore," she told the room softly. "It belongs to them. And to me."

She stood, joints protesting after sitting in the cold for too long. The journal in her bag. The boxes. The map. Her mind churned, threading the clues together. A secret station. Subjects monitored and eliminated. A town complicit through silence and fear.

The exit from the hill was suddenly not just a direction, but a necessity. She needed daylight. She needed other eyes on this, eyes that didn't belong to Briar's Rest.

Clara slid her arms through the straps of her bag, hefted the first two boxes, and turned toward the tunnel.

Behind her, the dark monitors watched wordlessly, their dead screens reflecting nothing but a skinny beam of borrowed light and a woman who had finally seen too much.

Chapter Six

The trip back up through the tunnels felt shorter, but heavier.

Clara's muscles burned from the awkward weight of the file boxes, the corners biting into her forearms with every jostle. Her breath fogged in the beam of her flashlight, the small puffs of white proof that she was still moving, still alive, still above whatever abyss Hollow Hill had tried to drag her into.

Her mind was anything but calm. It was a crowded room now—a chorus of voices overlapping.

Emily's unknowing smile from the photo.

The anonymous journal writer's cramped pen strokes.

Michael Hayes' careful records.

The unspoken "they" who would handle anything that threatened to pull back the curtain.

Every crunch of gravel under her boots echoed like a countdown.

She forced herself to pay attention to the path—her chalk marks, the turn at the cavern with the warning graffiti, the narrow squeeze past the collapsed support. Getting lost down here because she'd let her thoughts spiral would be an irony the hill might relish.

At one point, the rumble she'd felt earlier returned, throbbing faintly through the stone. This time she could hear a dim whine layered beneath it, like a generator struggling to keep running. It was distant, though, as if it were coming from deeper veins of tunnel she hadn't yet found.

Whatever was still humming down there, it wasn't her concern. Not tonight.

She told herself that twice before believing it.

After what felt like an eternity of repetitive steps, the air changed.

It was subtle at first—a hint of something fresher, a whisper of outside. Then, gradually, the tunnel lightened, the black shifting to a murky gray ahead. Clara's shoulders sagged with relief she hadn't realized she was holding back.

The entrance yawned a few yards ahead, a smudge of pale sky framed by stone and roots. She emerged like something being exhaled, blinking against the cool wash of night air. The world outside had the quiet stillness of 2 a.m.—houses dark, the stars sharp points in a clear sky. The hum of the town was distant, muffled by the hill's bulk.

Her car waited where she'd left it, a lonely shape on the side of the narrow road.

She loaded the boxes into the trunk carefully, as if they were fragile, or explosive, or both. When she finally sat behind the wheel, the seat felt abruptly alien. For a moment, her hands hovered above the steering wheel, disoriented by the simple normalcy of it.

You went down. You came back up, she told herself. That's all.

Except it wasn't. She hadn't just gone down into some old tunnels. She'd stepped into the marrow of her town and found rot.

She drove back toward Briar's Rest with a strange blend of exhaustion and adrenaline humming under her skin. The streets were empty, the traffic lights cycling pointlessly through red, yellow, green. Her headlights skimmed over mailboxes, picket fences, front porches lined with potted plants. Kindergarten art taped crookedly in windows. A bicycle leaning against a garage.

How many of these people knew? How many suspected and chose not to ask? How many would still rather believe Emily and Jacob and Lily and Michael had simply left than accept that something monstrous had been sitting beneath their feet?

At a four-way stop, she paused longer than necessary, watching the silent cross streets. The station, she knew, would be running on the skeleton crew the night shift always got. A dispatcher. Maybe one patrol car out. The chief home in bed, his phone on the nightstand.

Clara turned instead toward her apartment.

It wasn't cowardice—it was strategy. Bursting into the station at two in the morning with arms full of incriminating files and wild claims about secret labs beneath the hill was not going to get her

the careful, methodical investigation these boxes deserved. At worst, it could tip off the wrong people.

And tonight, she had no idea who the wrong people were.

She carried the boxes up the narrow stairwell to her second-story apartment one at a time, muscles screaming in protest. The hallway smelled faintly of someone's reheated dinner and the lemon cleaner the landlord overused on the floors. Her door stuck slightly before opening, as it always did. Inside, the small space felt suddenly too bright, too exposed, despite the drawn curtains.

Clara set the boxes against the wall by her kitchen table and collapsed into one of the mismatched chairs. The clock above the stove ticked loudly in the quiet.

She stared at the boxes until her eyes blurred.

She should sleep. Rationally, she knew that. Everything she'd found would still be there in the morning. But each time she let her gaze drift from the cardboard edges, she pictured hands in the dark, moving files, shredding pages, wiping clean the only proof she had.

Paranoia, she thought. Or maybe just experience.

Her phone buzzed with a text. Mitch.

U alive? U left in a hurry earlier. Mulligan wants your notes on Miller by morning.

She stared at the glowing screen. The simplicity of it—concern and bureaucracy smashed into one casual line—felt obscene compared to what she'd just walked out of.

Clara typed back: Alive. Working. Will send them.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard a second longer.

Do you know what's under Hollow Hill?

The question burned the tip of her tongue, but she didn't hit send. Not yet. Not to him. Not without knowing which side of the invisible line he was on.

She set the phone down, screen darkening.

The apartment settled around her, creaks and groans of old wood expanding and contracting. Her own heartbeat eventually slowed into a more reasonable rhythm. The urge to dive into the boxes again tugged at her, but she forced herself to stand instead, heading for the bedroom.

Shower. Change. Then maybe an hour of sleep, just enough to keep her functional.

As she peeled off her jacket, the journal in her bag thumped against her hip. She hesitated, pulled it free, and set it on the nightstand. The small, battered book looked out of place next to the digital alarm clock and the half-finished glass of water. Like a relic from another century dropped into a life that still believed in cell service and grocery lists.

“Tomorrow,” she told it quietly, as if it were a person. “We dig in tomorrow.”

She crawled into bed, the sheets cool against her skin, the weight of exhaustion finally washing over her in a wave. For a while, she lay on her side, listening to the distant hum of a passing car, the muted bark of a dog, the low thrum of her refrigerator.

Sleep came slowly, with images of tunnels and file boxes and Emily’s laughing face hovering just beyond reach.

The last thing she thought before the darkness claimed her was not of the people already lost, but of the ones who had vowed to keep them that way.

If they knew I’d been there, she thought, they won’t just let me walk away.

In the quiet apartment, with the town unaware that anything had changed, a detective finally let her eyes close.

Beneath her, far below Hollow Hill, the generators hummed once more.

Chapter Seven

Clara woke to the feeling that she’d overslept, even before her eyes opened.

The light seeping around the edges of her curtains was too bright to be early morning, and her body had that leaden heaviness that came from sleep that wasn’t quite deep enough to be restorative. She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling for a few seconds as the previous night came back in jagged flashes.

The tunnels.

The research station.

Emily Rhodes’ photograph.

The boxes now stacked quietly against her living room wall.

Adrenaline cut through the last of the fuzziness in her head.

She pushed herself upright and swung her legs over the side of the bed. For a moment, the room tilted—the hangover of fear and exhaustion—and she pressed her palms to her knees until the sensation passed. The clock on her nightstand read 9:13 a.m. Not terrible, but late by

her usual standards. Her phone, facedown beside the clock, pulsed with a small notification light.

She picked it up.

Three messages from the station. One from dispatch at 7:30, asking if she was still planning to bring in her updated notes on the Miller case. One from Mitch—You alive? You ghosted us—followed by a thumbs-up reaction to her late-night “Alive. Working” reply. And one from the chief.

Call me when you get this. – M.

No elaboration. No emojis. Just the clipped, practiced tone of a man who didn’t like surprises.

Clara’s gaze slid to the doorway. From here, she could just see the corner of one of the file boxes. The sight anchored her. Whatever the chief wanted, whatever the station thought they knew, she had something they didn’t.

Proof.

She showered quickly, letting the hot water untangle some of the tension wound through her muscles. As she towed off and dressed, she mentally sorted priorities.

The boxes needed to be documented—copied, scanned, something to keep the information from being a single point of failure. She’d need a secure way to store those copies, and she sure as hell didn’t trust the evidence locker until she knew who had their fingers on its keys.

The chief wanted to talk. It would be suspicious if she stalled too long. But walking in blind would be worse.

She compromised.

Coffee first. Then a call. Then the boxes.

