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The Vanished Voices

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A cold case, a podcaster who won't give up and a detective who won't let her in – until the truth pulls them both into danger

True crime podcaster Clio Holloway travels to the small coastal town of Rye with one goal only: to finally give the late Rebecca Adler a voice. But her very first interview partner puts her to the test – Hudson Montgomery, former police officer and one-time lead investigator in Rebecca's murder case. Hudson has no time for nosy reporters who tear open old wounds. But Clio is different – behind her determination lies a vulnerability that moves him more than he would like.

The deeper Clio digs into the case, the more Hudson's walls begin to crumble – and between them grows an attraction as dangerous as the truth they are closing in on. When Clio uncovers inconsistencies in the old investigation, the darkness catches up with them both – and puts their feelings to a deadly test.

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Chapter 1
Hudson

"Hudson Montgomery?"

The voice is pleasantly bright and velvety at the same time, but something about it is off. Its excessively friendly tone triggers that uncomfortable feeling inside me – the kind that burrows deeper under my skin with every syllable, as if it wants to nest in my very blood cells.

I don't turn around. Whoever she is, she already knows exactly who she's looking at.

"Who wants to know?"

A shadow slides up beside me, blocking the warm sunlight that floods the entire restaurant through the wide front windows. Out of the corner of my eye I catch dark blonde hair and a green shirt, but I refuse to look away from the half-empty coffee in front of me. I'd almost managed to sit out the time before my shift started without having to talk to anyone.

"My name is Clio Holloway. I run the podcast The Vanished Voices and I'd like to talk to you about Rebecca Adler –"

My stool scrapes across the old floorboards as I abruptly stand. "Get out," I say through clenched teeth.

"Excuse me?" She speaks slowly, carefully. You'd almost think she was genuinely surprised. As if she weren't a parasite hungry for Rebecca's blood.

"Get out."

My fingers grip the worn wood of the counter almost painfully. My pulse roars in my ears. I keep my eyes down, staring at my white-knuckled hands, trying to anchor myself in my surroundings. The distant clatter of metal on metal from the kitchen. The muffled voices of the guests at the tables behind me. The faint smell of the coffee in front of me – instead of the hint of berries drifting from the woman beside me. Fuck. Her scent is just as present as Rebecca's name in my head.

She has to go. Before she says another word and I lose control.

Slowly I turn until a blurred face appears before me. "Get out," I repeat, not knowing whether I'm whispering or shouting. "Or I'm calling the police."

A deep crease forms between her eyebrows. "I just have a few questions. We don't have to talk here – I only wanted to introduce myself. You knew Rebecca before you were involved in the investigation, didn't you? Or am I wrong?"

Every word pulls the thin thread of my nerves tighter, makes the roaring in my ears grow louder and the world a little less sharp. Even the air seems to disappear. Each breath feels like it draws nothing but emptiness into my lungs – the same emptiness that has surrounded me for months, since the morning the earth fell onto a black coffin and I had failed for good.

I don't wait. I don't say anything. I turn around and walk away, leaving the woman in the restaurant behind me and stumbling through the swing door into the kitchen. Brendon barely manages to jump aside before I collide with the plates in his hands.

My chest heaves as though I've been running. And still no oxygen reaches my lungs. Instead, the room around me shrinks – smaller and smaller, tighter and tighter.

"Hey, man, you okay?" Brendon has set the full plates back on the counter and puts a hand on my shoulder. His face radiates so much concern it makes me want to scream.

"Fine," I manage. No idea where I find the breath for it, but it sounds almost normal. Almost as cold as I'm supposed to be.

"No offence, but you really don't look it. Sit down." He nods toward the small seating area the kitchen staff use to rest during quiet moments. "I'll get you something to drink."

I don't notice I'm moving until I'm already in the chair. The cold plastic presses uncomfortably against the sweat-damp fabric of my T-shirt, and the familiar noise of the kitchen slowly drowns out the roaring in my ears. Reality pushes back to the surface, right in front of the memories that had almost taken control of me.

Brendon holds out a glass of water beaded with condensation. I take it without a word. There's still a knot in my chest pulling everything inside me tight, but the cold water helps. It makes my thoughts pause – caught in a wretched brain freeze. My thoughts are not my friends. They're not even friendly.

The last place I wanted to be reminded of any of this is Williamson's. Not when I'm only here to wait out my time until I relieve Brendon and lose myself in the comfortable chaos of the restaurant.

Hudson Montgomery?

