Gone Before Dawn

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Introduction

Rowan Bay looks smaller from the highway. The ocean announces itself first—salt in the air, a smear of pewter on the horizon—then the town comes into view: weathered boardwalk ribbing the shoreline, shingles grayed by wind, summer bunting left to fade over closed winter shops. The sign still says Welcome to Rowan Bay, Population 7,104, but it might as well read Keep Driving. I roll the window down and the smell hits me—brine, creosote, cranberries rotting sweetly where the bog meets the road. I used to call that scent home. Today it smells like a memory I don’t trust.

The bog sits inland from the boardwalk, a flat burnished scar when the vines are cut back. It’s a man-made marsh, squared by dykes and old wooden sluice gates, a red sea in autumn and a brown map in winter. This morning it’s carved into by backhoes. Orange vests move like insects on the berm. A municipal banner flaps from a fence: BOARDWALK RESTORATION PROJECT—PHASE II. Inside the fence, a circle of people stands with the reverence of a graveside service. There is no priest. There is the Sheriff. There are a few of my classmates’ mothers, now with gray hair and hard mouths. There are the cameras, waiting.

I park in the takeout lane by Sal’s Bait and ignore the posted signs. If someone wants to tow me, they’ll have to find a driver bold enough to do it in front of this. The cold bites the skin along my jaw where I’ve forgotten to zip my coat, and my breath ghosts as I walk. Gravel gives under my boots. The fence opening is a makeshift gap in the mesh, just big enough for authority and grief to pass through.

“Monroe,” Sheriff Tom Rourke says when he spots me. He doesn’t move to block the gap, but his shoulders square like I’m a gust he means to lean into. The last time I saw him, I was eighteen and shaking on a folding chair in his office. He’s broader now. Hair thinner. Eyes the same—calculating, practical, tired. “Didn’t expect you so soon.”

“You put a shovel near that ground, Sheriff, word travels,” I say. My voice is steady, the way years of interviews have trained it to be. Inside I’m vibrating, like a bridge in a storm.

He follows my gaze to the open trench. There’s a canopy, a white pop-up like the kind you rent for a wedding or a farmers’ market. Under it, a young man kneels beside a swaddled shape. The shape is small. Not a whole person. A limb? A half moon of a skull? It’s difficult to tell, because the forensic tech—gloves, mask, clinical patience—moves with his body between the cameras and what matters. He looks up once, and in the split second our eyes meet I see that he’s new here. Not to death—there’s a calm in him that doesn’t come from ignorance—but to the politics of

Rowan Bay. Later I'll learn his name: Jonah Price. Right now I file his face in the part of my brain that keeps allies and witnesses and people foolish enough to believe truth is simple.

The ocean breathes behind us. The wind lifts the corner of a tarp and slaps it back down. A woman pushes past the Sheriff and almost drops to her knees before the trench. Her voice is a sound I know even before I can see her face, because grief tunes a person and the pitch of Anna Hale's mother lives in my chest. "Is it her?" she asks. "Is it my Anna?" No one answers. Jonah doesn't look up again. He is performing a sacred job and the rest of us are a violation.

Eighteen years ago, my best friend vanished from this town like a coin slipped between floorboards. We were girls tilting toward women and everything glowed with potential and threat. We knew the smell of the bog and the secrets it could hold. We knew the boys who worked nights at the cannery, the men who watched from the corners of their eyes, the sound of our names when authority needed to make us small. When Anna didn't come home, the search lights swept the water until dawn, and then the rumor mill took over. By the time I left for college, the official word was a shrug. Runaway. Not our fault. The case file gathered dust behind a locked door.

I built a life on stories like that, and on the stubborn belief that dust is just what truth wears to survive. My podcast is called Undertow. It started in my studio apartment with a borrowed mic and a portable sound booth I made from moving blankets clipped to a shower rod. I told stories about the missing, the unsolved, the almost-forgotten. In the first year, fifteen thousand people listened. In the second, there were sponsors and a chart ranking I pretended didn't matter. In the third, a case I covered led to a tip that led to an arrest, and suddenly Undertow was evidence that a woman with a recorder and a refusal to let go can move a mountain one pebble at a time.