In the kitchen, she brewed a pot strong enough to make her eyes water and poured it into a travel mug. The apartment felt smaller than usual, the air thick with the invisible presence of the files stacked against the wall. She crossed to them and lifted the lid of the first box, reassured by the neat rows of folders inside. Still there. Still real. Last night hadn’t been some exhausted hallucination conjured by too much caffeine and frustration.

She snapped a quick set of photos with her phone—box labels, the first page of Emily’s notes, the research station’s printed sign she’d stuffed in with the files. It wasn’t a proper backup, but it was something. A breadcrumb trail outside of Hollow Hill’s reach.

Her thumb hovered over her contacts for a beat before tapping Chief Mulligan’s number.

He answered on the second ring. “Reeves.”

“Morning, Chief. Got your message.”

“You’re late,” he said, but there was no real heat in it. Just observation. “You dropped off the grid last night. Daugherty said you left here in a hurry.”

“I was following up on a lead,” Clara said. She watched her own reflection in the dark TV screen across the room, the line of her mouth, the tension in her shoulders. “On the missing persons.”

A short pause. “And?”

“And I found something,” she said carefully. “Something I think we need to talk about in person.”

Another pause. When he spoke again, his voice had shifted, smoothed. “All right. Bring it in. My office. And Reeves?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s keep this off the main floor for now. No need to stir people up until we know what you’ve really got.”

The hairs on the back of her neck rose.

“Understood,” she said.

She ended the call and slipped the phone into her jacket pocket, the sense of walking a tightrope tightening around her ribs. There was no version of this that wasn’t dangerous. But pretending she’d found nothing was no longer an option. The faces in the files didn’t leave room for that.

She chose two boxes—the ones containing Emily Rhodes, Michael Hayes, and the clearest documents about the “research station.” The others she left stacked near the bookshelf, throwing an old blanket haphazardly over them.

Her brain supplied an unhelpful thought as she locked the apartment door behind her: If someone knows where to look, that blanket won’t slow them down for more than five seconds.

She double-checked the locks anyway.

Outside, the day was bright and deceptively pleasant. The sky was a clear, empty blue, the air crisp with the hint of incoming autumn. People walked dogs, swept porches, carried grocery bags. The very normalcy of it all made Clara feel like she was walking through a set that was about to be torn down.

She loaded the boxes into her trunk and drove to the station, every glance in the rearview mirror an inspection for headlights that lingered too long. Paranoia, she told herself. Maybe. Or maybe a new awareness of just how many eyes could be pointed at you without ever blinking.

The station house stood squat and familiar on the corner of Maple and Third, its brick facade softened by flower boxes and a faded mural painted by local high schoolers years ago. Clara had walked through its glass doors hundreds of times. Today, as she pushed inside, it felt like crossing an invisible barrier.

The front desk officer—Janine—looked up, her expression flickering for half a second before settling into something neutral.

“Morning, Detective,” she said.

“Morning.” Clara held her gaze a fraction too long, searching for... something. Complicity. Fear. Recognition. She found only mild curiosity and moved on.

The bullpen was quieter than usual. A couple of officers at their desks, typing. Someone on the phone, voice low. A TV mounted in the corner played muted news footage of some national scandal far removed from Briar’s Rest.

Mitch spotted her as she passed his cubicle and gave a low whistle. “What’s with the moving boxes?”

“Paperwork,” she said. “You know how it is.”

He grimaced. “Glad it’s you and not me.”

She offered a tight smile and kept walking.

Chief Mulligan’s office door was ajar. Clara nudged it open with her elbow and stepped in. The chief sat behind his desk, reading glasses perched low on his nose, a stack of files in front of him. He was in his late fifties, hair thinning, stomach just starting to test the limits of his belt. A framed photo on the filing cabinet behind him showed his grandkids at a county fair, faces painted, cotton candy in hand.

The ordinary image made the box in Clara’s arms feel heavier.

“You look like hell,” Mulligan said by way of greeting. His gaze flicked to the cardboard. “That what you found?”

She set the box on one of the chairs opposite his desk, then went back for the second, closing the door behind her on her return. The soft click of it shutting sounded final.

“Under Hollow Hill,” she said. “There’s more than just old tunnels.”

Mulligan removed his glasses and leaned back, studying her. “You had me worried last night, Reeves. You’ve been burning the candle at both ends. I was starting to think you were seeing patterns where there weren’t any.”

“I wish I were,” she said. She flipped the box flap back and drew out the first folder, sliding it onto his desk. “These are files on the people we’ve been calling ‘missing.’ Emily Rhodes. Michael Hayes. Others. Someone’s been tracking them for years, Chief. Categorizing them. Deciding what happens when they ‘get too close.’”

She watched his face as he scanned the top page. For a brief second, she saw something crack through the professional mask—recognition? Surprise? It was gone almost immediately, smoothed into a more controlled frown.

“Where exactly did you say you found this?” he asked.

She told him. The entrance. The tunnels. The research station sign. She left out the parts about how the hill had made her feel small and watched; this wasn’t the moment for atmospherics.

Mulligan listened, hands resting lightly on the folder, as if it might try to run away. When she finished, he blew out a slow breath through his nose.

“This is... a lot,” he said. “If it’s legitimate.”

“You think I forged a decades-old facility under the hill?” Clara asked, unable to keep the edge out of her voice.

He held up a placating hand. “I think we have to be careful. If this is what it looks like, it goes way above our pay grade. Way above Briar’s Rest. You start throwing accusations around without context, and you’ll have lawyers crawling all over you before you can blink.”

“Lawyers,” she repeated flatly. “Chief, someone killed Emily Rhodes.”

Mulligan’s jaw tightened. His fingers drummed once against the paper.

“I’m not saying we sit on it,” he said. “I’m saying we move smart. Chain of command. Proper channels. Maybe State. Maybe even federal, depending on what this research station actually was.” He looked up at her. “Leave these with me. Let me make a few calls, see who—”

“No.”

The word came out sharper than she’d intended, but she didn’t pull it back.

The chief’s brows rose. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll make copies,” she said quickly, modulating her tone. “Everything in here needs to be backed up before it goes anywhere. We don’t know who’s involved yet. We don’t know how deep this goes. If we drop the only evidence we have into the wrong set of hands—”

“Are you implying I’m the wrong set of hands?” Mulligan asked quietly.

Their gazes locked across the desk. Clara’s pulse thudded against her throat.

"I'm saying," she replied, "that until we know who knew about that station, we treat this like any other potentially compromised scene. Redundant documentation. Limited circulation. You taught me that."

Mulligan studied her for a long moment, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

Finally, he sighed. "You've always been a stubborn one, Reeves."

"It's saved lives before," she said.

"Sometimes it just gets people killed."

The words hung in the air, heavy and soft.

He reached into a drawer and pulled out a yellow legal pad. "Fine. Make your copies. Today. Keep me in the loop on everything you find. And don't talk about this outside this office unless you absolutely have to. I'll... feel out who we can trust beyond these walls."

His tone on the last sentence was odd—measured, almost forced. Clara tucked that away for later.

"Understood," she said.

She gathered the files back into the boxes, the movement brisk. As she turned to leave, Mulligan said, "Reeves?"

She paused.

"Be careful," he said. "There are things in this world that don't like being dragged into the light. You tug hard enough on the wrong thread, the whole thing comes down on your head."

She met his gaze one more time. "Then they shouldn't have tied it around people's necks."

Something like reluctant admiration flickered there. Or maybe it was just resignation.

"Go," he said, sounding tired. "And get some real sleep at some point. You look like you've been through a war."

Not yet, Clara thought as she stepped back into the hallway. But she had the sinking feeling one was coming.

Chapter Eight

By late afternoon, Clara's eyes burned from staring at a scanner screen.

She had commandeered one of the small back offices under the pretense of digitizing old case files. The hum of the machine and the soft shick of paper feeding through had become a metronome marking the passing hours. Outside the closed door, the station moved through its routine—phones, footsteps, the occasional burst of laughter. Inside, the world had narrowed to folders, page numbers, and the grainy glow of digital copies appearing on her laptop.

She worked in silence, the only breaks coming when she got up to stretch or refill her water bottle. The files revealed more with each page.

There were names she recognized from her own missing persons board, and others she'd only ever heard mentioned in hushed, nostalgic tones. The Rhodes family. The Millers. The long-retired council members whose names still adorned plaques around town. The documents tied them together in ways that made her stomach twist—a web of “incidents,” “subjects,” and “mitigation strategies” laid out in tidy columns.