My fingers tighten around the glass as the velvety voice returns.

You knew Rebecca before you were involved in the investigation, didn't you? Or am I wrong?

It's unbelievable how some people crave the blood of innocent victims. They want to know what happened to them – every morbid detail. No limits. No compassion for those left behind. There's never a rock bottom, only fresh proof that people are not as good as they like to think. It's not the first time someone has asked me about Rebecca. About my opinion of her, my unique perspective, because she wasn't a stranger to me. Insight into the investigation from someone who was actively involved in it, plus a sad story? Jackpot, some people seem to think. And yet Rebecca and I were barely more than two kids who grew up in the same area and crossed paths at school now and then. My opinion of her was never relevant. And still, her death turned her into a commodity.

The door swings open, letting in a rush of loud conversation as Brendon returns from the dining room. For a moment his gaze flickers between the waiting plates on the counter and the seating area before he makes up his mind. His practised smile slips slightly as he stops in front of me.

"Should I call someone?" He speaks so quietly his voice nearly blends into the noise of the kitchen around us. "You really don't look good."

I breathe in deeply, square my shoulders and force my thoughts to the back of my mind. "Just my circulation. Didn't drink enough," I murmur, and haul myself to my feet. My knees are unsteady, but I manage to look cool and composed again. Brendon's gaze burns into my back as I walk back to the swing door. "If you leave those plates there much longer, it's coming out of your tips," I call out, nodding toward the counter.

Not that I care how much the guests tip him.

The restaurant looks exactly as I left it. Small and large tables are spread across the worn floorboards, over which sunlight dances through wide windows on three sides. The glass roof is sheltered by green-draped beams, from which round lanterns hang at even intervals. The rustic charm of the restaurant suits the old barn perfectly – Williamson's is housed in an extension of it. On the other side of the building is a garden centre, which explains the annoying plants on the ceiling. Tourists find them charming; I personally find the greenery a constant irritation. It's enough that the guests are exhausting – getting my head caught in the longer tendrils while serving feels like a foretaste of hell.

At the counter sits a young woman with dark blonde hair, tied back with a brightly patterned scarf. In her dark grey jeans and sage-green T-shirt she looks like all the other people who come to the restaurant. At least the other reporters had the decency to look like the vultures they are at heart – in their shirts and blazers.

"Wasn't I clear enough?"

Her shoulders shoot up before she turns to face me and stands. Unlike before, my vision doesn't blur – I can see her face properly for the first time.

I almost wish I'd lose control again. Breathlessness and blurred vision would be preferable to this.

She looks so ... soft. Her eyes are a blue-green, a shade you've seen a hundred times before, yet there's something about them that makes it hard to look away. Freckles dust her nose and cheeks, framed by full lips and expressive eyebrows. Her face matches the bright, velvety sound of her voice so perfectly that it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Get out and here are two very simple words." I sound so cold and hard it sends a chill down my own spine. It feels wrong to speak to someone who appears this gentle in such a way – but looks are deceiving. "Are they really so hard to understand?" I add, even colder than before.

This is no gentle girl. This is a sensation-hungry reporter who sells the suffering of innocent people as entertainment.

She pulls a face. "I'm sorry about before. I didn't mean to disturb you at work. I just came in to get some food, and then there you were, and I – I got ahead of myself," she explains with an embarrassed smile.

It shouldn't look as damn charming as it does. Her voice, her face, that faint scent of berries that drifts from her and seems to fill the entire restaurant – it's too much. I shake my head as if I could shake off her effect on me, then take an internal step back.

Distance.

Indifference.

It's not about what I feel.

"Listening is clearly not your strong suit." I speak slowly, every syllable carefully weighed. "When I said you should leave, it wasn't a joke. It wasn't getting ahead of yourself" – I spit the words out as if they've gone off – "it was a warning. Either you listen and go, or you get thrown out. Your choice."

She blinks. That's her only reaction. She stands there in silence, her body so motionless it's almost funny, and blinks. It wouldn't surprise me if no one has ever spoken to her like this before. As soft as she seems, she's probably only ever known praise and applause.

"I really didn't mean to cross a line," she replies, her voice rough. "I shouldn't have approached you out of the blue, and your reaction is completely justified. I'm genuinely sorry." She smiles gently. "The other waiter has already taken my order – as soon as it's ready, you'll be rid of me."

An incredulous laugh escapes me before I can stop it. "You really think you can get away with anything. Wow."

Her mouth falls open as if she were about to reply, but no words come out.

