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# The House of Broken Alibis

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## Introduction

Memory returns in smells before it chooses words. For Claire Monroe, it is always the salt first—the sour-sweet bite of low tide that crawls under the tongue and settles at the back of the throat. A foghorn bleats somewhere far off and the sound arrives blunted, like a hand cupped around a confession. Even from the highway, windows cracked, she can taste Raven’s Harbor. The town sits on its own shelf of shale and rumor, a place where gulls circle the cannery roofs and potholed lanes braid around clapboard houses with peeling paint the color of old sea glass. You can leave, she’d told herself, but the harbor has a way of getting into your lungs.

Years ago, Claire drove a car into a guardrail and woke in a white room with stitches like black ants climbing her hairline. The months before the crash had been scissored clean out of her life—edges ragged, centers missing. Doctors told her what trauma does to a mind already exhausted by grief and fear; friends told her what they remembered about her in those weeks. None of it felt like possession. When she tried to push past the blankness, the effort raised a heat behind her eyes, a pressure like a storm rolling in. She learned to live around the hollow, to varnish her explanations into something that sounded like acceptance.

She became a voice the country trusted to ask questions it didn’t want to answer. The microphone liked her; it didn’t care about the missing months. She built a podcast out of other people’s shattered timelines, out of chain-of-custody spreadsheets and the weary bravery of mothers who saved every voicemail. She learned the ethics of it, the edge between listening and taking. When episodes were good, she could feel a case pivot—a fact that had been sleeping turned over and opened its eyes. On the worst days she wondered if the work was an elaborate way to convince herself that stories resolve when you press hard enough.

Raven’s Harbor carried a story that never tilted toward resolution. Emma Clarke disappeared one bright summer, sun cutting the water into splinters, and the town folded itself around the loss like a fist. There were vigils on the church steps and tin-foil casseroles lined on the long tables in the parish hall. Statements were given, alibis repeated, times memorized and then polished to a dull glow that held up under questioning. Emma remained seventeen forever in the photographs on the convenience store corkboard, smile caught mid-breath. The investigation slowed. People said they remembered things that did not quite fit. People said they did not remember anything at all.

The call that drew Claire back did not come from a publicist or a listener with a tip. It came in the flattening midnight tone of a man who knew her as a girl: Jonah Hale, now

a detective, voice sanded down by years of saying less than he meant. There's been a discovery, he said. He did not use the word body, and somehow that was worse. It connects, he added after a beat, and Claire felt the air thicken in her apartment as if the harbor fog had rolled through the window and taken the furniture in its damp hands. She could hear the far-off scrape of a gull's cry in the silence between them, though that was impossible. Memory, again, doing what it wanted.

In Raven's Harbor, privacy is a thin curtain and respectability is a lock people pick with smiles. Mayor Ellen Powers keeps speeches folded like clean linens, and Lyle Mercer signs checks in a room framed by photographs of ribbon cuttings and handshakes. The church steeple cuts the mist and rings noon too loudly for a place this small. There are town gatherings where the punch is sweet and everyone's eyes are busy. Claire remembers those rooms from before and after, though the line between the two feels treacherous. She remembers standing under a string of white lights and feeling watched in a way that did not make her skin crawl until the next morning, when there was a bruise she couldn't source.

Her father, Mae Monroe, lives in the house with the cedar shingles and the whale weathervane that spins even when the air is still. He has begun to wear his sweaters in summer and to move through rooms as if each doorway exacts a toll. In their last conversation, he called her by a nickname no one else uses and told her not to come home hungry. Then he said nothing for a long time, and Claire recognized in the silence the shape of a secret, the way you can tell where a rock sits just beneath the surface by how the current curls. She does not know whether he is protecting her or himself. She has come to suspect the answer is yes.

Driving toward the causeway now—or rather, deciding to—Claire feels the twin pulls she has always felt here: the desire to believe, and the itch to pry. The season's first fog hangs low across the marsh, making the eelgrass look like a field of drowned hair. Somewhere a buoy bell works its one-note song, patient and insistent. If she comes back, she will be looked at the way the town looks at storms: with readiness and resentment. The show will follow her, a network of equipment and deadlines, but the work of this story will be done with her own skin in the game.

There are fragments that surface when she is not braced for them: the oil-and-metal smell of the pier under her palms, a strand of someone's hair caught on her coat sleeve, a blue door she cannot place. Sometimes a song on the radio lifts the back of a curtain and she glimpses herself moving through a room with purpose she cannot name. The images arrive with the obscenity of a stranger reading her diary aloud in a public place—too intimate, too incomplete. She has learned not to chase them. She writes them down, anyway, in a notebook where she might later decide they are evidence, or mercy, or both.

