

Chapter Eight

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

Anneliese: So here I am again. Sitting at the kitchen table, drinking my coffee, talking to my phone. It's mid-morning, like ten o'clock, and the sunlight is flooding in from the gravel parking lot. Yoga Lady is on her porch, doing some tai chi moves, and the sun behind her is haloing her head. It all looks very peaceful. I can hear birds. The best morning light is here in the kitchen, because the windows face sort of east-ish. The whole kitchen gets bathed in white gold and sometimes the rectangles of light on the table get hot to the touch. But it's always that shaky light, light that's been filtered through the funhouse of the old glass. It's like the kitchen has been painted by an artist with a bad case of the tremors. It's beautiful, but it's a little like living in a hangover. Which makes sense, I guess, since last night was like a bad drug trip. My head is killing me.

Okay. I don't even know where to begin. I woke up late, if you want to call what I was doing sleeping. I...fell and hit my head...on the tub I think?

The blood washed off my feet pretty easily--if it was really blood. I mean it was definitely blood, but I don't know if it was really... Anyway. When I heard that voice calling my name, and I looked at the door, I saw...

I saw Thomas. Here, in the apartment. He was at the bathroom door, smiling and friendly just like always. But he was dead. And...and...he was messed up. I mean, he had been bitten or ripped into--his chest was torn open and his shoulder was a mass of blood and meat. Part of his face was... **[she struggles to gather herself]** He was all torn up. And I panicked, and I scrambled to get away. All I could think was that I had to run, I had to get as far away from that thing as I

could. But there was nowhere to go, and my feet were wet, and I was still half-crouching, and I slipped. And I don't remember hitting my head, but I woke up on the bathroom floor, and I have a huge throbbing knot just above my temple. There was no blood in the bathtub, no blood on my sheets. No bloody footprints in the hallway, even though I know I saw...no, wait, that's wrong. The bloody footprints were somewhere else. That was a long time ago. **[frustrated]** I'm trying not to get confused.

But anyway, there was no evidence of what I had seen the night before. So it's like every moment of my childhood, right? Anneliese imagining things.

Except.

After I dragged myself off the bathroom floor, and pressed some ice wrapped in a washcloth against the lump on my head, I listened back to the recording from last night. And Thomas is on it. I can hear him calling me, and I can hear his footsteps just before the recording cuts off. I am not crazy. Thomas *was* in this house last night. And that means everything is true. Claire, Thomas, my whole childhood. It's all true.

[Theme music. Credits.]

Every story is a ghost story. When we tell an anecdote or a funny thing that happened to us, when we talk about the way things used to be, when we look at pieces of the past. When we feel nostalgic. When we desperately try to touch the things that have faded. Any time we remember, we're talking about ghosts. And ghosts want something--they want closure or they want justice or maybe they just want to make sure the ones they left behind are going to be okay. But they want *something* so they can finally rest. So they can let go. Memories are the same way.

That's what the doctors never got. That's what *you* never got. Every memory is a haunting.

The last time I saw Claire, she was standing in the door to our hospital room. This was after all that crap with Dr. Stevens. After they upped my meds. After my dad had moved out of the house. I remember this very clearly. Mom was standing by the bed. I was sitting up, and she was holding my hand. Mom was saying something about when they thought I could go home. I was aware of someone at the door, and I looked, expecting to see a nurse or my psychologist. But it was Claire. I hadn't seen her in a day or two. Towards the end she came less and less frequently. She didn't like to be there when mom was there, and I get that. Mom wasn't very...tolerant of Claire. Not by that point. And she certainly wasn't very interested in me talking about Claire. That really upset her.

Claire stood in the doorway, and she looked sad. The hospital always made her sad, because she loved me so much, but this time she really looked heartbroken. And...I don't know the word. "Resigned?" Looking back, I know she knew it was the last time. She was wearing her I Love Beanie Babies t-shirt and jeans, just like always. I couldn't say anything, with mom standing right there. So I just raised my arm. I did that sometimes, to stretch, when they had me in the bed for a long time.

And, like I knew she would, Claire raised her arm at the same time. We spread our fingers, and stretched our arms sideways above our heads. Claire was always the best at Mirrors. We both smiled. Her eyes were so beautiful.

But when I put my arm down, Claire left hers up, just for a minute. She spread her fingers again, and then she pressed her hand to her mouth, like she was blowing a kiss. She looked so sad. I don't think even then I completely realized what she was telling me. I was never as smart as Claire.

Then she was gone. I stayed in the hospital a little while longer--maybe two weeks? Maybe three--but I never saw Claire again. Now all I have is that photo on the mantle. And memories. So am I less haunted now? Or more?

I don't know if it's worse to have the thing itself or the memory of the thing. If it's gone, then it ought to stay gone, but that's never been the way the world works.

Thomas should be gone, but he isn't. He's in my house. And he's in the yard. And he's in Mrs. Aickmann's head, I'm pretty sure. But I don't have the memories to explain this haunting. And I can't get Mrs. Aickmann to come to the door.

So I'm going to open this box.

That's why I turned this on in the first place. To document what I find. I don't know why I wandered off on a tangent like that, though I suppose it's the kind of thing you want me to do with this recording. But that's not what I'm doing this morning. Here goes.

[Sound effect: lifting box lid]

[Long exhale]

I don't know what... **[slow breath]** It's another gun. There are a lot of papers and things, but on top is a gun. I can't be sure, because I only got a glimpse the other night, but I think it's exactly like the one she had on the little table by the door. The one she folded the doily over. It's a small, pearl-handled revolver. This one looks really old, the barrel is rusty, and so is the trigger. I have no idea if it's loaded. I suppose if I want to see what else is in here I need to...move it. So I'm going to take it out of the box and lay it on the table.

