

The House on Hollow Hill

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Introduction

By the time Claire Emerson crested Hollow Hill, the house had already started remembering her. Wood remembers, she'd learned from interviews with arson investigators and grief counselors; it keeps the shape of heat and the echo of footfalls. The Emerson place kept plenty—paint peeled in long, curling tongues, a porch swing rusted to stillness, the eaves bowed like tired shoulders. She stopped the car and let the engine tick itself quiet. Wind traded secrets through the black pines, and the old

roof answered with a private creak that made the back of her neck prick.

The call about Mason had come the way bad news always did: too early, too certain, and delivered by someone using the professional hush that sounded like sympathy copy-pasted into a mouth. Apparent suicide, the coroner said. The phrase nested under her ribs like a splinter. Claire hosted a true-crime podcast built on wary questions and uncomfortable pauses; she knew how the neat words behaved when they wanted a messy story to lie down. In Hollow Hill, though, neat words got paraded down Main Street and pinned to bulletin boards like community service notices—Bring a casserole. Sign here. Don't make trouble.

Inside, the air had the temperature of a closed book. Damp wood. Old paper. A sweetness that might have been mildew or the ghost of furniture polish. The front hall runner wrinkled in the same treacherous way it had when she was eleven, and the fourth stair still complained like it took betrayal personally. Claire cataloged details with the reflex that paid her bills: thumb over the crack in the banister; a sun-faded rectangle where a photograph had been; dust heavy enough to make her think of snow. Memory offered her edits—a childhood argument with no sound, a slammed door that belonged to the wrong season, a night that smelled like rain when it hadn't rained at all.

Objects waited the way witnesses did when they knew you'd circle back. On the foyer table, the old music box bit her palm with its ornamental filigree. When she lifted the lid, it coughed out three tinny notes of a tune she didn't know she'd missed, then stuttered, as if the rest of the melody had been redacted. In Mason's office, an envelope with no return address slid loose from a stack of unpaid bills; the handwriting was careful in a way that felt anonymous on purpose. Upstairs, a picture frame gave up a smaller photograph where the backing had separated—two girls on a summer lawn, one face turned away, a name scrawled on the back that did not match the face Claire half-remembered. And at the end of the hall, the attic door wore a new lock that hadn't been there in any version of her childhood.

Hollow Hill had a way of collecting people's eyes. Neighbors watched over their fences like lifeguards who didn't swim. A car idled across the street and didn't bother to pretend otherwise. Claire's phone buzzed with messages that sounded helpful and read like warnings. There was Noah Price, now Detective Price if the signature block was to be believed—We can talk, but take care of yourself first—and the mayor's assistant, who deployed condolences the way a florist deployed ribbon, and a cousin she hadn't seen in ten years offering to organize a meal train. The town was already curating her grief for her, and she felt the old, familiar urge to flinch and crack a joke no one would hear.

She stood at the bottom of the attic stairs with keys nudging her palm like a dare. The coroner's report sat in her messenger bag, crisp and confident. Accept it, and she

could move through this house like a real estate agent, inventorying and pricing, packing Mason into labeled boxes. Question it, and every creak became testimony, every object a rumor with edges. The professional in her made a tidy list of risks: upsetting her mother, antagonizing a town with a long memory and short patience, turning her platform into a stage for her own family's collapse. The sister in her couldn't get past the way Mason's name looked typed over the word suicide, as if he'd been assigned a role in a play he would have heckled.

She ran a thumb along the spine of the music box until a small burr caught her skin. There was a rattle inside that wasn't the mechanism, a thinner, papery scrape. Slip of a letter? Note? She didn't open it. Not yet. The house felt like a lung that might gasp if she moved too fast. She paced herself the way she did when she waited out a reluctant interviewee—let silence do half the work, offer small openings, pretend patience while the room tightened. Somewhere upstairs, something settled with a soft, hollow knock. Someone had oiled the attic hinges recently. Someone had been here, after.

On her show, she always wrapped the cold open with a promise: This isn't the story you think it is. In Hollow Hill, the promise came back to her with a flavor more bitter than clever. The photograph with the wrong name on the back. The letters that arrived from nowhere. The locked door at the top of the house where her dreams used to wander. Memory, she knew, was a terrible archivist and an excellent editor, and she could feel hers trimming and smoothing even as she stared at the evidence that didn't fit.

She turned on her recorder anyway. Not because she planned to use it—maybe she would, maybe she wouldn't—but because the red light steadied her hands. It meant there would be a record even if she got talked out of her own certainty. "Claire Emerson," she said softly, as if introducing herself to the empty hall, "Hollow Hill." The words felt like a key rolled across knuckles, a habit that pretended at control. Outside, a car door shut. Inside, the music box clicked and went still.

