

Chapter Nine

Jamieson: This episode of Palimpsest contains graphic depictions of gun violence.

[Sound fx: Click; rattle]

ANNELIESE: They talked me out of her, you know. That's what finally happened. The doctors. My parents. They talked and talked and medicated and talked some more, and eventually they convinced me she wasn't there. No. Not that she wasn't there. That she hadn't been there. Not since it happened. They told me she wasn't with me giggling in middle school, that she wasn't talking about boys with me in high school, that she never snuck me into clubs or crept into my bed at night or helped me stand up to Justine Fullerton at the football game when she tried to embarrass me in front of Adam Hammond. That we had never played mirrors or whispered til two in the morning. They made me believe me my memories were wrong. They convinced me I was crazy.

And now, I know that was ridiculous. I could never have called Justine Fullerton out like that without Claire's help. And can you imagine me hithchiking all the way to another town by myself at fourteen? I could never have done that--would never have even gotten out of bed that night if Claire hadn't told me to. And how could I have gotten through all the other stuff? Mom and dad's fighting, the divorce? Those long years alone? The funeral? I could never have done any of that without Claire. She was there every step of the way.

But people are afraid of what they can't understand. So they couldn't accept her. They worked so hard to keep us apart, to separate us. To banish her. And it worked, eventually. That hospital

stay finally did it. They rewrote my past. Or no...they made me doubt my past. The past didn't change. The memories were still there. I just didn't trust them anymore.

The only memory they left alone was the one I didn't want. The one everyone agreed on. The one I wish wasn't real. I don't talk about it. I try to pretend it's not there. But I never ever doubted that one. I still remember. I know how she died and I know when she died.

I remember killing Claire.

[Theme music; credits]

The thing about Claire is that she made everything and everybody around her better. She was so smart and so funny and so pretty. And when I was with Claire, I felt smart and funny and pretty, too. It's like she shared some of herself with you. She was just so...so good. And she couldn't help spilling that goodness out onto the people around her. The world was brighter with her in it.

We were always together. We slept in the same room, we ate the same things for breakfast, we watched the same TV shows. I wore her clothes when I could, even though they were big on me. We played endless games--not Mirrors, that wasn't til after, but hide and seek or charades or dress-up or these elaborate games of pretend where we would make up whole new identities and spend the day being the new people.

School was the worst, because we were in different grades and couldn't see each other. But even there, we could play together at recess, and sometimes I'd sneak over to her lunch table while my teacher wasn't looking. I got in trouble for that so many times that they finally just let me eat with her. I felt so lucky to have a best friend built in to my family. I know she was older,

but it's hard to imagine the two years she existed before I came along. I can't picture her separate from me. Mom used to joke that we were the same person.

That picture on the mantle, the one with her arm slung over my shoulder, is the truest picture of me I have. It was one of the last times Claire was uncomplicated. One of the last times it was pure.

Because when it happened, when the thing happened that changed everything about Claire, it was only a week or so after that picture was taken. I was eight and Claire was ten. It was spring break, and we were able to spend all day every day together. I mean, we played together all the time. But there was something special about that week. Something magical. Or maybe it just seems magical looking back. Because it was the last week.

I remember we spent one of those days building a huge blanket fort in our bedroom. We took blankets from all over the house. Mom was pissed, but when we finished we had an entire castle made of blankets--rooms within rooms. We didn't come out all day; we had to defend it against all intruders. That bugged Mom too, because we threw pillows at her when she came to tell us dinner was ready.

We also snuck onto the roof one day and sat against the chimney reading comic books. At first I was worried we'd fall. It felt so ridiculously high. I couldn't look up or out at all, at first. But Claire was never afraid of anything. She said "Liese, walking on the roof is just like walking on a floor." She said she'd never let anything happen to me. We brought a backpack full of junk food, and we sat eating Sour Patch Kids and Little Debbie Cakes and looking out over the neighborhood. It felt like we were the only people in the world.

[Beat]

I'm sitting here looking at Mrs. Aickmann's gun. It must be the one she used, when she...when it got to be too much. I get it. Waking up every day without him. Seeing the long stretch of your life with only you in it. I get it. If I had been alone, if Claire had really been gone, I don't know what I would have done. This gun, though, Mrs. Aickmann's gun. It's small and sort of, I don't know, dainty? It's absolutely a gun that a 1950s housewife would keep. It's almost cute. I mean, it did what it needed to. There was nothing cute about that. It got the job done. But it looks pretty innocuous, laying here on my kitchen table. It doesn't look anything like the gun I found.