I take a step toward her, closing the distance between us, even though it doesn't help in the slightest. Her scent is even stronger now, the faint freckles on her face sharper.

"Maybe you get away with this kind of thing elsewhere, but we don't want people like you here," I say, my voice sharp. "Maybe it doesn't matter to you, but real people live here – people who have experienced a real loss. Someone was abducted, starved, and sunk alive into the sea. The last thing we need is people like you treating that as good entertainment."

Her wide eyes grow even wider, as if she's having trouble processing my words. The tip of her tongue runs over her lips. My gaze lingers on her mouth a second too long before it travels back to her eyes.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," she says slowly. "I know True Crime can be problematic, and I know what happened to Rebecca, but –"

"You and your podcast can go to hell, for all I care." My pulse spikes and my skin burns, as if everyone is staring at me, knowing exactly what this is about.

As if they remember what was done to Rebecca.

As if they know it could have been prevented.

"I don't want to hear your crap," I snap at her. "We don't want you here – that's all that matters. So you'd better go back to wherever you came from. You're banned from here."

Without giving her a chance to respond, I turn away and walk back toward the kitchen. At the swing door I pause, fighting the inexplicable urge to look back at her one more time, before I leave the dining room behind. Laughter surrounds me – from Brendon and the two kitchen hands. I push past them, call out to Brendon to cancel the woman's order at the counter, and storm out the back door.

As if I could outrun my guilt that way.

As if I could forget that I cost Rebecca Adler her life.

Chapter 2

Clio

"Hudson Montgomery is an asshole."

Floyd looks up from his phone with a frown as I pull the campervan door shut behind me, cutting out the noise from the main road. "I thought you were getting burgers. Where are the burgers? And who is Hudson Montgomery?"

"Do you ever pay attention?" Brooke shoots her brother a reproachful look. "Montgomery is the police officer. He's the one who caught the suspect."

"And has issues. He's got those too," I mutter. Floyd isn't the only one who was looking forward to food. I can't believe I walked into that hipster restaurant for three simple burgers – only to come back without said burgers and with a ban. My blood is boiling, which for the moment drowns out the growling of my empty stomach.

Wilson lifts his head as I drop my wallet on the table. The golden retriever blinks drowsily, wags his tail once, then curls back up beside Brooke on the bench seat. At least one of us without a care in the world.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asks Brooke, her fingers deftly moving through her brown hair and weaving it into a thick plait.

Arms crossed, I lean against the narrow door separating the living area of the van from the tiny bathroom. "Montgomery was sitting at the counter when I came in, and I thought I'd use the moment. It's more comfortable when a stranger approaches you in a public place, right?"

She pulls a face. "Some people don't like being approached by strangers at all."

"I know! Which is why I kept it casual. No small talk, no pretending to have a normal conversation before ambushing him with questions. I said straight out what I was there for. And he yelled at me."

Get out.

Or I'm calling the police.

Heat rises to my cheeks as the scene replays in my head again and again. The image of Hudson on the bar stool, a cup in front of him, relaxed. And then his reaction the moment he heard my voice – not even looking at me, just saying one word: out. The reactions aren't always positive when I mention the podcast, but Hudson reacted like a bull to a red flag. It was the wrong moment, the topic is sensitive – but the way he came at me...

Someone was abducted, starved, and sunk alive into the sea. The last thing we need is people like you treating that as good entertainment.

What was I even thinking? I only wanted to grab some food so we could set up camp in peace afterwards. Arrive in Rye relaxed, on a full stomach. Get everything out of the van, unpack the camping furniture, put up Floyd's tent.

I should have known it was a bad idea to approach Hudson at work. But when I walked into the restaurant and saw him sitting at the counter – it seemed like the perfect opportunity to make direct contact with a potential interviewee. Two birds, one stone: food and a perspective on Rebecca's story that we're hoping to tell over the coming weeks.

Hudson's reaction is exactly why our first step is normally to get an overview. Who are the key people, how are they connected to the story, and do they know we're here? The Adlerds sent us a list of everyone involved in the investigation into their daughter's disappearance. Apparently it didn't occur to them to prepare those people for our arrival. Or to tell them that it was their wish for us to cover Rebecca's murder in our podcast.

"Damn." Groaning, I let my forehead fall against the cool wooden door. "I really messed up."

"Figured as much, when you came back without food," Floyd replies slowly. A dull thud follows, then an indignant hey – which tells me Brooke has kicked her brother under the table.