Each time she found the phrase UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY or SUBJECT ELIMINATED, she felt a fresh spike of anger.

Whoever had kept these records hadn't seen people. They'd seen variables.

At some point, a knock sounded on the office door.

Clara stiffened. “Yeah?”

The door opened a crack and Mitch poked his head in. “They’ve got you in the file dungeon, huh?” He stepped inside, letting the door shut behind him, and glanced at the scanner. “I thought you said you were working on Miller.”

“I am,” Clara said. It wasn’t entirely a lie. Jacob Miller’s file was currently spread open on the desk, its pages mid-scan.

Mitch’s gaze drifted over the boxes stacked neatly beside her chair, but he didn’t linger there. “Chief’s been in a mood,” he said. “Must’ve been whatever you dropped in his lap this morning.”

“You know him,” Clara said. “He loves surprises.”

Mitch snorted. “Especially when they involve overtime.” He shifted his weight, suddenly less sure of why he’d come. “Look... you okay? You’ve been off lately. Ever since you started pinning all those faces to your murder board.”

“Missing persons board,” she corrected automatically.

“Feels the same from where I’m sitting,” he said. “Town’s starting to talk. Says you’re obsessed with the hill. That you’re trying to dig up ghosts best left buried.”

The words landed with a thud.

“Who’s ‘the town’?” she asked.

He shrugged. “You know. People. Cops’ wives. Folks at the diner. My neighbor. Your neighbor, probably. It’s a small place, Reeves. News travels faster than we do.”

She studied him. “And what do you think?”

Mitch hesitated. For once, his usual easy grin didn’t come to the rescue.

“I think,” he said slowly, “you’re good at your job. Better than most of us. I also think some things around here don’t add up. Have never added up. But I like... breathing. And this place is home. So I try not to look too hard in certain directions.”

His candor unsettled her more than any cold shoulder could have.

“Sometimes you don’t get a choice about what you see,” she said.

“Yeah, well.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Just... watch your back, okay? You’re not exactly winning any popularity contests right now.”

“Since when have I ever?” she asked dryly.

He huffed a laugh, but it faded quickly.

“That’s kind of what worries me,” he said, and slipped out.

The door clicked shut. The scanner resumed its patient hum.

Clara stared at the blank screen saver for a moment, Mitch’s words echoing in the enclosed space. You’re obsessed. Ghosts best left buried.

If “the town” was talking, it meant someone had already started shaping a story about her: unstable detective, seeing conspiracies in the wallpaper. It was the kind of narrative that made people look away when things started happening to you.

She resumed scanning, working faster now.

By evening, she had digital copies of most of the most incriminating documents—research station logs, subject profiles, references to “council oversight.” She transferred them to an encrypted drive she’d bought years ago and rarely used. The little device felt absurdly small in her palm, considering it now held the bones of Hollow Hill’s secrets.

On her way out of the station, the air felt thicker. Conversations dipped as she passed. A few pairs of eyes skittered away when she met them.

Janine at the front desk offered her a tight smile. “Night, Detective.”

“Night,” Clara said.

Outside, the sky had darkened to a deep indigo. Streetlights blinked on one by one, halos of amber in the cooling air. She walked to her car with a growing sense of relief—away from the station, away from the eyes and the unspoken questions. The boxes she left locked in her trunk; the encrypted drive she slipped into her inner jacket pocket, close to her heart.

On the drive home, she caught her reflection in the rearview mirror. She looked older than she had a week ago. Or maybe just more awake.

She pulled into her apartment’s small lot and parked beneath the flickering security light. As she stepped out, she glanced up and down the street. A jogger turned the corner a block away, earbuds in. A porch light snapped on as someone opened their front door to call in a child.

Everything looked normal.

It didn’t feel normal.

Inside, her apartment greeted her with the familiar scent of coffee and whatever candle she’d last burned. She locked the door behind her, double-checked the deadbolt, and, for good measure, dragged a small chair in front of it—a habit she had never had before last night.

Paranoia, again. Or survival.

She went to bed later than she meant to, after skimming through the journal by her nightstand until the words blurred together. When sleep finally came, it was shallow and restless.

She dreamt of tunnels.

Of a girl in a cheer uniform standing at the mouth of a stone corridor, looking back over her shoulder with a half-smile, half-dare.

Of voices above ground saying, “She wanted to leave. She always said she would.”

Of a hand reaching out of the dark, not to pull someone up, but to push them further in.

Clara woke sometime after midnight, her heart pounding, the room too quiet.

She lay there for a moment, listening.

That was when she heard it.

A soft, unmistakable sound from downstairs.

A floorboard creaking beneath careful weight.

Chapter Nine

For a moment, Clara thought it might just be the building settling—the kind of late-night complaint old wood made when the temperature dropped. But then it came again, more distinct this time. The dulled thump of something brushing against a piece of furniture. A whisper of movement where no movement should be.

Her hand moved automatically toward the nightstand drawer.

The metal of the gun's grip was cold and reassuring under her fingers. She slid it out soundlessly, heart beating a steady, measured rhythm now: up, down, up, down. Years of training slotted into place like a familiar script. Breathe. Assess. Move.

She swung her legs out of bed, feet touching the floor with deliberate care. No lights. No raised voice demanding to know who was there. Not yet. Surprise was leverage she wasn't ready to give up.

Her bedroom door stood slightly ajar. Beyond it, the hallway was dark, the only light a thin strip of amber leaking up the stairwell from the streetlamp outside. She eased the door open with two fingers, gun low but ready.

Another sound.

Not from the hallway.

From below.

She crept to the top of the stairs and paused, listening. Her apartment was small—living room at the bottom of the stairs, kitchen to the right, a narrow hall to the bathroom. The front door's lock was solid. The windows were old but well-fitted. There weren't a lot of ways in.

Unless someone had been watching long enough to find the one she didn't know she had.

Her mind ran through possibilities: A burglar. A desperate neighbor. A drunk who'd gotten the wrong unit.

Then she heard a voice.

Low. Male. Unfamiliar. "Get the beam straighter. It has to look like she kicked it herself."

Her blood turned to ice.

Another voice, equally calm. "You sure she's alone? Word is she's been stirring the pot."

"That's why we're here."

A rustle of fabric. A faint clink, like metal on metal.

Clara's mouth went dry.

She pictured her living room: the low coffee table, the sagging couch, the cheap floor lamp, the beam running across the ceiling. She imagined two men in dark clothing standing directly beneath that beam, discussing how best to stage her death.

Rage and fear tangled in her chest, forming something sharp.

They expected her to be asleep. A passive body to be arranged. A problem to be solved quietly.

They were wrong.

She slipped her phone from her pocket with her free hand, thumbed it to life, and tapped the emergency dial screen. She didn't hit call—yet. Not while it could give away her position with sound. But it sat ready, a glowing promise.

Three steps down, the stairwell creaked. She winced at the sound, the noise loud as a gunshot in her ears. Conversation below stuttered.

"You hear that?"

"Probably just the building."

"No. Check."

A shadow shifted on the wall at the bottom of the stairs. A man moved into view, head tilted upward. He wore a dark hoodie, the hood up, obscuring most of his face. What she could see was ordinary. Unremarkable. The kind of face you'd pass on the street and never register.

He took another step toward the stairs.

Clara didn't give him the chance to come closer.

"Police," she snapped, voice low but carrying. "Don't move."

The man froze. For a fraction of a second, his eyes widened—surprise, calculation—and then he moved, fast, reaching for something at his hip.

Clara fired.

The shot cracked through the apartment, deafening in the confined space. The man staggered, his back hitting the wall, a strangled sound escaping his throat. He slid down in a tangle of limbs, leaving a dark smear behind.

"Shit!" the second man shouted from the living room. "You said she'd be out!"

Clara dropped low, instinctually reducing her silhouette, and moved down two more steps, using the wall as partial cover. Her ears rang, but she picked up the hurried shuffle of feet, the sound of something being knocked over.

"Come out slowly," she called, gun trained on the corner where the hallway opened into the living room. "Hands where I can see them. This is your only warning."

A beat of silence.

Then the second man bolted.

He flashed into view just long enough for her to register the glint of something metallic in his hand before he darted for the door. She fired again; the shot embedded in the doorframe inches from his shoulder. He wrenched the door open and disappeared into the night, footsteps pounding down the exterior stairs.

Clara swore under her breath and resisted the urge to pursue. Rule one: Secure the scene. Neutralize immediate threats. The man on the floor groaned, drawing her attention back.

