

Chapter Four

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

ANNELIESE: So, Leah thinks it's "cool" that I live in a haunted house. I am in no way convinced that's what's going on; it's too much like a lot of my childhood for me to trust anything, you know? I know you know. But even if it is, it's certainly not "cool." But Leah means well, and she really did make me feel better last night. I finally got to sleep around three-thirty.

I've only got a minute to talk before I have to do a super high-speed clean up. I have to be at work in--wow, in an hour and a half--and the party's tonight. I guess I'll have a couple of hours after I get home before it starts. But man, this place is a mess.

It's not Leah's fault. She doesn't really know everything that happened when I was younger. I mean, she knows that Claire died when I was sixteen. She knows about the months in the hospital. But there's a difference between knowing that and knowing...well, you know what I mean. There's no one who really knows everything, except you. Even my parents, who obviously would tell a different story, they don't know half of it. Even after everything. Claire used to say...well, it doesn't matter. Damn I wish Claire was here. And that doesn't matter either.

What does that even mean, the house is haunted? Let's catalog, shall we? One: something jumps on my bed a couple of times a night, except there's nothing there. Two: I heard something heavy being dragged through the foyer outside my front door, except there was nothing there. Well, Mrs. Aickmann was there, but that double confirms nothing, because she didn't see anything, either. Three: somebody stalked me from behind the shower curtain while I was

looking in the mirror, except there was nothing there. Four: somebody or *something* was laughing outside my bedroom window at two o'clock this morning, but there was nothing there.

Do you see the common thread? There is nothing there. Just Anneliese being crazy. Again. Right? I mean, you would never use those words, but you were always clear about what was real and what wasn't. And you were always clear about how I *wasn't* clear on those things. So why is this any different?

Oh my god!

[Sound fx: Clatter; movement]

[From a distance, away from the mic:] Holy shit! Oh, it's just you. You scared me! Don't play up there, okay?

[Back at the mic:] Oh my god. Sorry. I'm freaking myself out. There's a mirror over the sink, and it sort of reflects the living room windows, and I saw something on the porch and I just freaked. Okay. Deep breaths.

But it was just the neighbor kid, Thomas. I guess it's okay for him to be playing on the porch. Anyway--in the mirror, through that wavy old glass in the front windows, it looked like... well, like I said, I'm freaking myself out. I thought...

I've got to clean this apartment. I can't let Bailey and Scott see it like this. And Alex is coming too. I'm a little nervous about that. So--cleaning. Now. No dwelling on the past, no thinking about the things I imagine in mirrors. Even though.

[Sound fx: Clatter. Moving objects.]

There, I've moved the mirror. And I see Thomas playing under the big tree, so I couldn't have seen what I thought. Shadows. Wavy glass. Mirrors. That's all. But. It looked like he was covered in blood.

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

[Theme music; opening credits]

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

Okay. Home now. And I think the place is ready for the party. I've still got to change, but I had to tell you about this weird thing that just happened.

I got home from work forty-five minutes ago or something like that. I'm usually tired after being on my feet for four or five hours, and you'd think that I'd be doubly tired after not sleeping last night, but I'm feeling pretty energized today. Maybe it's the party coming up. I had a really good talk with that Alex guy at the record shop, too, so maybe...

At work we talked about the party. Everybody was excited to come over tonight. Bailey and Scott are coming. They both work with me at Spongecake. I know Bailey the best--she and I are on the bakery side of things, so we're together all day. She's really fun, very bubbly and friendly. I really like her. So she and her girlfriend are coming.

And then there's Scott, he works on the coffeeshop side, so we only talk on breaks or when he has an order for us. He's nice. That sounds like I don't mean it, but he really is nice. Sometimes he can be...well, I think he might have a crush on me? And sometimes he seems irritated that I don't feel the same way? Like he says things that are really protective, or like he's worried about me, but it comes off as a little assy. I'm not being fair. He's a decent guy and he did help me move stuff in here. Anyway, he's coming, too.