She could sign the papers, book a return flight, let the town fold her back into a sanitized story. Or she could open the places meant to stay closed. The house breathed, the attic door watched, and the first letter's edge peered out like a corner of a secret too tired to hide. Claire lifted her eyes to the ceiling as if it might answer. Something here wanted to be found. Something else wanted her to forget. And on Hollow Hill, those had always been the same thing.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The silence of Hollow Hill wasn't a true silence; it hummed with the ghosts of cicadas and the distant thrum of the town below, a bass note of perpetual small-town vigilance. Claire pulled her beaten-up Subaru Forester closer to the overgrown hydrangea bushes that flanked the porch steps, as if the car itself might offer some protection. Her mother, Eleanor, had called twice since Claire arrived, both times with the precise, brittle tone of someone arranging flowers for a funeral she secretly resented. "The neighbors will be wondering, darling," she'd said, "about the house. And you. Are you eating?" Claire hadn't eaten much beyond a stale granola bar since the news about Mason. Eating felt like an act of betrayal to the knot in her stomach.

She climbed the porch steps, the wood groaning a familiar protest. The paint, once a cheerful robin's egg blue, now resembled a bruise. A small, ceramic gnome, chipped and missing an eye, stood sentinel by the front door, a relic from Mason's brief, ironic foray into garden whimsy. She remembered him placing it there years ago, declaring it the house's "guardian against suburban malaise." Now, it simply looked forlorn.

The key, heavy and cold in her palm, turned with a reluctant click. The air inside hit her first: the specific tang of dust, forgotten spices, and something vaguely metallic, like old coins. It wasn't the scent of death, not exactly, but it was close enough to make her throat tighten. The foyer was darker than she remembered, the once-bright wallpaper now a muted floral pattern that blended into the shadows. Claire pulled her phone from her pocket, the flashlight beam cutting through the gloom, momentarily illuminating the cobwebs draped like macabre lace from the chandelier.

"Claire? Is that you?"

The voice, thin and reedy, startled her. She swung the phone beam towards the sound, finding Mrs. Gable, their next-door neighbor, peeking her head through the doorway connecting the kitchen to the hall. Mrs. Gable was a woman made of sharp angles and perpetually pursed lips, her silver hair pulled back in a severe bun that seemed to defy gravity. She held a casserole dish, still warm, wrapped in a tea towel.

"Mrs. Gable. Yes, it's me," Claire replied, trying to muster a polite smile. It felt like stretching a muscle she hadn't used in years.

"Oh, darling. It's so good to see you, even under... these circumstances." Mrs. Gable bustled into the hall, her eyes, sharp and dark, raking over Claire's travel-worn clothes, then lingering on the scuff marks on the old hardwood floor. "I brought over some of my famous macaroni and cheese. Mason always loved it. Said it reminded him of home."

Claire offered a grateful nod, accepting the warm dish. "Thank you, Mrs. Gable. That's very kind." Mason hadn't eaten Mrs. Gable's macaroni and cheese in years, preferring the gourmet delivery services of the city. But the lie was a small kindness, a balm for

the neighborly expectation.

“Such a tragedy,” Mrs. Gable continued, her voice dropping to a theatrical whisper. “Poor Mason. So full of life, then... gone. Just like that. The whole town is just heartbroken.” She clucked her tongue, but her gaze was already darting around the foyer, taking in the dust, the slightly askew rug, the general air of neglect. “Your mother said you’d be coming. She’s taking it hard, you know. They were always so close.”

Claire swallowed, the mac and cheese suddenly feeling like a lead weight. Close was not the word she would have used to describe Mason and their mother’s relationship, which had always been a delicate dance of unspoken resentments and carefully curated appearances. Mason, brilliant and mercurial, had chafed under Eleanor’s meticulous control. Their bond had been more like two planets orbiting each other, occasionally colliding with spectacular force.

“Yes, I know,” Claire said, trying to steer the conversation away from the treacherous currents of family dynamics. “It’s been hard on everyone.”

Mrs. Gable nodded sagely, but her eyes held a spark of something more—curiosity, perhaps, or a subtle judgment. “He really let this place go, didn’t he? Such a shame. Your father always kept it so pristine.” Her gaze finally landed on the music box on the foyer table, her brows knitting together. “Oh, that old thing. I remember you two playing with it constantly as children. Your father gave it to your mother, didn’t he? A wedding gift, I think.”