The old case, the fresh discovery, the missing months: the lines tangle in front of her

like fishing wire glinting in sunlight, beautiful and dangerous. She knows what the town will ask of her if she comes, what it always asks of its prodigals: polish your alibi, protect our reflection. She also knows what her work asks: tell the truth even when it makes you an exile in your own life. She cannot say which she will choose when the time comes. She only knows she is tired of standing at the waterline, pretending not to be ankle-deep already.

Claire turns the microphone on in her empty kitchen and listens to the room breathe. "Raven's Harbor," she says, and the word leaves her mouth with a small tremor, as if it prefers not to be summoned. Outside, a siren threads the city night, indifferent. She imagines, instead, the slow red lights along the causeway blinking through the fog, a ghost's pulse. There is a house she has not entered yet, a place where stories are stored and broken and made to shine. If she is careful, if she is brave, she might find her way to its door and decide, finally, what to carry out and what to leave burning behind her.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The causeway always felt like entering a different country. The salt-crusted guardrails hummed under the tires, a low, metallic moan, and the world outside the windshield flattened into a canvas of shifting grays and blues. To her right, the open ocean, an endless heave of slate-colored waves under a bruised sky. To her left, the brackish expanse of the marsh, where spindly eelgrass shivered in the perpetual breeze, giving the landscape a strangely animated, almost haunted quality. Claire gripped the steering wheel tighter, her knuckles white. She'd made this drive countless times, yet each return brought with it a fresh wave of apprehension, a sense of having crossed an invisible boundary.

Raven's Harbor wasn't just a place; it was a state of mind, a collective memory etched onto every peeling paint chip and every weather-beaten shingle. Even before the town sign, a hand-painted affair depicting a stylized raven perched on a lighthouse, she could smell it. That distinct aroma of low tide and pine needles, woodsmoke and diesel from the fishing boats, a scent that was both comforting and unsettling. It was the smell of home, but also the smell of secrets carefully preserved, like specimens in brine.

She reached for the volume knob, twisting down the low murmur of her own podcast, an interview about a cold case in rural Oregon that suddenly felt impossibly distant, almost innocent. Here, the air itself seemed to hum with unspoken narratives. The radio picked up a local station, a tinny jumble of classic rock and advertisements for the fish market and the annual Lobster Bake. Claire usually found the local color amusing, but today, it felt like static, interfering with the quiet hum of her own anxiety.

The first cluster of houses appeared, stoic Victorians with widow's walks gazing out at the restless sea, their ornate details softened by decades of salt spray. Then came the main drag: Front Street, a modest collection of storefronts, a diner, a general store, and the imposing brick facade of the First Congregational Church, its steeple a needle against the sky. Nothing much had changed, not really. The same faded awnings, the same meticulously maintained window boxes brimming with petunias, the same sense of a town holding its breath, waiting.

She pulled her rental car into the familiar gravel driveway of her father's house, the crunch of the stones loud in the sudden silence. The cedar shingles, once vibrant, had mellowed to a deep silver, and the whale weathervane on the roof still spun erratically in the faint breeze, a testament to its stubborn longevity. A single light burned in the living room, a warm, inviting glow that seemed to beckon her in, even as a faint

tremor of dread ran through her.

As she turned off the ignition, her phone vibrated on the passenger seat. Jonah. His timing was impeccable, as always. She picked it up, a knot tightening in her stomach. "I just pulled up," she said, her voice a little more breathless than she'd intended.

"Thought so," Jonah's voice came through, gruff but with an underlying warmth that always surprised her. He had a way of cutting through the polite pretense, a remnant of their shared childhood, perhaps. "You always did hit town around sunset. Gives the fog a chance to roll in and make everything dramatic, right?"

Claire managed a weak chuckle. "Trying to set the mood for my big comeback, detective?"

"Something like that," he replied, and she could almost hear the faint smile in his voice. "Look, I'm at the station. Can you swing by? I want to brief you properly before the town gets wind you're here."

The last part hung in the air, heavy with implication. "They already know, don't they?" Claire said, staring out at the darkening street. In small towns like Raven's Harbor, news travelled faster than a seagull on a fresh catch.

"Probably," Jonah conceded. "But this gives us a head start. And..." He paused, a beat of hesitation. "It's been a while, Claire. Good to see you, even if it's under these circumstances."

"You too, Jonah," she said, and meant it. Despite the years, despite the distance, Jonah Hale remained a constant, a fixed point in the shifting landscape of her past. She'd always trusted him, even when she hadn't fully trusted herself. "Give me fifteen. I just need to drop off my bags and say a quick hello to Dad."

"Don't keep him too long," Jonah warned. "He's probably already glued to the window, waiting for you."