"Not the time for jokes," she reprimands him.

He grumbles irritably before standing up. "I'll go start the Jeep."

The van rocks gently as Floyd slides the door open and steps out. I reluctantly straighten up and follow him, Brooke right behind me. She walks around the van to take the wheel while I squeeze into the passenger seat with Wilson. He ends up half in my lap, Brooke's old stuffed toy as always in his mouth. Anyone who remembers what it used to look like can tell it was once Stitch. By now it looks more like a lump of threadbare blue fabric, but that does nothing to diminish Wilson's love for the plush toy.

The old van splutters to life with a loud cough, then jolts out of the car park and back onto Rye's main road. I'd been expecting sea, beach and white fences, but so far this stretch of the New Hampshire coast consists mainly of trees, green meadows, and more trees.

"Do you want to tell me what happened back there? It's not often you snap at someone like that." Brooke glances in the rear-view mirror at the dark green Jeep following us, then turns off and leaves the accusingly red façade of Williamson's behind.

"Montgomery was sitting at the counter and I thought, if I'm waiting for the burgers anyway, I might as well make the time count. We'd have contacted him soon regardless, so why not get started?" I sigh and rub my forehead. "So I went up to him ... and now I'm banned."

"And what happened in between?"

Get out and here are two very simple words. Are they really so hard to understand?

I frown, trying to erase Hudson's voice from my thoughts. It's far from the first time someone has spoken to me like that. Hell, it's not even close to the worst thing that's ever been thrown at me. And yet his words have landed deep enough to sting.

You really think you can get away with anything.

God, it's been a long time since I acted this impulsively, and every word Hudson threw at my feet reminds me why.

With unsteady fingers I straighten my headscarf. I can feel Brooke's honey-brown eyes drifting in my direction every so often, but the last thing I want right now is to chew over the conversation again. What good would it do? I know I should think before I open my mouth. Nobody likes a girl who talks back, and you learn eventually how to avoid uncomfortable situations. Tone matters – the lighter the voice, the easier the words land. Smile, no exceptions.

"Hudson Montgomery hates reporters. To him, we're scum. He didn't even let me finish explaining that the Adlerds asked us to tell Rebecca's story."

Brooke makes a thoughtful sound and glances in the mirror again. "You know, everyone deals with trauma differently. For the Adlerds, the podcast is a way of keeping Rebecca's memory alive. Others won't see it that way. Some people love True Crime – others hate it and everyone connected to it."

I pull a face as my mind obligingly spits out the comments people have left on The Vanished Voices online. Joy, hate, disgust, disappointment, greed, indifference – seen it all. Perfect for falling asleep to, or insults that cover the full spectrum. Only this time we haven't even properly started before we've already got a negative reaction. And it has nothing to do with our work – it has everything to do with me.

Groaning, I let my head fall back against the seat. "How badly have I messed this up?"

"Let Montgomery cool down –" Brooke pauses with a frown as the tinny voice of the sat nav cuts in with new directions. "Give him the chance to get used to the idea," she adds after a brief pause. "If he decides he wants to talk to you afterwards, you can explain what we're planning."

She takes one hand off the wheel to give my arm an encouraging squeeze, which Wilson apparently takes as an invitation. With a small whine he clambers fully into my lap to lick my face – and shoves the worn-out Stitch directly into it. Wet fabric that has been in places I'd rather not think about touches my lips, and I have to fight back a gag.

"Ugh," I cry, trying to dodge his attempt at comfort. "Boundaries, Wilson! We've talked about this."

Brooke's sharp click of her tongue makes the dog stop abruptly. Wilson may not have made it through his assistance dog training, but some commands are rock solid. Still, I hold him firmly in my lap just to be safe as Brooke manoeuvres the van between bushes and trees onto a green meadow. The Adlerds had insisted they knew the perfect pitch and would sort everything out for us – and they weren't exaggerating. Thanks to the trees it's barely visible from the road, and there's not a neighbour in sight. Ideal for getting some peace and quiet.

We pull up at the far end of the meadow, where a small patch of woodland begins. Floyd parks the Jeep a few metres further on and jumps out grinning. It doesn't take long before we fall into our well-rehearsed routine. Brooke gets the inside of the van back into living mode while Floyd and I unload the Jeep and set up our little camp under the warm afternoon sun.

I'm placing the last camping chair when Floyd stops beside me. His gaze flickers toward the open van door, but there's no sign of his sister.

"You okay?" he asks, voice lowered.