She descended the remaining steps cautiously, gun still raised, eyes flicking between the wounded intruder and the open doorway. The security light outside cast a weak, flickering wash into the living room, revealing more of the scene.

A length of rope lay coiled on the coffee table. A metal bracket and a length of chain sat beside it. Someone had dragged the step stool she kept in the kitchen to a spot directly beneath the ceiling beam.

Her stomach rolled.

She approached the fallen man slowly, nudging his weapon away with the toe of her boot. A knife—not a gun. Interesting. He was clutching his side, fingers slick with blood where her bullet had caught him below the ribs.

"Don't move," she said, though he was in no position to argue. With her phone still in one hand, she hit the emergency call button.

The dispatcher's voice came through fractured by the ringing in her ears. "Nine-one-one, what's your—"

"This is Detective Reeves," she said, breathing hard but steady. "Officer-involved shooting at my residence. Two intruders, one fled on foot, one down but alive. Send units and an ambulance."

"Copy that, Detective. Officers en route. Are you injured?"

"No," she said. Then, catching herself: "Just my hearing."

The wounded man stared up at her, his face bleaching to a grayish pallor. His features were unremarkable except for the eyes—a watery, unfocused brown that didn't match the cold intent of his actions.

“Who sent you?” Clara asked.

He laughed weakly, the sound bubbling. “You think... they'd tell me that?”

“You broke into a cop's house to hang her from her own ceiling,” she said, anger flattening her tone. “You knew enough.”

His gaze flickered toward the door, where the second man had vanished. For a moment, something like regret passed through his expression. Or maybe it was just pain.

“You shouldn't've... gone under the hill,” he whispered.

A chill crawled down her spine.

“How did you know I did?”

But whatever answer he might have had dissolved in a wet cough. Blood seeped between his fingers. The sound of distant sirens drifted on the night air, growing louder.

Clara looked at the rope, the chain, the careful arrangement of the scene.

Someone had decided she was a loose end.

And they'd used people she might have seen at the grocery store to do it.

Chapter Ten

The next few hours blurred into a haze of protocol and disorientation.

Blue and red lights splashed across her walls, turning the ordinary furniture of her living room into something broken and surreal. Officers tromped through her apartment in boot covers, voices overlapping—questions, commands, subdued swearing. The paramedics worked on the wounded intruder until they had him stable enough to transport, wheeling him out past the neighbors who'd gathered in clumps on the sidewalk, faces pale and hungry for drama.

Clara sat on her own couch, a thin blanket over her shoulders she didn't remember accepting, her gun in an evidence bag at her feet. Her hands shook less now. The adrenaline had ebbed, leaving a hollow, vibrating tiredness behind.

Chief Mulligan arrived halfway through, his tie askew, hair rumpled. He took in the rope, the tools on the table, the blood on the floor with a glance that was too controlled.

“What the hell happened, Reeves?” he asked, though the question was more ritual than curiosity.

She told him. The noises. The voices. The words she’d overheard. The fight. The shot. She kept it concise, factual, her training turning even terror into bullet points.

“You’re sure you didn’t recognize either of them?” he pressed.

“I got a good look at the one I shot,” she said. “Didn’t recognize him from anywhere I remember. But he knew about the hill.”

“How?”

“He told me I shouldn’t have gone under it.”

Mulligan’s gaze sharpened. “And you believe him?”

“Yes.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “We’ll run his prints, see what shakes out. If he’s local, we’ll know soon enough.”

Clara glanced toward the hallway, where two crime scene techs were photographing the rope and chain. “They were going to make it look like a suicide,” she said quietly. “You see that, right?”

Mulligan didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he moved closer to the coffee table, taking in the layout as if seeing it for the first time through her eyes.

After a moment, he said, “Could’ve been a burglary gone wrong. They come in, think the place is empty, get surprised by an armed detective—”

“Burglars don’t bring hardware to stage a hanging,” she cut in.

He didn’t argue. He just sighed, shoulders sagging slightly.

“We’re opening an official investigation,” he said. “Full workup. You’ll be on administrative leave with pay until we clear you on the shooting.”

“Leave?” The word tasted wrong. “Chief, whoever sent them will think it didn’t work. They’ll try again.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Which is why I’d rather you didn’t walk back into the station tomorrow like nothing happened. You’re a target, Reeves. I need you alive if we’re going to figure out who you pissed off enough to pull this.”

She swallowed hard. Administrative leave. The phrase always sounded like a vacation when applied to other people. Now, it felt like exile.

“What about the files?” she asked. “From the hill.”

“We’ll secure them,” Mulligan said. “Lock them down tighter than Fort Knox. No one touches them without my say-so.”

The promise should have reassured her. Instead, it made a knot form in her gut. The hill. The lab. The boxes in her trunk. Someone already knew enough to send men into her house.

“I want to keep working the case,” she said. “Even if it’s off the books. Bring in someone from outside if you have to. State, federal, I don’t care. But don’t box this up and call it an anomaly.”

Mulligan’s eyes met hers, and for a moment, his usual bureaucratic shell cracked. He looked tired. Old. Like a man who had been playing a game much longer than she realized.

“You think I don’t know what this looks like?” he asked. “You think I haven’t seen enough of the world to recognize when someone is sending a message?”

“Then—”

“Then let me do my job,” he snapped, and she fell silent. He exhaled slowly. “We’re not closing this, Reeves. But I need you to step back. Just far enough that whoever’s pulling strings doesn’t get another shot at your neck.”

He squeezed her shoulder once—a brief, awkward gesture—then turned to bark orders at an officer near the door.

In the end, they insisted she spend the night somewhere else “for her own safety.” A motel on the edge of town, anonymous and bland, with faded floral bedspreads and thin walls. The department offered to post a cruiser outside; she said no. The idea of being watched, even by supposed allies, made her skin crawl.

She checked into the motel sometime around 3 a.m., carrying a small overnight bag and the encrypted drive in her pocket. The boxes stayed at the station; the chief had been very firm about that.

When she closed the motel room door behind her, the quiet felt different than it did at home. Less familiar, more hollow. She locked it, then slid the one chain the room offered into place, knowing full well what chains could be used for.

She didn't sleep much. When she did drift off, it was into shallow, jittery dozes snatched between the noises of other guests and the distant rush of highway traffic.

By dawn, her head ached, and gritty exhaustion had settled behind her eyes, but she'd reached one clear conclusion:

Whoever was behind Hollow Hill had reach. Enough to send men into a detective's house. Enough to coerce or scare townsfolk into looking away. Maybe enough to dip a hand into the station itself.

She was out of safe spaces.

If she wanted to keep going, she'd need someone completely outside the hill's shadow.

Chapter Eleven

The library had always been one of the quiet hearts of Briar's Rest.

As a kid, Clara had spent hours in its cramped children's section, fingers tracing the spines of adventure novels, losing herself in worlds that had nothing to do with small-town politics or the shape of hills on the horizon. As an adult, she still came here sometimes on her days off, under the pretense of checking out a book, when what she really wanted was to sit somewhere that didn't expect anything from her.

That was where she found Mr. Harland most days—a steady presence behind the front desk, glasses perpetually slipping down his nose, sweater vests in muted browns and grays. He'd been the librarian for as long as she could remember, a part of the library the way the creaky steps and dusty corners were.

When she walked in that afternoon, he looked up with the same small, polite smile he gave everyone. But as she approached, his expression shifted, the corners of his eyes tightening.

"Detective Reeves," he said. "You're off duty?"

"Something like that," she said.

He studied her face more closely. "You look like you haven't slept."

"I've been busy."

"Busy," he repeated softly. "Yes. I suppose you have."

It wasn't the words that made her pause. It was the way he said them, as if they carried extra weight. As if he knew more than he should.

Clara glanced around. The library was almost empty—an older woman paging through a magazine near the windows, a teenager at a computer with headphones on, oblivious to the world. No one close enough to overhear.

“Mr. Harland,” she said quietly, “do you have somewhere we can talk?”

He held her gaze for a beat longer, then nodded.

“Come with me.”

He led her past the stacks, to a narrow door marked STAFF ONLY. Inside was a small workroom cluttered with carts of books, boxes of donated paperbacks, and a bulletin board covered in outdated flyers. He closed the door behind them and, for good measure, turned a small radio on low, a wash of classical music filling the space.

“Tea?” he offered, gesturing to an electric kettle on the counter.