He was right, of course. Mae Monroe lived a life of quiet anticipation these days, his world shrinking to the boundaries of his sturdy, familiar home. As Claire got out of the car, the cool, damp air wrapped around her, carrying with it the familiar tang of salt and decay. She pulled her cardigan tighter, a shiver running down her spine that had nothing to do with the temperature.

The front door opened before she even reached the porch, and her father stood silhouetted in the rectangle of light, a frail figure in an oversized cardigan. His silver hair, once thick and unruly, was thinner now, flattened against his scalp. But his eyes, even from this distance, still held that familiar, piercing intelligence.

“Claire,” he said, his voice raspy, a whisper of a greeting. He held out his arms, and she stepped into his embrace, feeling the familiar fragility of his frame. He smelled of old books and something vaguely medicinal, a scent that spoke of age and a life lived.

“Hi, Dad,” she murmured, burying her face in his shoulder. For a moment, she was just a girl again, back home, seeking refuge.

He pulled back, holding her at arm’s length, his gaze searching her face. “You’re thinner,” he observed, a standard parental pronouncement. “Working too hard.”

“You know me,” she said, trying to inject some lightness into her tone. “Always chasing the next big story.”

He didn’t smile. Instead, his eyes held a flicker of something she couldn’t quite decipher—worry? Resignation? “This story,” he said, his voice dropping. “This one’s different.”

Claire felt a familiar prickle of unease. Her father, for all his quiet demeanor, had an uncanny ability to cut straight to the core of things. “Because it’s here?”

He nodded slowly. “Because it’s *ours*.” He led her inside, the house a comforting labyrinth of familiar objects and forgotten memories. The grandfather clock in the hall ticked with a slow, deliberate rhythm, marking time in a way that felt both eternal and fleeting. She dropped her small suitcase by the staircase, her gaze sweeping over the familiar framed photographs on the mantelpiece, snapshots of a family she barely recognized in her fractured memory.

“I need to go see Jonah,” she told him, trying to keep her tone casual. “He wants to brief me on the new development.”

Mae’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “Of course,” he said. “He always was a stickler for procedure.” He paused, then added, “Be careful, Claire. This town... it remembers everything. And it forgets nothing.”

The words hung in the air, a cryptic warning that resonated with the unsettled feeling in her gut. She kissed his cheek, promising to be back soon, and stepped back out into the encroaching dusk. The short drive to the police station felt longer than it was, each turn bringing her deeper into the heart of the town, deeper into the tangled web of its past.

The Raven’s Harbor Police Department was housed in a squat, utilitarian building next to the town hall, a stark contrast to the charming historical architecture of the surrounding area. The sign above the door, a chipped wooden rectangle, declared its

purpose with a worn authority. Inside, the fluorescent lights hummed with an almost aggressive brightness, illuminating scuffed linoleum floors and bulletin boards cluttered with faded notices.

Jonah was waiting for her in his office, a small, cramped space dominated by a messy desk piled high with folders and half-empty coffee mugs. He rose as she entered, a tall, solid figure with the kind of broad shoulders that spoke of years spent hauling fishing nets or, more recently, navigating the complexities of small-town crime. His hair, once a sandy blond, was now streaked with gray at the temples, and there were faint lines etched around his intelligent blue eyes.

"Claire," he said, extending a hand. His grip was firm, reassuring. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Wouldn't miss it," she replied, settling into the visitor's chair opposite his desk. The room smelled faintly of old coffee and a faint, metallic tang she couldn't quite place. "So, what's the official word? What did they find?"

Jonah leaned back in his chair, his expression serious. "A fisherman trawling a few miles offshore brought up a weighted duffel bag. Inside... well, inside was a pair of sneakers. A specific brand, a specific size. And a necklace. One Emma Clarke was wearing the night she disappeared."

Claire felt a cold dread seep into her bones. A duffel bag, weighted. Not just a random discovery, but a deliberate act. "Weighted?"

He nodded. "Professional job, by the looks of it. Someone wanted those items to stay at the bottom of the ocean."

"But why bring them up now?" she mused aloud, her podcaster's brain already sifting through the details. "After all these years, why would they suddenly surface?"

"Could be a number of things," Jonah said, rubbing a hand across his jaw. "Changes in currents, or maybe the weights weren't as permanent as whoever tied them thought. The important thing is, it's enough to reopen the case. Formally, this time. The state police are involved. And, of course, the media."

He gestured vaguely, as if to encompass the entire, hungry world beyond Raven's Harbor. Claire knew what that meant. Her return, her podcast, would only amplify the noise.

"And what about the other discovery?" Claire pressed, remembering Jonah's cryptic call. "You mentioned something else on the phone. Something that connects."