"Annoyed with myself, but otherwise fine."

He rolls his eyes, then turns serious again. "I'm here if you want to talk. Or if you want me to have a word with this Montgomery ... or whatever."

I study his hands – hands that have never been used for any form of violence – with a smirk. The worst you'll ever get from Floyd is a middle finger. The man can't even kill a fly. "I'd actually love to see that. You versus the ex-cop –" I tilt my head, lips pursed. "D'you think I could charge admission?"

He narrows his eyes. "I was trying to be supportive."

"Making me laugh is also a form of support."

"I shouldn't have offered." He sighs and runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Can you stop deflecting now, Clio?"

"I'm not deflecting."

"Mmm-hmm."

I frown at him. "Floyd."

"I'm just saying it's okay if you didn't handle the situation perfectly. And it's okay if this Montgomery overreacted because of it. We both know what it's like to lose someone. Reactions aren't always rational, no matter how long ago it was."

In an instant everything around us loses a shade of colour. The sunshine feels cooler, the gentle breeze sharper.

We know what it's like. Every day we see how loss and trauma sink their claws into people years later – people who simply can't escape them. We see it in Brooke, we know that she'll barely leave this camp either, however long we stay. Sometimes I wonder whether she'll ever truly heal.

"Precisely because I know, I should have gone about it differently," I reply quietly.

Floyd tilts his head, studying me through narrowed eyes. His overgrown hair slides further into his forehead, falling in thick waves between his cheek and ear. It's far too long – longer than he's ever worn it. Floyd is an adult now, free from social workers and guardians, and can do as he likes ... even if the hair and his patchy three-day stubble make him look like a drifter. He's no longer the boy I met ten years ago. No longer the twelve-year-old who tried to distract his little sister with her Stitch plush toy while the adults argued loudly in the background.

"Clio." He smiles gently. "Please don't forget why we're doing this. Montgomery isn't a relative who lost a loved one. He's just a police officer we want to interview about his work."

"Ex-police officer," I correct him automatically.

He waves it off. "He may have known Rebecca – but in a place like this, that's probably true of a lot of people. Could you have handled it differently?" He slowly tilts his head from side to side. "I'd say yes, but you couldn't have known how he'd react. If he doesn't want to talk to us because of it, we'll speak to another investigator for the podcast. Or we'll use the reports. He's one person – not a total write-off."

Sighing, I sink into one of the camping chairs. Wilson seizes the chance and jumps into the chair beside mine for some petting. Grumbling contentedly, he curls up with his Stitch, chin resting on the armrest. Floyd bends down to scratch him behind the ear, bringing his face level with mine.

"For Kate," he reminds me, his voice rough. "And for all the women who might one day end up like her or Rebecca. That's why we're doing this."

I nod, unable to find any words.

The Adlerts reached out to us. They sent us documents and lists to make our work easier. They want us here.

You and your podcast can go to hell, for all I care.

Hudson's cool voice sends the hairs on my arms standing as the memory surfaces. He certainly doesn't want us here – but his opinion doesn't count. We're met with prejudice all the time: vultures, bloodsuckers, sensation-hungry, and plenty of other colourful terms. But it has never stopped us from doing what we came to do.

Rebecca Adler is dead. Murdered by her former neighbour.

The news reports tell his story. Rebecca is the victim, the body, the dead woman, the teacher. Blunt facts that show how little her life matters to them. It's about the sensation, the murder, the blood, and all the gruesome details. Who Rebecca was before only becomes relevant if it might have contributed to her death.

We are here to tell her story and immortalise her life in a podcast that will hopefully serve as a warning to others. That is what The Vanished Voices is for: to give those affected their voice back, to keep them in memory, to expose mistakes, and to make clear that every case is individual. What ends well once can be the end another time. We've made it our mission to show how dangerous seemingly harmless situations can be. How important it is to trust your gut, to leave when you're afraid, and to talk to others about your worries.

The start of Rebecca's series wasn't ideal – which is one hundred per cent my fault. Rebecca's parents want their daughter remembered as a person, not as a victim – that is our goal. What matters is Rebecca, and Rebecca alone.

Everything else is irrelevant, even if some people think that makes me a bad person. I have plenty of experience being treated like an annoying pest. Hudson Montgomery can get in line with his opinion.

[...]

Maike Schmitt was born in 1997 in Kaiserslautern and, following her passion for reading, studied "something with books." When she isn't writing, she loves to read or cuddle with her dogs.