She almost laughed. “I’m not sure tea is going to fix this one.”

“Tea rarely fixes anything,” he said. “But it gives us an excuse to stand still for a moment.” He busied himself with mugs and teabags, his movements unhurried. “You’ve been looking into Hollow Hill.”

It wasn’t a question.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“You’re not as subtle as you think you are, Detective,” he said gently. “The board at the station. The questions you’ve been asking around town. People talk. People always talk.”

“Mostly about how crazy I am,” she said.

He smiled faintly. “Perhaps. Or perhaps they are afraid of what your questions might uncover.”

He set a mug in front of her. The steam curled up between them.

“You didn’t bring me back here to discuss gossip,” she said. “What do you know?”

Mr. Harland’s gaze dropped to his own hands. They were the hands of a man who’d spent his life handling paper—dry, lined, careful.

“You’re not the first,” he said.

The words landed like a stone in her stomach.

“Not the first what?” she asked.

“Not the first to come looking for what lies beneath that hill,” he said. “Not the first to ask why people go missing and why the town is so quick to call it bad luck. Or misadventure. Or youthful restlessness.”

“Who else?” Clara pressed.

He moved to the bulletin board, plucking off an old flyer. Underneath it, pinned to the cork, was a faded photograph—two young men in front of the library, arms around each other’s shoulders, grinning at the camera. One of them was unmistakably a younger Mr. Harland—more hair, fewer lines, same quiet eyes. The other, Clara didn’t recognize.

“His name was Simon,” Mr. Harland said, tapping the stranger’s face. “He was my friend. He started asking questions about the hill in 1978. There had been... incidents. People disappearing. Stories that never quite made sense.” He swallowed. “He was persistent. He spent weeks in the archives, looking through old council records, property deeds, newspaper clippings. He said there was a pattern. That the hill was at the center of it.”

Clara’s throat felt tight. “What happened to him?”

“He went to meet with a council member one evening,” Mr. Harland said. “Said he finally had proof. He never came home. His car was found near the quarry side path.”

“And no one—”

“People looked,” Harland said. “For a while. But the council said he’d been troubled. That he’d talked about leaving town. That he must have had an accident in the woods. They closed the case after a few weeks. Called it misadventure.”

“And you?” Clara asked. “What did you think?”

“I thought,” he said quietly, “that I lived in a town that chose its truths carefully.” He pinned the flyer back over the photo, as if tucking the memory away. “I learned to be careful about what questions I asked.”

He turned back to her, eyes searching her face. “You haven’t learned that lesson yet.”

“I shot a man in my living room last night,” Clara said. “He was setting up a rope to hang me from my ceiling. Another man ran. They knew I’d been under the hill. So no, I haven’t learned to stop.”

Pain flickered across Harland’s face. “I heard,” he said. “Small town, as I said. The rumor is that you startled a burglar.”

“Do you believe that?” she asked.

“No,” he said simply.

Something in her eased at that. A tiny piece of the isolation she'd been carrying cracked.

"Others have come before you," he said. "Journalists. Outsiders. People just passing through who noticed the... oddness of certain events. Some of them vanished. Some of them left town very quickly, without saying goodbye. All of them were warned, in one way or another, that Hollow Hill is not to be disturbed."

"And you?" she asked. "You never went looking yourself?"

"I looked enough to know that the hill reaches further than its roots," he said. "Into the council. Into certain families. Into the places where decisions are made. And I decided that I would rather keep the little light I have here, in this building, than go chasing shadows I couldn't outrun."

"Why tell me this now?" she asked.

He studied her for a long moment.

"Because someone already tried to kill you," he said. "Which means you've already crossed the line I spent my life staying behind. At this point, ignorance is no longer a shield you can use. Only information is."

Clara wrapped her hands around the warm mug.

"I need records," she said. "Old ones. Council minutes. Land deeds. Missing persons reports from before the digital archive. Anything that touches Hollow Hill."

Mr. Harland nodded slowly. "The public records are incomplete," he said. "Some years... vanished. Some files... misfiled. But I have my own copies of certain things. Call it a professional quirk." A faint smile. "Or paranoia."

"Can I see them?"

"You can," he said. "But understand this, Detective Reeves." His voice dropped. "Every step you take from here on out will be on a road others died walking. The town will not thank you for continuing it. It will close in around you. Make you the problem, instead of what you are trying to expose."

"It already has," she said.

He regarded her with a mixture of sadness and reluctant admiration.

"Then I suppose," he said, "we should make sure you don't walk it alone."

Chapter Twelve

Mr. Harland's private archive wasn't large, but it was precise.

He led Clara down into the library's basement—a cool, concrete space that smelled faintly of dust and old ink. Metal shelves lined the walls, filled with boxes labeled in neat handwriting. Most held overflow—donations waiting to be sorted, outdated encyclopedias, seasonal decorations for the children's reading corner. But one section, tucked into a back corner behind a shelf of forgotten VHS tapes, was different.

The boxes here were uniform, plain gray, their labels written in code: HH-1, HH-2, RH-87, MH-02.

He knelt, slid one box free, and opened it.

Inside, carefully protected in plastic sleeves, were photocopies of old council minutes, clippings from the town's long-defunct newspaper, and handwritten notes in Harland's tight script.

"I couldn't prove anything," he said as she sifted through the contents. "Not enough to bring to anyone who wasn't already inclined to believe. But I could... preserve. Make it harder for the town to rewrite itself completely."

Clara pulled out a stack of clippings. Headlines jumped out at her.

LOCAL TEEN MISSING AFTER CHEER PRACTICE.

COUNCIL APPROVES LAND REZONING NEAR HOLLOW HILL.

LIBRARIAN ASSISTANT FOUND DEAD; FOUL PLAY NOT SUSPECTED.

"Simon," she said, tapping the last headline.

Harland nodded. "They said he fell. Hit his head on a rock by the quarry. No autopsy. Quick burial."

She set the clippings aside and reached for another box—RH-87. Inside, she found what the file label implied: Emily Rhodes' yearbook photo, printed in grainy black and white. Notes about a scholarship she'd been in the running for. A flyer for the vigil held after she vanished.

"She was bright," Harland said quietly. "Spoke her mind. Her family's been here since the beginning. Founders, some would say."

"The files I found under the hill mention 'founder lines,'" Clara said. "As if certain families were more... tied to whatever the project was."

"Some families built this town," he said. "Donated land. Established businesses. Served on the council for generations. Their names are carved into plaques and etched into cornerstones."

They also made certain decisions behind closed doors. Decisions that echo longer than any dedication ceremony.”

“What about Michael Hayes?” she asked. “The clerk.”

Harland pulled another box—MH-02. Inside were copies of town budgets, meeting agendas, and a photo of a man in his thirties with kind eyes and a nervous smile.

“He started asking questions when records went missing,” Harland said. “Budgets that didn’t reconcile. Projects with funding but no paper trail. Some of that money, I suspect, went under the hill.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Once or twice,” Harland said. “He was cautious. Said he didn’t want to drag anyone else into it until he understood more. Then, one day, he stopped coming in.” He swallowed. “I found out later his wife had begged the council to do more. They patted her hand and said these things sometimes happen.”

Clara thought of the files in the lab: MICHAEL HAYES – CLERK ACCESS. UNAUTHORIZED REVIEW OF ARCHIVES.

“Did any of them mention a research station?” she asked. “In their notes?”

“Not by that name,” Harland said. “But Simon talked about ‘trials.’ Emily wrote in her diary about ‘people choosing who gets to stay and who gets to disappear.’ Michael called it ‘a machine that eats the inconvenient.’”

A machine.

She pictured the station’s humming cables, the labeled drawers, the tidy logs.

“What were they researching?” she murmured.

Harland shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it started as something benign. Safety measures for the mines. Geological surveys. Experiments in transportation or energy—who knows? But at some point, it became a way to filter the town. To decide who fit the narrative it wanted to tell about itself, and who didn’t.”

Clara sifted through more documents, the pattern emerging in sharper relief. People who asked questions. People who had access to records. People like Emily, who had the wrong combination of curiosity and family history.

“You’re putting this together faster than I did,” Harland said quietly. “I had decades. You’ve had weeks.”

“I have files you didn’t,” Clara said. “From down there.”

She told him, in broad strokes, about the research station—the sign, the subject logs, the boxes labeled with names like Emily's and Michael's. She did not mention the encrypted drive, but she saw recognition flicker in his eyes at the descriptions.

