

A LOVE LIKE NO OTHER . . .

# The Hollow

Jessica  
Verday



# The Hollow

When Abbey's best friend, Kristen, vanishes at the bridge near Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, everyone else is all too quick to accept that Kristen is dead and rumors fly that her death was no accident. Abbey goes through the motions of mourning her best friend, but privately, she refuses to believe that Kristen is really gone. It only makes things worse that everyone now treats Abbey like either a freak show or a charity case. Thank goodness for Caspian, the gorgeous and mysterious boy who shows up out of nowhere at Kristen's funeral, and keeps reappearing in Abbey's life. Caspian clearly has secrets of his own, but he's the only person who makes Abbey feel normal again... but also special. Just when Abbey starts to feel that she might survive all this, she learns a secret that makes her question everything she thought she knew about her best friend. How could Kristen have kept silent about so much? And could this secret have led to her death? As Abbey struggles to understand Kristen's betrayal, she uncovers a frightening truth that nearly unravels her—one that will challenge her emerging love for Caspian, as well as her own sanity.

**Jessica Verday** wrote the first draft of *The Hollow* by hand, using thirteen spiral-bound notebooks and fifteen black pens. She is currently hand-writing her second novel, the continuation of Abbey and Caspian's story, from her home in Goodlettsville, Tennessee.

I reached out and touched the casket lid. It was cold. So cold that I immediately snatched my hand away. It almost felt like it had burned me.

I just stood there. I couldn't bring myself to say anything. . . . Not out loud at least. But a thousand thoughts raged inside my head, while a thousand feelings raged inside my heart.

The weather mimicked my emotions. A fierce wind rattled by, howling in outrage. The edges of the plastic awning flapped angrily against the aluminum poles holding it up, and made a horrible ringing sound. Even the rain pounded harder, lashing out its bitterness.

And that was when I felt someone watching me.

I looked out over the rows of tombstones, memorial plates, mausoleums, and crypts. Past trees and bushes. There, standing next to a huge mausoleum built into the side of a hill, was a boy.

He was dressed in a black suit, with a white shirt and a black tie, and his hair was so pale that it almost looked white. His hands were clasped in front of him, and I saw he didn't have a raincoat or an umbrella. The rain had completely soaked him through. I couldn't see what color his eyes were, he was too far away for that, but he looked right at me, and his gaze held mine.

Who was he? Did he know Kristen? Or was he here for someone else?

The wind continued to howl around me, and the rain pounded on the scant shelter overhead. Whoever he was, he was crazy to be standing out there. Before I could even think it through, I found myself taking a couple of steps out from underneath the awning. *I should go talk to him*, I thought. Find out if he was here for Kristen. Find out why he was staring at me. Tell him he was nuts for getting soaked out there.

But the wind drove me back. The fierceness of it was so sudden that I staggered backward and had to grasp on to the nearest awning pole for support. The rain didn't relent either, and it streamed down my face, leaving the same type of tracks that tears would have.

Head held high, grasping on to that pole for all I was worth, I stared back at the stranger. Daring him to come closer. Demanding that he not look at me with pity in his eyes.

The wind ruffled the edges of his clothing and blew his hair into his face, but he stood where he was. Then he bowed his head slightly.

Something told me that he meant it as a sign of respect, so I nodded back. Then I turned to take one last look at the casket behind me. Meeting him would have to wait. Today I had different things to think about.

The rain started letting up a little as I walked farther away from the grave site. I spotted my parents talking to Reverend Prescott on the stone steps of the church, and I definitely didn't want to get caught up in any of that. I moved quickly to the car as I took my cell phone out of my jacket pocket and dialed Mom's number.

She reached into her purse and glanced at her phone before taking a small step away from the Reverend. "Abbey?" she answered distractedly.

"I'm just going to walk home from here, okay, Mom?" Even at a distance I could tell she didn't like that idea. A look was forming on her face.

"I think you should come with us to the Maxwells', Abbey. They went through a lot of trouble to arrange a gathering, and since Kristen was your friend, it's only appropriate that you be there."

“Mom,” I sighed. “I’m really not in the mood to be around a whole bunch of people right now. I just want to be left alone.”

“You should come, Abigail.” The use of my proper name was not a good sign. Not at all. “You can have all the time you need to yourself afterward.”

“But, Mom—”

“It’s being catered, Abigail!” The sudden click of her phone being shut made my mind up for me. My mother *lived* for catered events, and obviously that meant I had to as well.