None of it matters if I can't do right by Anna.

"Claire?" The voice is gentler than I expect. Mrs. Hale's hand finds my sleeve and squeezes. Her fingers are cold. There's a tremor in them that rattles guilt out of whatever box I've kept it in. "You came."

"I should have come a long time ago," I say. The wind steals the end of the sentence, which is for the best. The end of the sentence is and I should have stayed that night.

The Sheriff clears his throat. "We've got procedures," he says. "You know that. Chain of custody. State lab. I won't have this turned into a circus."

I nod as if I agree, as if I haven't already felt the weight of my recorder in my pocket like a promise. "I'm not here to make a circus," I say. "I'm here because this began with us." I don't say because it might end me. I don't say because I can't stop

dreaming about a lantern’s glow by the waterline and the way Anna’s laugh clipped off like someone turned down a radio mid-song. Memory is a liar. It’s also all I have.

He studies me for a beat. His jaw works. “Stay behind the line,” he says finally. “And no publishing anything that compromises the investigation.”

It’s not permission. It’s a boundary drawn with a boot in soft dirt. The line wobbles. The wind will take it. Still, I step back. The white tent becomes a world I can’t enter, so I look outward: to the town that sits watching, to the boardwalk that creaks when no one walks on it, to the arcades that smell like stale popcorn and sunscreen even in January. Rowan Bay is beautiful if you love it. It’s claustrophobic if you ask for something it doesn’t want to give. The same faces at the diner year after year. The same last names on office doors. Reputation heavy as a wet coat. Silence passed down like family silver.

I pull out my phone. I scroll to a folder labeled RB—old photos, scans of yearbook pages, a news clipping with a headline that managed to say missing without saying lost. In one photo, two girls squint at the camera in sunlight. One of them has hair like a field in a storm and a smile that dares trouble to come closer. That’s Anna. The other is me, soft around the edges in a way I’m not anymore. We are on the boardwalk in that picture, paper cups sweating lemonade, the fortune-teller’s booth behind us with its painted eye forever open. It feels obscene to look at it here. I look anyway.

There is a rhythm to investigation that I have learned to trust. Step one: what happened. Step two: who was there. Step three: what should have happened but didn’t. That last one is where the truth hides, in the negative space, in the procedures skipped, the tapes recorded over, the logs that go missing. Rowan Bay has a way of misplacing what it doesn’t want to carry. If you pay attention, you can hear the gaps.

“Ms. Monroe?” The young man from under the tent has stepped out, stripping gloves with a careful snap. Up close, Jonah looks younger, then older again—a boy’s skin, a professional’s posture, eyes that belong to someone who sorts the worst day of people’s lives into labeled bags. “I’m Jonah Price. We haven’t met.”

“We have now,” I say. “I’m sorry for the circumstances.”

“Me too,” he says. He glances at the cameras, at the cluster of town power—the councilman with the polished smile, the business owner with a handshake that hurts, the church deacon already organizing casseroles. “Just so you know, the state will be here within the hour. We’ll do this right.”

The way he says right makes me think of all the times this town did something else.

I don’t ask him anything more. Not here, not now. I have learned to let silences do a

little work for me. I have learned that grief and authority both resent the question they aren’t ready to answer. Instead I step back again, and I listen. Mrs. Hale murmurs into a tissue. The councilman says the phrase our thoughts and prayers with a voice warmed for benefit dinners. The Sheriff directs the kind of ballet he knows by muscle memory: tape, markers, a log sheet pressed to a clipboard that will be initialed and checked and, if I’m not careful, filed away and forgotten when someone decides forgetting is safer.