"I always suspected there was something more than tunnels," he said. "A center. A heart. I suppose I was right." He didn't sound pleased.

"What I don't understand is why the town would go along with it," Clara said. "Why look the other way? Why help?"

"Fear," he said simply. "Loyalty. Habit. Some people benefit from the way things are. Others are too afraid of what will happen if they're seen as troublemakers. And some convince themselves that the stories are just that—stories. Easier to believe someone ran away than that your neighbor might have pushed them."

"Do you think the chief knows?" she asked.

Harland hesitated. "Mulligan? He's not a fool," he said eventually. "He's also not a hero. If he knows, he's decided it's bigger than him."

Clara thought of the way Mulligan had looked at the rope in her living room. The way he'd warned her to step back. The weariness in his eyes when he'd said, Sometimes stubborn just gets people killed.

"Someone in the station knows enough to be dangerous," she said. "They knew I went under the hill. They had time to send people after me."

"Then you cannot rely on the station alone," Harland said. "You need someone beyond Briar's Rest. Someone who isn't part of its bloodstream."

"State cops?" she asked. "Feds?"

"Perhaps," he said. "But institutions speak to institutions. And if the rot reaches as far as I suspect, an official channel might simply funnel your evidence into another basement."

She grimaced. He wasn't wrong.

"Then who?" she asked.

Harland studied her, as if weighing what he was about to say.

"There's a reporter," he said. "From the next county over. Name of Alex Kane. Investigative. Stubborn. Has a knack for making powerful people very uncomfortable. They've been sniffing around Hollow Hill for years, but they never had anyone on the inside willing to talk."

"Until now," Clara said.

“Until now,” he agreed.

He wrote a name and number on a scrap of paper and handed it to her.

“Be careful with this,” he said. “Alex is good. But their presence will be noticed. And once the story leaves town... there’s no putting it back in the box.”

“Good,” Clara said. “It’s been in a box long enough.”

Chapter Thirteen

Alex Kane answered on the third ring.

“Yeah?” The voice was low, a little rough, probably pulled from another task. There was the background hiss of traffic, the faint blare of a distant horn.

“Is this Alex Kane?” Clara asked.

“Depends who’s asking.”

“Detective Clara Reeves. Briar’s Rest PD.”

A beat of silence. Then a soft, incredulous huff. “Well, that’s a surprise.”

“You’ve heard of me,” she said.

“You shot a guy in your living room last night,” Alex said. “Word travels. And I’ve been trying to get someone—anyone—from that station to say more than ‘no comment’ about Hollow Hill for years. So yeah, you’re on my radar.”

Clara leaned against the side of her car in the library parking lot, the late afternoon sun slanting gold through the trees.

“I have evidence,” she said. “Physical files from a facility under the hill. Records of people the town called missing. And I have a target on my back because of it.”

The sound of traffic on the line faded as if Alex had stepped into a quieter space. “You’re serious.”

“I don’t have the energy to joke about this,” she said.

“All right,” Alex said. “Let’s say I believe you. What do you want?”

"I want this out of their hands," she said. "Whoever 'they' are. I want it somewhere the council can't shred it and call it rumor. I want the families of the people they took to know what really happened. And I want the town to stop pretending Hollow Hill is just a bump in the landscape."

"So you want a miracle," Alex said.

"I want a story," Clara replied. "One you're good at telling."

Another pause. When Alex spoke again, their voice had sharpened—focused. "Okay, Detective Reeves. I'll bite. But if we're doing this, we do it right. No anonymous sources. No half-baked insinuations. I'm going to need to see everything. The files. The station. You. And you'd better be prepared for what happens when this goes live."

"What happens?" she asked.

"People get angry," Alex said. "People panic. Powerful folks call my editor and demand my head on a platter. Some of them try to dig up dirt to discredit sources. Some of them try to scare them into silence. It gets messy. It gets loud."

"I'm already being targeted in my own home," she said. "Messy and loud is better than quiet and dead."

"Fair point," Alex said. "Where are you?"

She told them. Harland had stepped back into the main library, giving her privacy, but she could see him through the staff room window, shelving returned books with practiced ease.

"I can be there in an hour," Alex said. "Don't bring the files into the open. We'll find somewhere off the radar."

"Agreed," Clara said.

They hung up.

She slipped the phone back into her pocket and exhaled slowly. The decision felt like stepping off a ledge and trusting there would be ground beneath her when she landed.

Mr. Harland found her a few minutes later.

"Well?" he asked.

"They're coming," she said. "You're sure you're okay with this?"

"I made my choice a long time ago," he said. "To stay. To keep my little piece of the world intact. But that choice has always carried a cost." His gaze was steady. "Perhaps it's time someone else made a different one."

“You’ll be in the blast radius,” she warned.

“I live in it already,” he said gently. “At least this way, the blast might clear the air.”

Chapter Fourteen

Alex Kane did not look like the kind of person the council would invite to a gala.

They arrived in a dusty sedan whose paint had seen better days, parking two blocks from the library and walking the rest of the way with a worn messenger bag slung across one shoulder. Short hair, dark and tousled. Jeans. Scuffed boots. A denim jacket over a T-shirt that read JOURNALISM: BECAUSE SOMEONE HAS TO BE NOISY.

As they stepped into the staff room, they took in the space with a quick, assessing glance, the kind of look Clara recognized from detectives sizing up crime scenes.

“Detective Reeves,” they said, extending a hand. “Alex Kane. Thanks for not hanging up on me.”

“Thanks for picking up,” she said, shaking their hand. Their grip was firm, no nonsense.

Mr. Harland hovered by the shelves, watching with polite curiosity.

“And you must be the infamous librarian,” Alex said. “Alex Kane. I’ve heard about your... retention habits.”

Harland’s mouth quirked. “I prefer ‘archival inclinations,’ ” he said. “But yes. I suppose I am guilty as charged.”

“Guilty is good,” Alex said. “Guilty means you have what I need.”

Clara pulled the encrypted drive from her pocket and placed it on the table between them. It was such a small object. Ridiculous, really, that so many lives could be compressed into something you might misplace in a couch cushion.

“These are copies of what I pulled from a facility under Hollow Hill,” she said. “Subject logs. Internal notes. Files on Emily Rhodes, Michael Hayes, and others. Not everything—I’m still working on scanning it all. But enough to establish a pattern.”

Alex picked up the drive delicately, as if it might vanish if they weren’t careful. “You have the originals?”

“At the station,” she said. “Under lock and key.”

“You trust that lock?” Alex asked.

“No,” she said. “But I didn’t have much choice the night someone tried to hang me.”

Alex’s eyes flicked up sharply. “You think those two were connected to the hill?”

“I don’t think,” she said. “I know. One of them told me I shouldn’t have gone under.”

Alex whistled softly. “Bold of them to telegraph motive like that.”

“They didn’t know I’d be awake,” she said. “I wasn’t supposed to hear anything at all.”

They nodded, lips pressed together.

“Okay,” Alex said. “Here’s how this works. I take this drive. I corroborate everything I can independently. I cross-reference with Mr. Harland’s archive, state records, anything I can get my hands on. I interview you. I talk to the families. And then, when we have enough to withstand the inevitable storm, we publish. Not just in the county rag. I have contacts at bigger outlets. The kind people in power read when they’re trying to figure out what to panic about next.”

“And in the meantime?” Clara asked.

“In the meantime, you stay alive,” Alex said. “You keep your head down in some ways and up in others. You document everything. Every threat. Every odd look. Every missing file. If anything happens to you, I run what I have, unfinished or not, with your name on it as the source.”

“A dead detective makes a compelling lede,” Clara said dryly.

“A living one makes a better one,” Alex replied. “I prefer my sources responsive.”

Harland cleared his throat gently. “You mentioned families,” he said. “Will you... talk to them before this goes public?”

“Yes,” Alex said. “They deserve to hear it from someone who isn’t a headline.”

Clara thought of Emily’s parents—the way their farmhouse had looked when she’d driven past it on patrol, the sagging fence, the faded FOR SALE sign that had been up, then taken down, then up again over the years. She thought of Michael’s wife, who still came into town twice a week for groceries, head down, wedding ring still on.

“They’ve been living in limbo for decades,” she said. “The town gave them stories about runaways and accidents. This will break them.”

“It might also start to heal them,” Harland said quietly. “Knowing the truth is painful. Not knowing is... something else.”

Grief without a body, she thought. A wound that never scabs over because there's nothing to close around.