[Pause]

Okay. So it looks like I can't do that. I mean, I can. I should. But I haven't yet. I feel like touching the gun isn't something I can... Okay, I'm being ridiculous. Claire would say...

Claire would say "Don't touch the gun, Liese." She would say "Liese, put the gun down." She would say...

Fuck this.

[Sound fx: Click, rattle.]

[Sound fx: Click, rattle.]

Okay. I could not touch the gun. So I...god, why am I such a freak?...I turned the box over, and everything spilled across the table. So I can get to the papers and stuff without touching the gun. Suddenly I'm glad you won't ever hear this. Because I don't want anybody to know that I...

Oh my god.

[Sound fx: papers moving]

I'm looking at a photograph. It's black and white. It shows the front of the house. The tree is on the right, with swing. It's a simple board hanging between two ropes. There are some flower pots, little planters on the porch railing that aren't there now. And standing on the steps is Thomas. He's smiling. Next to him is Mrs. Aickmann. She has her arm around him and she looks almost happy. So I was right, yeah? She's his mother? That's so weird to see them together. Almost as weird as Mrs. Aickmann smiling.

[Sound fx: papers moving]

Here's a newspaper article: "Body of Missing Boy Found Buried in Yard, Local Woman Questioned." Oh my god. "The body of ten-year-old Thomas Aickmann, missing since late October, was discovered buried in a shallow grave behind the house where he lived with his mother, Violet Aickmann. The cause of death appears to be attack by a large animal. The body was discovered by a neighbor who saw the Aickmann's dog digging in the back yard and exposing part of the corpse. A representative of the city police department, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that authorities suspect the same dog may have been responsible for the boy's death. Foul play is not suspected, but police are questioning the mother in connection with a possible charge of failure to properly dispose of a dead body."

Holy shit. I think I'm going to be sick.

There are a bunch of other pictures here. Thomas' school pictures. A crayon drawing of...of Baskerville. A mother's day card. Oh my god. I wish...I wish this didn't make sense. Thomas-- that dog. What did that do to her? What would that do to you? I wish...

[A pause]

Listen to this. It's a...poem, I guess? It's written in thin, old lady handwriting, on the back of what I guess is Thomas' report card?

"Dinner is ready but there are no chairs
at the table. None of the windows will open
and it is too beautiful to be inside. All the trees
have been uprooted and still have their leaves.

The swings are still swinging, but there

are no children on the playground.

The wind isn't even blowing."

Oh my god. She does not need to be alone in the house with that gun. I've got to make her answer me.

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Disturbed; upset] I went to her door, like I have three or four times since the party. I started by knocking, and calling her name. But no answer. Just like always. So I went out on the porch and tried to look in the windows, but the blinds were down. I thought I could make out something in the room, dim shapes, furniture maybe, but it was dark in there and I was squinting through the drawn blinds. I knocked on the window. No answer.

I went back into the foyer. And then.

There were footprints in the foyer. Just like...just like the ones Claire showed me in the hospital, all those years ago. A line of bloody footprints—a child's footprints--leading from nowhere to nowhere. The blood was wet on the hardwood floor. I tried not to see it. I had to focus. But I couldn't help it. The footprints were right there. And I knew whose they were. They weren't Thomas.' And there they were, in my house. Why? Why now?

I don't know how long I stood there, looking at the blood on the floor, remembering the child whose feet made those marks. But then I snapped out of it. Mrs. Aickmann needed me. I had to tell her it wasn't her fault. I had to tell her she couldn't blame herself, no matter how much it hurt, no matter how much she missed him. I had to...

I stepped over the footprints and started banging on Mrs. Aickmann's door. I beat it with my fists, and I yelled her name. I sort of lost it, I guess. I shouted and kicked. I think I was crying. I was hysterical. And then someone had me, someone pulled me back from the door. Strong arms were around me. I heard my name in my ear.

It was Bri. She had heard me freaking out and had come downstairs. She grabbed me, held me.

She held me until I calmed down. I was...sobbing against her shoulder. Thomas. Eventually I could draw a deeper breath. I could focus. My hands felt bruised from battering the door.

Bri said, "What were you doing?"

And I told her. I told her that Mrs. Aickmann had a gun. That the dog had killed her son. That I thought she blamed herself and was going to do something stupid. That we had to get to her.

And Bri said, "What are you talking about? Nobody lives in that apartment. It's been empty for over a year. Ever since Mr. Ashton moved out."

I said "What?" and she said it again. "That apartment is empty." I could see the whole foyer. The "For Rent" sign. The smooth, clean floor.

Like I said, I was never as smart as Claire. I didn't get it. I didn't look closely enough. Claire would have seen it. You probably would have. But I didn't. I mean I saw the dog with the...body...in the yard. I saw her burying it. And it's right here in this box. Thomas's report card,

from winter term, 1955. The newspaper, too: October 10th, 1955. Right in front of my face. And if I had dug down deeper I would have found the death certificate. Violet Aickmann, date of death January, 23rd, 1956. Cause of death, self-inflicted gunshot. It was right there.

So what now? I'm back at the kitchen table. I've put almost everything back in the box. The only thing left out is the gun. It's just lying there. Sleeping. Waiting.

I feel like nothing is real. Or everything is real. Thomas. Mrs. Aickmann. Claire. Those footprints in the hallway. Is this really happening? If I remember it later will that make it true?

I've only fired a gun once in my life.

[Theme music, credits.]

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