Claire felt a familiar, unwelcome jolt. She picked up the music box, turning it over in her hands. The intricate carving, the dull gleam of the metal. She remembered the tune from the introduction, a snippet of something she couldn’t quite place, but no, she didn’t remember it being a wedding gift. It felt... older, somehow. More worn than a cherished family heirloom. “I think so,” she murmured, a vague sense of unease stirring within her. Memory, she’d learned in her line of work, was often a reconstructive art, not a photographic one. People remembered what they needed to remember, or what they’d been told to remember.

Mrs. Gable seemed to sense Claire’s distraction, or perhaps she’d exhausted her initial reconnaissance. “Well, I’ll leave you to it, darling. Let me know if you need anything at all. Anything.” The ‘anything’ hung in the air, weighted with implied questions and potential disclosures. With a final, lingering look at the house, she retreated back across the threshold, her footsteps echoing briefly on the porch before she disappeared.

Claire placed the music box back on the table, a thin film of dust clinging to her fingertips. The conversation with Mrs. Gable had left her feeling like she’d just

navigated a verbal minefield. She knew her neighbors, knew their particular brand of benign interference and relentless observation. In Hollow Hill, everyone knew everyone, and everyone knew everyone's business—or thought they did.

She walked further into the house, her footsteps feeling strangely loud in the quiet. The living room, once filled with sturdy, dark furniture, now seemed vast and empty. Dust motes danced in the slivers of sunlight that pierced the grimy windows. She paused by the fireplace, running a hand over the cold, rough stone. A flicker of memory: Mason, younger, crouched here, trying to start a fire with crumpled newspaper and a single match, his face intent, his tongue sticking out in concentration. Then, another image, blurred and indistinct: a woman, not her mother, her face obscured by shadow, standing by the mantelpiece, a small, silver locket clutched in her hand. The memory was fleeting, like a half-forgotten dream, leaving a faint chill in its wake. Who was that? It didn't fit with anything she knew.

Pushing the unsettling image aside, Claire moved into Mason's study, the room where he'd spent countless hours hunched over his computer, immersed in his enigmatic projects. The air here was heavy with the scent of old paper and something else, something metallic and faintly sweet. On his desk, stacks of books teetered precariously, alongside discarded coffee cups and a scattering of pens. His computer monitor sat dark, a silent sentinel. She hesitated, then reached out, her fingers hovering over the power button. For a moment, she imagined him here, typing furiously, his mind alight with ideas. It was hard to reconcile that image with the sterile coroner's report.

She spotted it then: tucked beneath a stack of old journals, a white envelope. No stamp, no return address, just her name, 'Claire Emerson,' written in a meticulous, almost calligraphic hand. It was the same handwriting she'd seen on the envelope in the introduction, the one that had slid loose from the unpaid bills. A shiver traced its way down her spine. This wasn't just a random piece of mail. This was intentional.

Her heart began to pound a slow, insistent rhythm against her ribs. She picked up the envelope, her fingers trembling slightly. The paper felt thick, expensive. She slid a thumb under the flap, careful not to tear it, and pulled out a single sheet of cream-colored stationery. The words, written in the same precise hand, were short and stark:

Claire,

Don't look too closely. Some things are better left buried.

A Friend.

The signature was unsettling in its ambiguity. A friend. Whose friend? Mason's? Hers? Or was it merely a euphemism, a polite threat veiled in familiarity? The implications

sent a cold dread through her. Someone knew she was here. Someone knew what she might be looking for. And someone wanted her to stop.

She reread the note, the words burning into her mind. *Don't look too closely.* But looking closely was her job. It was how she made sense of the world, how she found the cracks in the official narratives. And now, it felt like her only way to understand Mason, to understand the truth behind the stark pronouncement of suicide.

The music box downstairs seemed to chime faintly in her mind, a ghost of its interrupted melody. The photographs she'd glimpsed, the locked attic door, the snippets of memory that felt rearranged – they all coalesced into a single, insistent question. Mason's death wasn't just a tragedy. It was a story. And someone, somewhere, was trying to edit the ending.

Claire folded the letter carefully and tucked it into her jeans pocket. The house was no longer just a collection of dusty rooms; it was an archive, a silent witness. And she, the podcaster who specialized in uncovering hidden truths, was now living inside her own true-crime episode. She had to dig deeper. She had to find out what Mason had uncovered. And she had to do it before "A Friend" decided to take more direct action. The knot in her stomach tightened, but beneath it, a new feeling stirred: a flicker of resolve, cold and sharp. Hollow Hill had secrets, and Claire Emerson was about to excavate every last one.

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