"I'll talk to them," Clara said. "First. Before any cameras. Before any articles. I owe them that."

Alex nodded slowly. "Good," they said. "And I'll be there, if they'll let me. Listening, not leading."

They slipped the drive into an inner pocket of their bag.

"Once this leaves this room," Alex said, "there's no pretending it never existed. Are you both ready for that?"

Harland looked older than he had at the start of the day, but his gaze was steady.

"I've been waiting for someone to be ready for a very long time," he said.

Clara thought of the rope in her living room. The familiar faces turning away on the street. The way the hill's shadow fell across the town every evening.

"I'm done pretending," she said.

"Good," Alex said again. "Then let's go talk to some ghosts."

Chapter Fifteen

The Rhodes farm sat on the outskirts of town, where the neat rows of suburban houses gave way to fields and tree lines. Once, it had probably been picturesque—white farmhouse, red barn, the kind of place you'd see on a postcard. Now, the paint peeled in strips from the siding, and the barn's roof sagged in the middle, held up by stubbornness as much as nails.

Clara parked at the edge of the gravel drive. Alex's car pulled in behind hers, engine ticking as it cooled. For a moment, neither of them moved.

"You sure you want me there?" Alex asked. "Reporters don't always make the best first impression, given the circumstances."

"You'll hang back at first," Clara said. "Let me talk. If they're open to more, you step in. If not, you wait until they're ready. Or you don't. Their choice."

"Fair," Alex said.

They walked up the path together, the crunch of gravel underfoot loud in the quiet afternoon. A wind had picked up, rattling the bare branches of the trees along the property line. A dog barked once from somewhere behind the barn, then fell silent.

Clara knocked on the front door. For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then the lock turned with a reluctant clack.

Mrs. Rhodes opened the door halfway. She had the kind of face that had been pretty once and was still striking beneath the lines grief had carved—sharp cheekbones, dark eyes. Her hair, mostly gray now, was pulled back in a loose bun.

“Detective Reeves,” she said, surprise flickering across her features. “I wasn’t expecting...”

Her gaze shifted past Clara to Alex, hovering a polite distance behind.

“May we come in?” Clara asked. “It’s... about Emily.”

Mrs. Rhodes’ fingers tightened on the edge of the door. For a second, Clara thought she might slam it in their faces. Instead, she stepped back.

“Of course,” she said. “We always have time for Emily.”

The house smelled like old wood and something simmering on the stove—stew, maybe. The furniture was worn but clean. Photos lined the walls: Emily as a toddler in a patchy backyard; Emily in a Halloween costume; Emily in her cheer uniform, pom-poms raised.

Mr. Rhodes sat in an armchair in the living room, a blanket over his knees despite the warmth of the day. His hair was thinner, his face paler than the last time Clara had seen him in town. His eyes, though, were sharp as ever.

“Detective,” he said, voice gravelly. “We haven’t heard from you in a while. I take it that means you haven’t found our girl.”

Clara sat on the edge of the sofa across from them, hands clasped tightly in her lap. Alex remained standing near the doorway, a respectful shadow.

“What I’m about to tell you is going to be difficult,” she said. “But I promised you, when I took over the missing persons cases, that I would always be honest.”

Mrs. Rhodes sank onto the arm of her husband’s chair, one hand resting on his shoulder.

“Just say it,” she said.

Clara took a breath.

“I found a facility under Hollow Hill,” she said. “A research station. Old, but not abandoned. It had records on people this town has called missing. Including Emily.”

Mrs. Rhodes’ face went still, the color draining from her cheeks.

“Records?” she repeated.

“Logs,” Clara said. “Notes about her movements. About her asking questions. About her going under the hill. And a notation that the council was informed when she got too close.”

“The council,” Mr. Rhodes rasped. “You’re saying...”

“I don’t have a body,” Clara said, throat tight. “I can’t give you that. But I can tell you with near certainty that Emily didn’t run away. She didn’t just vanish. She was seen as a problem. And someone chose to make her disappear.”

Mrs. Rhodes put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes shone, but no tears fell yet. As if her body had run out of them years ago and was now only able to mimic the motion.

“We knew,” she whispered. “We always knew. They said she’d run off with some boy. That she’d gotten tired of this place. But she loved this farm. She loved us.” Her voice shook. “We spent everything we had trying to prove it. Hired lawyers. Private investigators. We thought—if we just showed them enough, they’d have to see.”

“They saw,” Mr. Rhodes said bitterly. “They just chose not to look.”

He stared at Clara, anger and gratitude warring in his eyes.

“Why now?” he asked. “Why are you telling us this now, after all these years?”

“Because I finally have something more than suspicion,” she said. “And because someone tried to kill me for finding it. Which tells me I’m not chasing shadows anymore.”

Mrs. Rhodes’ gaze slid to Alex. “And you?” she asked. “Who are you?”

Alex stepped forward slightly. “My name is Alex Kane,” they said. “I’m a journalist from the next county over. Detective Reeves contacted me because she wants what happened to your daughter to be known beyond this town. With your permission, I’d like to tell Emily’s story. As fully and truthfully as possible.”

“You want to put her in the papers again,” Mrs. Rhodes said. “Turn her into a headline.”

“I want to put the people who did this in the papers,” Alex said. “Emily deserves more than whispered rumors and half-truths. So do you. But it’s your choice. I won’t use anything you say without your consent.”

Silence stretched.

Mr. Rhodes reached for his wife’s hand. Their fingers interlaced, knuckles white.

“For years,” he said slowly, “we’ve been screaming into a void. Saying our daughter didn’t just leave. That something happened. People patted our hands. Told us grief makes you see

patterns. Said we were stuck in the past.” He swallowed hard. “If you can make the world see that we weren’t crazy... that she mattered... then maybe...”

His voice broke.

Mrs. Rhodes squeezed his hand. When she spoke, her voice was flat but steady.

“Tell her story,” she said. “Tell them what they did to her. Make them say her name.”

Alex nodded, something fierce and solemn in their expression. “I will,” they said. “I promise.”

As they began to talk—about Emily’s laugh, her stubborn streak, the nights her parents spent driving the roads around Hollow Hill with a flashlight and a sliver of hope—Clara felt something shift in the room. Grief was still there, heavy and sharp. But there was also a new thread woven into it.

Not closure. Not yet.

But the beginning of an answer to a question that had hung in the air for decades.

Why.

Chapter Sixteen

Michael Hayes’ wife, Lena, received the truth more quietly.

Her small house on Birch Street was neat, almost obsessively so, as if tidiness were the one thing she could still control. She listened as Clara explained the files from the station under the hill, the notes about Michael’s “unauthorized access” to financial records, the council’s awareness.

“I always thought it was the records,” Lena said. “He used to come home angry. Said numbers didn’t match. That money was going somewhere it shouldn’t. I told him to let it go. That we had enough on our plate. He said he couldn’t. That once you see certain things, you can’t unsee them.”

She smiled sadly. “Turns out he was right.”

When Alex asked if they could share Michael’s story, Lena nodded without hesitation.

“Make sure they know he wasn’t looking for trouble,” she said. “He was just trying to do his job. And they killed him for it.”

Chapter Seventeen

With each interview, Alex's notebook filled—names, dates, details that would give flesh to the bones of the files Clara had found. They spent late nights in the motel room Clara still occupied, laptops open, Harland's photocopies spread across the bed.

The pattern that emerged was chilling in its consistency.

Curiosity. Access. Proximity to Hollow Hill.

Those three traits, in any combination, seemed to mark a person for “handling.”

Clara found herself drawn back to the tunnels in her mind. The research station. Incident 14. The hum of unseen machinery. There were still gaps in the story, pieces of the council’s rationale that remained obscured.

“What do you think they told themselves?” she asked Alex one night, eyes gritty with fatigue. “When they signed off on this? When they decided Emily was an acceptable loss?”

Alex leaned back in their chair, rubbing a hand over their face.

“People are good at inventing stories that make them the heroes,” they said. “Maybe they told themselves they were protecting the town. That exposing whatever the hill started as would destroy everything. Maybe they convinced themselves those people were unstable, or dangerous, or already halfway gone. It’s easier to kill an idea of a person than the person in front of you.”

“That’s not an excuse,” she said.

“It’s not,” they agreed. “It’s just... how monsters sleep at night.”

Chapter Eighteen

The council chambers beneath the town hall were dustier than the research station, but no less haunted.