And Alex is coming. And I just don't know. Alex comes into the bakery every day, and he always orders an almond scone, and then he sticks around and talks. And he's funny, and he's genuine, and he's sort of cool--he plays bass in a band, and has this little thing that wants to be a goatee. He's cute, okay? And he's really nice. He's not...well, Rhys wasn't always nice. So I've

started stopping by the record store--he works at a record store next door to Spongecake--I've started stopping by after work just to chat. And then we started texting, and that's been fun. We mainly talk about music, as you might expect. But it's been...I don't know, uncomplicated. It's the only time I don't think about Rhys, or Claire, or the hospital, or any of that. It's so nice to just talk. So I invited him tonight. And now I'm nervous.

And that's ridiculous. Like patently ridiculous. After everything else, it's silly to be nervous about a boy. I haven't even talked to anybody about him. Well, that's not true, I mentioned him to Leah. And Bailey sees him in the bakery and teases me about him. Scott doesn't like him, but that's kind of Scott. But I haven't like, *talked* about him to anyone. In high school, when I had a crush I would talk to Claire, and she'd listen and giggle and say inappropriate things. Give me advice on what to say. I asked a guy to winter formal because Claire just wouldn't leave me alone until I did it. Jerry Dominick. I remember how Claire squealed when I told her he'd said yes, how we jumped up and down on my bed.

I ended up not going, because that's when everything started with Claire and the hospital. Junior year was a shambles. And everybody looked at me differently afterwards. No Jerry Dominick for Anneliese.

No Claire for anybody.

Which is...*not* what I'm talking about. God, I am the queen of tangents. I only turned this on to tell you about what happened after work. Like I said, I stopped and talked with Alex a little at the record store. We mainly talked about what he could bring to the party. Anyway, I didn't stay too long because I wanted to get home and make sure everything was ready. But I still felt like I was running late, so I rushed home, parked the car in the side lot, and was sort of fast-walking across the porch to the door. Baskerville was in the front yard playing with something. I wouldn't

normally have even paid attention to the dog--as long as he's not growling at me I'd rather stay away from him--but he was making this low grunting noise that sounded, well, it sounded alarming. I was worried he had cornered a cat or something. I still had my bag with me, so I grabbed my pepper spray--don't laugh at me, okay, that dog scares me--and I went over towards him. I shouldn't have worried, though. He didn't even look up at me. I didn't see Mrs. Aickmann anywhere. I'd never seen her let him run loose like that. I got within ten feet or so, and then I saw what he had.

Actually I don't know what it was originally. What I saw was a chunk of meat, roughly rectangular, torn and bloody. It was thick, thicker than a steak or anything you'd buy at the store. It had clearly been ripped from something, some animal, but I couldn't think what kind of thing that size would be in our yard. Unless it was another big dog? There was no fur, or at least not any more. It was just a big mass of blood and meat, and Baskerville was tearing at it, growling and jerking and spraying blood across the grass. It was shocking coming up on it all of a sudden like that.

I felt that pain in my chest again, like I'd been punched or bruised. It hit me out of nowhere, I turned away--I thought I might vomit--and then I almost screamed, because Mrs. Aickmann was standing right behind me. She had a cigarette in her hand, and she was looking directly at me, like the dog wasn't even there.

I said something like "your dog has killed something," and she glanced over at him and then back at me. She took a drag from her cigarette, and now it was getting maximum weird, you know? The dog was still ripping into the bloody *thing* and she was just standing there like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I said. "Can you take it from him or something? It's disgusting!"

She looked fully at the dog then, like she was seeing him for the first time. I wondered if maybe she was senile? She acted like she couldn't understand what she was seeing. Then she said "I can't do anything. Once he's got something, that's it. It's best to just let him finish."

I couldn't think what else to say. I've been worried about Baskerville being dangerous ever since I met the dog, but I didn't know how to say that. I asked, "What is it, even? Is it another dog? A cat?"