The sun climbs a little higher and the cold doesn’t soften. The bog holds its breath. Somewhere a gull drops a shell on asphalt and the crack is loud enough to make a woman flinch. I picture what lies under the tarp and the years between then and now collapse into a single, thin line. She was here. She is here. The sentence is both knife and balm.

I should say I made this decision before I got in the car, before the highway unspooled behind me and the old radio stations came back into range. That would be the cleaner version. The truth is I decide now, with the wind stinging my eyes and Mrs. Hale’s fingers still shaking around a damp square of paper. I decide because I am tired of the story where power gets to define what is acceptable grief and what is a problem. I decide because I am done letting my worst night be an unsolved note at the end of a song.

I take the recorder out of my pocket. It’s small, black, ordinary. My thumb slides over the button and I think about the first time I hit record—how each red light felt like a promise to someone I couldn’t see. Undertow isn’t a courtroom. It’s not a badge. It’s a voice in someone’s kitchen at midnight, on someone’s commute, in someone’s earbuds as they run past a field and think about their own town, their own secrets. It’s a place where the story gets told end to end without the parts that make powerful people comfortable.

“Claire,” the Sheriff warns, as if I am about to set a fire.

“Just ambient,” I say. “Just room tone.” It’s a lie by omission. I won’t release a second of this until I can do it without exploiting a woman’s sorrow. But I will tell the story. I owe Anna that. I owe myself that.

I turn away from the trench and face the town. The boardwalk runs like a sentence underlined in gray. Beyond it the ocean is a vast, indifferent listener. I lift the recorder, and in a voice pitched lower than my usual, steady as a heartbeat, I speak into the wind. “This is Undertow,” I say. “I’m Claire Monroe, and this is the story I never wanted to tell. Rowan Bay, Massachusetts. A cranberry bog. A girl gone before dawn. Eighteen years of silence. Today, the ground gives her back.”

A simple beginning. The only kind that makes sense. My breath fogs the air and

disappears. The red light glows. Somewhere in town, someone hears that I’m here and locks a drawer. Somewhere else, someone opens a box they swore they threw away. A gull cries. The tide turns. And in the thin space between what the town pretends to be and what it is, I step forward.

CHAPTER ONE: Return to Rowan Bay

The rental car’s GPS had a faint, irritating pulse, a green dot that blinked like it was counting my heartbeats. Rowan Bay was ten miles away and already the road narrowed, shrank, pressed the trees in close. I rolled down the window and let the air in, salt and swamp and something richer underneath, like the memory of a candle blown out. The radio found a station still playing the same soft rock from twenty years ago. It felt like walking into your childhood bedroom and finding everything exactly as you left it, right down to the dust.

I had left the city at four in the morning with a cooler, two full batteries for the recorder, and a list of names written on the back of a grocery receipt. Some people drive to forget. I had driven to remember. Undertow had given me a career, a small apartment that smelled like coffee and old books, and an audience that believed the truth mattered more than comfort. I had told myself that was why I was here. The town sign ahead cracked that lie with two words: Welcome Home.

Ezra Hale’s truck was already parked by the municipal lot, tailgate down and a thermos balanced on the bumper. He stood near the fence like a sentinel, broad and silent, his face carved out of the same wood as the pilings that held up the boardwalk. He didn’t wave. He only lifted his chin, a gesture that might have meant I’m here, or it might have meant you came too late. We had that between us, the time before and the time after, and a friendship that had been scraped down to raw nerve.

I turned toward the bog. The restoration had gouged a trench along the eastern edge where the dyke had slumped last winter, a wound in the earth that was raw and wet under a thin winter sun. There was yellow tape, the kind that always looks more official than it is, and there were two sheriff’s cruisers angled like a greeting that wanted to be a warning. A group of men and women in municipal vests clustered near the opening, a few holding clipboards and the kind of coffee cups that say we tried.