Jonah hesitated, his gaze fixed on a spot just over her shoulder. "There was a second discovery. Local hiker, up by the old lighthouse trail. Found... a bone fragment. Human, preliminary analysis suggests. And it was near a patch of marshland where Emma used to walk."

A bone fragment. The words landed like stones in her stomach. "Is it Emma?"

"Too early to say definitively," Jonah admitted. "But the proximity, the timing... it's enough to make us wonder. Enough to put the town on edge."

Claire leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "So, two separate incidents. One out at sea, one on land. Both pointing to Emma. It almost feels... deliberate. Like someone wants the truth to come out, after all this time."

Jonah met her gaze, his blue eyes unreadable. "Or someone's just sloppy. Or maybe, Claire, maybe it's just the universe finally deciding to turn over some rocks." He paused, then his voice softened. "Look, I know this is a lot. Especially for you."

The unspoken implication hung between them: *especially for you, with your missing months*. The gap in her memory, that gaping void surrounding Emma's disappearance, was a shared burden, an unspoken understanding between them. Jonah had been there, a constant presence in the bewildering aftermath of her accident. He knew the questions that haunted her, the unspoken anxieties that still clung to the edges of her consciousness.

"I'm fine," she said, perhaps a little too quickly. "I'm here to do a job, Jonah. To tell Emma's story. And maybe, finally, to help you find out what happened."

He studied her for a moment, a flicker of concern in his eyes. "I know you are. But be prepared, Claire. This isn't going to be easy. People here... they've built their lives around Emma's disappearance. Around what they *think* they know. Reopening this case, bringing your podcast into it... it's going to stir up a lot of resentment. A lot of old loyalties."

"I'm aware," she said, a steely resolve settling over her. "I'm a big girl, Jonah. I've handled worse."

He gave a wry smile. "Have you? Because last time I checked, you weren't investigating a case where everyone involved lives on the same block. Where the suspects are people you grew up with. Where every alibi has been polished to a shine for a decade."

His words struck a chord, a chilling reminder of the intricate, suffocating web of small-

town life. She'd spent her career dissecting cases in distant cities, analyzing facts from afar. Here, every interview would be a reunion, every question a potential betrayal.

"That's why I need your help, Jonah," she said, her voice dropping to a lower, more earnest tone. "You're on the inside. You know these people. You know the whispers, the unspoken truths. What do you really think happened to Emma?"

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I honestly don't know, Claire. That's the frustrating part. We chased every lead, interviewed everyone multiple times. But it always came back to the same story: Emma walked out that night, and she never came back. No one saw anything definitive. No one heard anything conclusive. Just a lot of 'I think she went this way,' and 'I'm pretty sure I saw her with so-and-so earlier.'"

"And the alibis?" Claire pressed. "Were they all airtight?"

Jonah scoffed. "In a town like this? Alibis are more like performance art. Everyone covers for everyone else, even if they don't have to. It's part of the fabric. You protect your own, no matter what. And sometimes, you protect someone just because you don't want to be the one to rock the boat."

"So you think someone knows more than they're letting on," Claire stated, not a question.

"I'd bet my pension on it," Jonah said, his gaze hardening. "Someone in this town knows exactly what happened to Emma Clarke. And now, with these new discoveries, maybe, just maybe, we'll finally get them to talk."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "But be careful, Claire. This isn't a podcast where you can just interview someone and walk away. This is Raven's Harbor. And some secrets here... they're worth killing for."

The words hung heavy in the air, a chilling premonition that settled deep in Claire's gut. She thanked Jonah, promising to keep in touch, and walked out of the police station feeling the weight of his warning. The streetlights cast long, distorted shadows, and the fog had begun to roll in earnest now, a thick, damp blanket that swallowed the edges of the familiar buildings, transforming the town into something spectral and unnerving.

She glanced at her phone. A text from Mae: *Dinner's on the table. Don't worry the old man.* She knew he meant *don't worry me*, and a familiar pang of guilt twisted in her stomach. She was here for Emma, for the truth, but she also carried the burden of her father's unspoken fears.

As she drove back toward his house, the fog grew thicker, reducing visibility to a mere

few yards. Headlights blurred into halos, and the familiar landmarks seemed to vanish, replaced by ghostly, indistinct shapes. The salt-sweet air clung to her skin, and for a fleeting moment, a sensory detail pierced through the encroaching fog of her mind: the faint, metallic scent of rain on hot asphalt, and the sharp, almost floral tang of wild roses. It was a fragment, incomplete, disorienting. A memory that didn't fit, a whisper from the months that were missing. She gripped the steering wheel, her heart pounding. The town, it seemed, was already beginning to speak to her in its own fractured language. And she was, irrevocably, listening.

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