And Mrs. Aickmann said "It's not the cat. I just saw her inside. And it's much too big." She was staring at the dog now, and she looked like she was about to cry. "It's not the cat," she said. And then she said again: "I can't do anything."

"Well, clean up after it at least," I said, and I went inside as fast as I could.

The whole thing has really unsettled me. At the end it looked like her heart had just been broken--she was staring at the dog like her life was over. And Jesus, I don't know what kind of thing it had killed, but it was gross. I felt like I wanted to shower just having seen it. What if she's got dementia or something? She shouldn't be responsible for a big animal like that. Or animals--I didn't even know she had a cat. The whole thing is fucked up.

In fact, I think I am going to take a shower. I'm sweaty from work, and the dog... The apartment looks good. I've got a cake in the oven, and I've got an hour before everybody's coming over. Maybe I can shake this feeling.

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

[Pause.]

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

Okay, I'm getting tired of this. More mirror bullshit. I'm standing in front of the sink, again, just wearing a towel on my head, again, and I see something move behind me, a rustle of the

shower curtain, just like before. So this time, instead of running to the bedroom, I turn and yank the curtain aside. Because it's ridiculous, right? I'm twenty-six years old, and it's silly to be afraid of what's hiding in the shower, for god's sake. And like always, there's nothing there.

Except there is. The water has just finished draining out of the tub--it's an old claw-foot thing that must have been original to the house--and there, in the middle of the tub, pointing towards the bathroom side, is a footprint. A wet, bare footprint, mostly water but a little mud mixed in it.

I know. "Anneliese, you were just standing barefoot in the shower, of course there's a footprint." But it wasn't me. This footprint was at least a quarter smaller than my foot. It was a kid's footprint. Like a child had been standing barefoot in the tub, watching me at the sink.

But there's nowhere to go, right? No way out of the tub. The bathroom is tiny, I mean, *really* tiny, and I turned and pulled the curtain immediately. And I had just been in there, like a minute before. If this was just a peeping tom thing, like if Thomas was just trying to catch a glimpse of me naked then I wouldn't--well, okay that would still be pretty bad. But it's *impossible*. No one could have been in there.

I'm dressed and I'm sitting on my bed, and I'm trying not to hyperventilate. Leah's joke about the house being haunted isn't very funny right now.

Weirdly, all I can think about is being in the hospital with Claire. Something about that footprint in the water. There was a day, or a night, it must have been at night, when we were in the hospital room. It was just me and Claire. Mom must have gone down the cafeteria or something. We were sitting there together. Towards the end we didn't talk much, we'd sit for hours sometimes and only say a few words. But we were there--and I'm certain about this memory, I can smell the room, feel the crisp sheets--and Claire said, "Look," and she pointed at

the floor. And I looked, and there was a line of footprints across the floor, leading from nowhere to nowhere. A child's feet, wet and red.

This can't be true, can it? Why do I remember it so vividly? A child's bloody footprints, six or seven of them, where they simply could not be. And Claire pointing to them, and smiling, sad, like she was showing me something she'd rather not, but that it was important I see. God, I can *see* it. Did I dream it?

[Sound fx: Digging]

What is that?

[Sound fx: Shifting. Blinds drawn.]

Holy shit. I cannot believe this. Mrs. Aickmann is in the backyard, burying whatever that thing was her dog had. What the hell? And right next to Mr. Blackwood's vegetable garden.

Gross! Who does that? I mean, I know I asked her to clean it up, but jesus.

[Sound fx: Banging on window]

Hey! What are you doing?

Jesus! What's wrong with her? She looks like she's been crying her eyes out. Oh god, what if it was her cat after all?

Mrs. Aickmann? Are you okay?--she can't hear me.

[Sound fx: Banging on window.]

Are you okay?

[Sound fx: Doorbell]

Crap. There's Leah. Okay. Time to party, I guess. I'll check on Mrs. Aickmann later.

[Sound fx: Blinds drawn.]

[Sound fx.: Doorbell]

Coming!

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

[Closing theme. Credits.]

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