They weren’t the only ones. The space between the road and the bog had turned into a small amphitheater for a play no one wanted to be in. Neighbors stood in their driveways and watched through binoculars. Someone had brought a thermos and paper cups like this was an afternoon at a high school football game. A kid I didn’t recognize, maybe twenty, wore a beanie that said STATE, and his eyes were bright with the kind of purpose that only shows up when you’re new to the job.

A woman I knew instantly as Anna’s mother, even after eighteen years, stood near the tape with her hand pressed to her mouth. Her hair had gone the color of the salted sea and her shoulders curved forward as if she carried something heavy under her coat. I

looked away before she could catch me staring. There was no version of this where me being here didn’t hurt her. There was also no version where I turned the car around.

The sheriff stepped out from behind a cruiser and met me at the gap in the tape. He was wider than he had been when I was nineteen, but it was a solid width, the kind that comes from sitting through too many meetings and eating too many casseroles. He looked at the rental plates, then at my face, and let the silence stretch. He was good at silence. He had used it effectively once, in an office that smelled of lemon cleaner and disappointment.

“Claire Monroe,” he said. Not a question. He glanced back toward the trench. “You drove fast.”

“I drove straight,” I said. “Is it her?”

“We’re waiting on the state,” he said, which wasn’t an answer. He took in my bag and the recorder shape in my coat pocket. “Don’t make this harder than it needs to be. I won’t have the evidence contaminated or the family harassed. There are procedures.”

“I’ve never broken chain of custody, Sheriff.” I kept my hands where he could see them. “I’m not here to step on your scene. I’m here because I promised her a story once, and I never finished it.”

He snorted, a small, tired sound. “You always were stubborn. You and that mouth.” But he didn’t move to block me. He was practical, Tom Rourke, and he knew as well as I did that the story would be told anyway. It was just a matter of who held the microphone.

A young man in a white Tyvek suit ducked out from under the pop-up tent and peeled off his mask. He had the kind of clean jawline that made him look even younger than he was, and his eyes took everything in without seeming to linger on anything. He lifted a hand in an awkward wave, then moved to the tape line, careful not to cross it. He carried a small evidence cooler and wore booties over his shoes, and I guessed him for the coroner or a tech with the medical examiner’s office.

“You’re her, right?” he asked. “The Undertow podcast?”

“That’s me,” I said. “Claire.”

“Jonah,” he said. He glanced at the sheriff, then back at me. “We just got confirmation. It’s human remains. Fragmentary. But it’s her. Dental matches the old file. We’ll need to verify with the lab, but I think you can tell Mrs. Hale it’s Anna.”

The words landed like stones in deep water. The sheriff closed his eyes briefly, as if he

could hold back the ripple. Anna’s mother had begun to make a low sound, a keening that traveled on the wind. Ezra took a step toward her and stopped, unsure if he had any right to comfort. Jonah looked like he wanted to hand me the responsibility of telling her, then thought better of it. He had enough ghosts to carry already.

I walked to Anna’s mother and stopped a respectful distance away. She turned to me, and her face did that thing where it is both utterly changed and exactly the same. She recognized me. Of course she did. I had slept over enough times to know the layout of her house, the squeak in the third step, the way her coffee tasted like cinnamon.

“Mrs. Hale,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

She reached for my hand and held it. Her fingers were cold and she squeezed as if trying to anchor something. “You came,” she whispered. “Claire, you came.”

“I should have come sooner,” I said. It came out raw. The wind took the rest of what I said, which was that I should have never left, should have stayed and searched until I found something better than rumors, should have answered the phone more often in the years after when she called and didn’t know what to say.

Behind us, a town council SUV pulled up and Martin Grady stepped out in polished boots, a coat that cost more than my car, and an expression that belonged in front of a camera. He didn’t approach the trench. He went straight to the knot of municipal staff, back pats and low murmurs. He ran his thumb along his jaw in a thoughtful gesture that looked rehearsed. When he saw me, he lifted his eyebrows and offered a tight, professional smile that didn’t reach his eyes. I filed him away on the list of names I had written on the back of the grocery receipt.