“Fine, whatever, Mom,” I grumbled to myself as I trudged over to the church steps. I waited impatiently for them to hurry up and finish their conversation with the reverend. They took their time, of course.

After an agonizing ten minutes of small talk, they finally said their good-byes to the reverend and we left the cemetery.

It was a short drive over to the Maxwells’ house, but there were already cars lined up around the block when we got there. Dad dropped Mom and me off at the front door, while he went to go find a parking spot. Mom only took three steps inside the house before she was stopped by someone. I heard her laughter drifting behind me as I kept moving past the hordes of milling people and headed straight for the kitchen.

I found Kristen’s mom in there. She had her back turned, and both arms were buried in a sink full of detergent suds. As I stepped closer, I could see there were only two mugs and a couple of plates in the sink. Hardly enough to worry about washing when you had a house full of guests.

Then I saw her shoulders shaking. I didn’t want to interrupt her grief, so I quietly made my way back out to the hallway.

A beverage table had been set up nearby, and I grabbed a clean mug to pour some hot water into. Dropping in an herbal tea bag, I waited for a minute, and then stirred in a little milk and sugar. The warmth of the mug felt comforting in my grip as I picked it up and sipped slowly, blocking out everything and everyone around me.

But my moment of peace was shattered when someone abruptly bumped into my shoulder, causing me to grasp the cup tightly.

“S-sorry,” the person stuttered.

I turned with a scowl on my face and saw curly brown hair in front of me.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Don’t worry about it, Brad.”

He picked up a mug too, and then struggled with opening a tea bag. “Actually, it’s, uh, Ben. I’m in your class at school.”

Right. “Okay then, see you around.” I was *so* not in the mood for conversation right now. All I wanted was to be alone.

I contemplated going up to Kristen’s room but decided against it. It didn’t really feel right, for some reason, being in her room without her there. So I chose the basement instead. There was a faint, musty odor, which I breathed in as soon as I started walking down the stairs. Upstairs had felt like a stranger’s house with all the extra people around, but down here, it was just like I remembered. I was relieved to step into familiar surroundings once again.

A battered desk lamp sitting on an old coffee table had been left on, and it cast a weak yellow glow, leaving most of the room cloaked in darkness. This room had always felt so safe and warm to me in the past that the dark didn’t bother me at all. I walked over to an old rocking chair sitting partially

in the shadows, and I settled in, balancing my cup of tea. Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes as I slowly rocked back and forth and thought about old memories.

“It looks terrible, Abbey! I’m never coming out again.”

Her voice drifted out to me from the crack at the bottom of the bathroom door. I thought I heard a sniffle, and then came the unmistakable sound of nose blowing.

“Come on, Kristen. Open the door,” I pleaded. “Let me see what it looks like. It can’t be that bad. Just open up.”

“Oh, it’s bad. Very, very bad. I should probably shave my head. Do you know how much wigs cost? Or maybe I could get full extensions put in.”

“You are *not* going to shave your head, Kristen,” I replied loudly. “And do you know how expensive extensions are? If it’s really that terrible, we’ll just dye it another color. That’s an easy fix.”

“What about hats?” she countered. “Would it look weird if I wore a different hat every day?”

Even though she couldn’t see it, I shook my head at her and was just about to use the if-you-won’t-come-out-then-I’m-coming-in tactic when the lock clicked and the door slowly opened inward.

I took three steps inside and tried very hard not to let the shock show on my face. “What did you . . . do?”

“I don’t know!” she wailed, holding up a badly colored piece of hair. “I was just so tired of having a flaming red bush on top of my head! I thought black dye would help tone it down a little. I know it looks terrible.”

She was close to tears again.

“Hey, Kris, it’s not that bad. Let me see it for a minute.” Stepping close, I inspected her still-wet hair. The black dye had covered up all the red in certain spots, but in others it had completely missed.

“Why don’t you dry it, and then we’ll see if it looks any different,” I suggested.

“Okay.” She sighed sadly and grabbed the blow-dryer from a cabinet under the sink.

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” I yelled over the blower noise when she turned it on high. “I would have helped you.”

“I don’t know,” she yelled back. “I guess I wanted it to be a surprise. Let you see it when it was all done, you know? Well, done right, of course.”

“You’re crazy.” I made a circular motion with my hand by my head and grinned. She laughed, and I sat on the edge of the tub while I waited for her to finish. Ten minutes later her hair was completely dry, and looking more streaked than spotted.