It was Harland who pointed Clara toward the old municipal blueprints, showing her the buried entrance behind a panel in the archives room. Under cover of darkness and with Alex standing lookout upstairs, Clara pried the panel open and slipped down a narrow set of stairs into the bowels of city government.

The council room itself was circular, with a ring of chairs and a central table scarred by years of use. Old microphones gathered dust. Faded nameplates sat askew. On the walls, framed photographs of past councils watched with cloudy eyes.

But it was the cabinets along the far wall that held what she was looking for.

Inside, in orderly rows, were binders. Each labeled with a year and a single word.

OVERSIGHT.

She pulled the one for 1987.

The pages inside were dense with meeting notes written in jargon meant to obscure more than illuminate. "Subject manifestations." "Community stability." "Mitigation measures." But scattered among the euphemisms were unmistakable references.

RH-87.

MH-02.

INCIDENT 14.

She snapped photos with her phone, heart hammering. The council hadn't just known. They'd structured entire subcommittees around managing the consequences.

Upstairs, in the world of public minutes and speeches about budgets and festivals, they'd talked about potholes and parades. Down here, they'd discussed who lived and who vanished.

When she emerged into the archive room again, dust on her hands, Alex was pacing.

"Get what you need?" they asked.

"Enough to burn this whole building to the ground," she said.

"Let's try publishing the story first," Alex suggested. "Arson makes a lousy premise for a follow-up article."

Chapter Nineteen

As Alex wrote, the town tightened around Clara like a fist.

People stopped returning her nods in the grocery store. Conversations cut off when she walked into the diner. A few bold souls told her, to her face, that she was stirring up trouble. That digging into old wounds wouldn't bring anyone back. That maybe she should leave well enough alone and be grateful she'd survived her little "incident."

Her administrative leave stretched on. Officially, the shooting investigation was ongoing. Unofficially, she knew she'd become a liability. A question mark in a department that preferred answers.

Mitch tried to bridge the gap, dropping by the motel once with coffee and donuts.

"They're saying you're obsessed," he told her. "That you're out to destroy the town."

"I'm trying to save it from itself," she said.

"Not everyone sees the difference," he replied. "But for what it's worth... I read some of the stuff you pulled. Before it disappeared."

Her head snapped up. "Disappeared?"

He grimaced. "The boxes. From the evidence room. Chief says they got sent up the chain to State. Chain of custody, blah blah. But no one seems to have a receipt. I pushed a little. Got told to focus on local priorities."

A cold, sharp anger blossomed in her chest.

Of course they were gone. She'd known, in some part of herself, that leaving them behind that night was a risk. The encrypted copies in Alex's possession suddenly felt even more vital.

"They're not gone," she said. "Not all of them."

Mitch eyed her. "You're playing a dangerous game, Reeves."

"So are they," she said.

He shook his head. "Just... don't get yourself killed before this all blows up. I'd like to see the fireworks."

Chapter Twenty

The article went live on a rainy Thursday morning.

It hit the regional outlet first—a long, meticulously sourced piece by Alex Kane, accompanied by grainy photos of tunnels, photocopies of council memos, and portraits of Emily Rhodes, Michael Hayes, and others whose names had once been relegated to dusty bulletin boards in the station lobby.

Within hours, bigger outlets picked it up. National ones by afternoon.

HIDDEN HISTORY: SMALL TOWN'S SECRET EXPERIMENTS BENEATH LOCAL LANDMARK.

FAMILIES SPEAK OUT: "THEY CALLED US CRAZY FOR DECADES."

The council called an emergency meeting. Town hall filled with people—some stunned, some furious, some openly hostile. Protesters gathered outside with hastily made signs: JUSTICE FOR EMILY. NO MORE SECRETS. Others carried quieter messages: WE KNEW. WE WERE SILENCED.

Chief Mulligan cornered Clara outside the motel, tie loosened, eyes bloodshot.

"You went to the press," he said.

"I went to the truth," she replied.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Given those families answers," she said. "And given this town a chance to be something other than a lie."

He stared at her for a long moment, then laughed—a sound with no humor in it.

"You really don't know when to back down," he said.

"If I did," Clara said, "Emily would still be a runaway on a bulletin board."

Mulligan rubbed his temples. "State's sending investigators," he said. "Real ones. Not the polite kind. They're going to tear through everything. The station. The council. The hill. And when they ask who led them there..."

"I'll raise my hand," she said.

He looked at her with something like reluctant admiration.

"You're going to be a hero to some of these people," he said. "And a villain to others. You ready for that?"

"I was already a villain," she said. "Ask half the town. Might as well be one for the right reasons."

Chapter Twenty-One

In the weeks that followed, Briar's Rest changed.

Not overnight. Not cleanly. But undeniably.

State investigators combed the tunnels, the research station, the hidden council chambers. They seized records, interviewed officials, followed money trails that led far beyond the town's borders. Some council members resigned. Others lawyered up. A few tried to claim ignorance so loudly it rang hollow even to their staunchest supporters.

The man Clara had shot in her living room survived long enough to take a plea deal, trading what scraps of information he had for a lighter sentence. He named a handler. The handler, when confronted, named someone higher. The chain led, eventually, to a knot of influence that straddled town politics and corporate interests—a network that had seen Hollow Hill not as a landmark, but as an asset.

Emily Rhodes' parents stood on the town hall steps one crisp morning, hands clasped, as a state official announced the reopening of her case as a homicide. Michael Hayes' name was cleared of rumors about embezzlement and instability. Other families heard, for the first time, official acknowledgments that what they'd suspected all along was true.

You were right, the town had to say, over and over again.

We failed you.

Mr. Harland kept the library open extended hours for people who needed somewhere quiet to sit and process. He added a small display by the front desk with photos of those who'd been taken—Emily, Michael, Simon, and others—surrounded by candles and handwritten notes.

Alex's article won awards. They didn't seem to care. What mattered, they told Clara over coffee one day, was the flood of emails from other small towns, other hills, other secrets.

"Turns out your monsters aren't unique," they said. "Comforting and horrifying, all at once."

The station changed too. Some officers left, whether out of shame or stubborn refusal to work under the new scrutiny. Others stayed and tried to rebuild trust. Eventually, after the shooting investigation was officially closed and the state cleared her use of force, Clara was offered her badge back.

She took it. But she also knew she was no longer the same detective who'd first pinned four faces to a board and wondered if she was seeing patterns in shadows.

She'd walked under the hill. She'd seen what lay beneath.

One evening, months later, she drove out to the old trailhead on Hollow Hill Road. The entrance she'd first stepped through was now sealed with concrete, a metal plaque bolted over it.

THIS SITE IS PRESERVED AS A REMINDER, it read.
OF WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SECRECY IS VALUED ABOVE HUMAN LIFE.

It wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be. But it was something.

She stood there for a while, listening to the wind move through the trees, the rustle of leaves against stone. The hill loomed above, unchanged and yet forever different in her eyes.

“People will tell stories about you, you know,” a voice said.

She turned. Alex leaned against her car, a thermos in hand.

“About me?” she asked.

“About the detective who went under the hill and dragged its bones into the daylight,” they said. “Some will make you a hero. Some will make you reckless. Some will say you ruined the town. Others will say you saved it.”

“What do you say?” she asked.

Alex considered.

“I say you refused to let a story end with ‘she disappeared,’ ” they said. “You insisted on a middle and an end. That matters.”

Clara looked up at the hill one more time.

“I still hear them sometimes,” she said. “In my head. The ones who didn’t come back. Asking why it took so long.”

“And what do you tell them?” Alex asked.

“I tell them I’m sorry,” she said. “And that I’m trying to make sure there aren’t any more like them.”

They stood in companionable silence for a moment, watching the last light fade from the sky.

Briar’s Rest would never be what it had been before. The illusion of innocence was gone. But in its place, something else was growing—haltingly, imperfectly.

Honesty, maybe.

Accountability.

A willingness to look under hills instead of pretending they were solid all the way down.

Eventually, Clara turned back toward the car.

“Come on,” she said. “Harland’s probably closing up. If we’re late, he’ll make us reshelve all the mystery novels as punishment.”

Alex laughed. “No worse fate.”

As they drove back toward town, the silhouette of Hollow Hill receded in the rearview mirror. It would always be there. A shadow on the horizon. A reminder.

But so would the people who had chosen to face it.

And for the first time in a long time, Clara felt something bloom beneath the fatigue and the scars.

Not triumph.

Not peace.

But a quiet, stubborn hope.

The kind that insisted, against all evidence, that shining a light into dark places was still worth the risk.