“Claire,” the sheriff said again, his voice lower. “If you’re going to do what I think you’re going to do, do it without starting a war. I’ve got a town to keep civil.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I said. He frowned, and I added, “I’m not here to pick fights. I’m here to tell the truth. If that’s a fight, it’s not mine that starts it.”

He grunted, unconvinced, and turned back to his deputies. I pulled my phone out and found the folder with the old scans. The photo of me and Anna on the boardwalk, hair wild from the wind, paper cups dripping onto the boards. It was summer, the arcade lights were on, the fortune-teller’s booth behind us looked like a carnival joke. We were sixteen. We thought we were invincible.

That word—invincible—was a lie, but I had believed it then. I believed it until the morning the search lights went dark and the town breathed out and pretended everything was normal again. When I left for college, I told myself I was chasing a career. The truth was I was running from the silence. It had followed me anyway,

through late nights editing audio, through the episodes that won awards, through the dreams where I heard Anna call my name from the bog and woke up with my heart beating in my throat.

Now the silence was broken by the scrape of shovels against earth and the quiet hum of a camera lens. There were two local news vans down the road, noses pressed to the tape like dogs at a fence. One of them had a satellite dish strapped to its roof that looked like a giant mushroom. I had no doubt my phone would start buzzing the moment I put this on social media. Undertow had fifty thousand subscribers. In a town of seven thousand, that meant every phone would light up by noon.

I turned to Jonah. “What do you have so far?”

He hesitated. “Officially? Not enough. Unofficially? There’s fabric caught on a root that matches the description of her jacket from the night she vanished. And we found a button. Metal. Could be from a shirt. I sent it to the state lab. It will be a week, maybe more.”

“Do you think it was kept here? In the bog?”

He looked at the trench. “It’s hard to say. There’s erosion. The dyke broke in ‘13. Water moved things. But she was here. That’s what matters.”

I nodded. I could feel the shape of the story already, the way facts wedge into spaces between memories and reshape them. If the original investigation had been a line drawn in chalk, I would now dig with a shovel. There were names to speak, records to request, silences to break. People would be angry. Some would call me a vulture. Some would thank me in whispers. The sheriff would try to keep the peace. Peace, I had learned, often came at the expense of truth.

I walked back to my car and retrieved the portable recorder from the glove box. It was small, black, and an ugly kind of reliable. In the front seat, I clipped a lavalier mic to my collar and pressed record, just to test levels. The red light glowed. My breath came through the headphones, loud and steady. It felt like a promise to a person I couldn’t see.

Anna’s mother was staring at the trench with a terrible focus, as if she could will the earth to give back more than bone. Ezra stood beside her, awkward and straight, his hands clenched into fists and then deliberately relaxed. I wondered what he had done with the years since she disappeared. Had he searched in his own way? Had he let it change him into a man who never smiled? I would ask him. I would ask everyone.

“Claire,” the sheriff called from the other side of the cruiser. “Don’t make me regret letting you stand here.”

I raised a hand without looking at him. Across the bog, Martin Grady laughed at something a deputy said and clapped him on the shoulder. His teeth were very white in the flat light. He caught me watching and the smile dropped for a second before he put it back on. It was the kind of mistake you only notice if you’re looking for it. I was.

I turned on the recorder fully and spoke into it, low, for the file that would become episode one. “Undertow. Rowan Bay. The bog gives up a body. We start again.” I paused, then added, “Anna, I’m here.”

The wind shifted and brought the smell of wet dirt and machine oil from somewhere down the road. Someone’s dog barked twice and stopped. A gull skated the air above us and let out a single, complaining note. The day moved on around us, indifferent and ordinary. I stood there and held the recorder and felt the old promise settle into my bones. This time, I would not look away.

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