I stood up. “Now let’s take a look at this again.”

She grabbed a brush and ran it through her hair, parting it to the side like she always wore it.

“See?” I said, rearranging, fluffing, and then patting down a couple of stray pieces. “If you wear it this way, it looks good. Like you totally meant to do it.”

“Really?” She turned from side to side in front of the mirror. “Do you *really* think it looks okay? You would tell me if it didn’t, right?”

“Of course I’d tell you, Kristen, that’s what friends are for. Honestly,



though, it looks good this way. Almost like you dyed it black and added a couple of red highlights.”

She took another glance at the mirror. “I don’t know, Abbey.” Her eyes were worried.

“It looks good.” I reassured her. *“Really.”*

Then inspiration hit.

“Hey, what if I put red highlights in my hair? We’ll tell everyone that we had our hair done together. What do you think?”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s a great idea. Thanks, Abbey. We can go get the stuff now, and then I’ll do your hair after dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I grabbed a small washcloth from the towel rack next to her and started wiping off stray hair dye splatters on the sink. “Mom and Dad have a meeting at the Horseman’s Haunt tonight anyway, so it’ll be an empty house for me.”

Her smile was a mile wide. “I’ll go tell Mom that you’re staying for dinner.” She started to walk out of the bathroom but stopped short and turned back with a sheepish look on her face. “Would you put the blow-dryer away for me?”

I nodded, and smiled to myself as I heard her yell down to her mom that she wanted lasagna and garlic bread for dinner.

My favorite meal.

Yeah, that’s what friends are for.

It was a soft sound that made my eyes fly open and my head snap forward. I scanned the room, certain that I’d heard footsteps.

I almost missed him.

Even though he was sitting a couple feet away from me, his black suit blended in completely with the shadows. Only his hair gave him away. The white-blond color glowed in the dark room. It was the boy from the cemetery.

I felt him looking at me, and I swear my heart started beating faster. I didn't know what to do, what to say . . . but I had to ask him *something*. I spoke quietly, trying to calm my racing pulse. "Did you know Kristen?"

I waited for his answer. The space of two heartbeats went by . . . and then another. My question hung in the room between us.

There was no reply.

I raised my voice slightly, in case he hadn't heard me. "So, um, how did you know Kristen Maxwell?" I shifted in my chair, and the squeak it made echoed through the room. I took a small sip of tea to distract myself.

"Sorry, did you say something to me?" He spoke so softly that at first I wasn't sure if I had imagined his response.

I was taken aback by the question. Had he really not heard me at all?

"I wanted to know if you knew Kristen." I grew bolder with each word. "I saw you at the funeral today and was just wondering how you knew her."

"You were wondering how I knew Kristen," he repeated, still speaking softly, almost to himself. Then his voice grew louder, and he leaned toward me. "I've seen her . . . around."

But *I'd* never met him before. Was he some type of secret admirer or something? I tried to examine him closer, but he was still hidden by the

shadows. His voice sounded older. Maybe he had been a friend of her brother's?

“Did you know Thomas?”

“Thomas?” He sounded puzzled. “No, I don't know any Thomas.”

“Kristen's brother?” I prompted, waiting for his reply.

“No, I didn't know she had a brother.” His voice was louder now. Like he was getting closer, but I hadn't seen him move at all. That made me slightly nervous. Here I was alone with a stranger who had come to Kristen's house and down to her basement, yet he didn't really seem to know her, or her family. It was all very strange.

I covered up my nervousness with a small laugh. “Oh, okay. Well, I'm going to go upstairs to see if they need any help cleaning up.” I abandoned my tea at the foot of the rocking chair and stood up, heading for the stairs. I made it up four steps before I realized that the stranger had followed me. I turned.

He stood at the bottom of the staircase, obscured in darkness. “You don't have to be afraid of me, Abbey. I'm actually here because of you.”

“How do you know my name?” I gripped at the stair railing. My question came out in a squeak. “Who are you? What do you mean you're here because of me?”

“Don't worry, Abbey. I'm a friend.” He leaned forward, placing himself in a pocket of light so that I could see him clearly.

Shock hit me first. Followed by a feeling of . . . something else. He was *gorgeous*. A total hottie.

I almost laughed at myself for thinking that at a time like this.

His hair was the first thing I noticed, up close this time. The pale color was unusual but it had a sharp streak of jet black that angled across his forehead. His eyebrows were dark too, and he had a very straight nose and full lips. But his eyes were what really struck me. They were such a clear, shocking green that I felt a shiver dance along my spine as he gazed at me. His eyes were stunning. And they looked kind.

“You’re Kristen’s best friend, right?” His voice held a soothing, calm quality now, and he looked up at me with such interest that I felt some of my nervousness vanish. “Tell me about her.”

I looked away for a moment, flattered that he was paying me any attention, and then angry at myself that I even cared. My eyes fell on the corner of the room where Kristen and I had spent so much time together, and I started talking about it to distract myself from my turbulent emotions.

“Do you see that corner over there, by the bookcase?” I leaned over the railing to point, and he nodded. “When we were little, Kristen and I used to come down here on rainy days. Her mom would take a couple of sheets and string them up around the bookcase to make a tent. Then we’d grab some books and a flashlight and go sit inside, and read stories to each other. Her mom always brought us cucumber and peanut butter sandwiches with all the crusts cut off while we were in there.”

I laughed at the memory. “We went through a real cucumber and peanut butter phase. I have no idea why.”

Then I found myself confessing even more. “It was almost like Kristen had this secret place in her basement that we could go to whenever it rained. I used to call it my magic rain castle, and I thought it was the coolest thing

ever.” My cheeks reddened from the story and how much I had revealed. “I don’t know why I told you that. It’s pretty silly, huh?”

He had an amused look on his face. “I don’t think it’s silly. Every kid should have a place like that to play in. I wish I would have had one of those. It sounds like fun.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling back at him. “That was a good memory. . . . I needed that.” The silence in the stairwell grew, and I became aware of how loud and fast my breathing sounded. I concentrated on regulating it, trying to breathe more normally.

He spoke quietly, and I had to lean forward to catch his words. “If you ever decide to build your magic rain castle again, Abbey, let me know. I’ll have to stop by for a visit.”

My breath caught on those words, and my heart skipped a beat at the implication behind them. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything at all. My mind raced frantically, thinking about all the questions I had for him.

The jarring ring of my cell phone interrupted us. I glanced down at the screen and grimaced when I saw who it was. “Sorry, but I have to go take this. It’s my mom.”

I walked up to the top of the stairs and answered the phone. “Uh, hi, what do you want—I mean, what’s up, Mom?” I glanced over my shoulder. I could still see his bright green eyes. He was staring intently at me, so my response to my mother was a bit distracted. “Yeah, um . . . okay.”

Her voice echoed loudly through the phone, and I looked away. “I’m almost ready too. I was down in the basement. . . . Yes, I know. Of course I’ll tell the Maxwells good-bye. I’ll see you in five minutes.”

I looked back over my shoulder and mouthed the word “Sorry” as I stepped out the basement door. He nodded and disappeared into the shadows below while I headed to the kitchen to find Kristen’s mom.

She was still there, now drying dishes, and I hesitantly crept closer. She appeared calmer, and glanced over her shoulder when she heard me coming. “Abbey, hi.” Her voice was soft, and her eyes were slightly reddened, but her smile was encouraging.

Reaching out for a hug, I remembered belatedly that I had left my cup downstairs in the basement. She didn’t say anything while she hugged me back, but I didn’t need to hear the words. I knew what she was feeling.

“Do you want me to stay and help you clean up?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, don’t worry about it, honey. I’ll take care of everything. It’ll give me something to do.” Her voice broke slightly on the last sentence, but I pretended not to notice.

“You’ll call us if you need anything, right? Anything at all.”

“Sure, sweetie.” She tried to give me a brave smile, but it didn’t work. “Tell your parents good-bye for me.”

“Okay,” I replied. “I will. Take care of yourself.” She nodded, and I squeezed her hand once before I left the kitchen.

Mom was waiting for me out in the hallway.

“I’ll be right back, and then I’m ready to go,” I told her. At a nod of agreement, I turned around and headed back toward the basement. I had one more good-bye to say.

But when I got down there, he was gone.

“Hello?” I called out, walking over to the rocking chair to pick up my

cup. I felt stupid for not asking him what his name was. I flipped on a nearby switch, and the room was instantly flooded with eight bulbs of sixty-watt fluorescent lighting.

It only confirmed what I already knew. He wasn't there. I wasn't going to get the chance to say good-bye, or find out his name. I didn't even know if I'd ever see him again.

Flipping the light switch one more time on my way back out, I paused for a moment in the dark. "Thank you," I whispered over my shoulder to the empty room.