[Sound fx: dog barking, faintly]

[Beat]

It was a Thursday. I know this because Mom was home. She worked from home on Thursdays, so we had to be quieter. We spent the morning watching Bugs Bunny reruns in our room. After lunch, we played dress up for a while, but then we got bored. Claire suggested hide and seek. We loved hide and seek, even though by that point there weren't really any surprising places to hide. We just went to the same dozen or so hiding spots and waited while the other one went through them one by one. Our main goal was to wait until the other one got close and then jump out and scare them. Like human jack-in-the-boxes. Claire was better at it. She always made me jump. I was always trying to really get her, but I only did it like one time out of five.

That day, I had already found Claire hiding in the pantry. She hadn't scared me because I saw her feet under the door. Then it was my turn. Claire stood with her face to wall in the kitchen and

started counting. I ran into our parents' bedroom. We didn't usually hide in there if Mom was home, because she didn't like us playing in her room. But she was upstairs in her office and I didn't think she'd know. Their room always felt quieter than the rest of the house. Because it was off limits, I guess. The shades were down, and it was all gray and muffled. I knew Claire would go for the closet first, since it was the easiest place to hide. So I thought I'd be clever. I got down on my belly and slid under the bed.

It took a long time. I knew it would. I knew Claire would go to all the other places first. She wouldn't expect me to be in Mom and Dad's room. I settled in. I could hear her finish counting, heard her high voice: "Ready or not, here I come!"

But I got bored. I was only eight. There was some junk down there. My parents shoved stuff under the bed when they didn't know where else to put it. Boxes of paper, like old receipts and stuff. A lockbox that I know now held important papers like birth certificates, the deed to the house, and their will. Grown-ups have things like wills. They expect they'll die one day. I doubt it had ever occurred to me.

I found the gun in a zippered pouch lying next to the lockbox. In my memory it is very big, though I don't know for certain what kind it was or anything like that. It was a revolver, very shiny, very clean, very heavy. I remember that, being surprised by how heavy it was. And I remember thinking: *This is something I've found. Claire doesn't know about this.*

I knew what a gun was. I wasn't as smart as Claire but I wasn't stupid. But I wasn't going to shoot it. I had found something interesting and exciting. I wanted my sister to see.

She found me, like she always did. She called to me to come out, that she could see my bare foot sticking out from under the bed. I slid out from where I was wedged, sort of elbow walking

on my belly. It was dusty under there, and I remember thinking Mom would yell at me for getting my shirt dirty.

I stood up, holding the gun. Claire was wearing her I Heart Beanie Babies shirt, her favorite. It had a small smear of chocolate near the collar. Her jeans had little flowers embroidered on the pockets. Daisies. This is what she wore the rest of our time together. She never changed clothes again.

I was going to say something. Something simple and obvious like "look what I found!" But I never said anything. When I stood up, Claire's eyes got huge. It took me a second to figure out what was happening, because I had never, ever seen her face do what it did when she saw the gun. Claire, ten years old, and so much more sophisticated than me. My much better half. She spoke in a very quiet voice. A very grown-up voice. She said, "Liese. You shouldn't touch that."

I looked at the gun in my hand. And I looked back at Claire. And then I got it. It was so outside of my reality, that it took a minute to click. Claire was scared. It felt like a dream. A nightmare. Claire was scared. And suddenly the weight of that--the weight of Claire's unimaginable fear--became a tangible thing. A rising panic in my chest. Something was terribly wrong. I didn't know what it was or how to fix it, but I knew it.

I was only eight.

Claire said, "Liese, put the gun down." But I didn't know how. I felt tears welling up, and I couldn't make my hands do anything. Claire said my name one more time: "Liese..." And then the world exploded.

I don't know why it went off. It's the one part of my memory that literally doesn't exist. I don't know if I squeezed the trigger in my panic. I don't know if something malfunctioned. I

don't know anything about guns. I just know that I was holding it, looking at Claire, and then everything changed forever.

The noise was so loud it stopped being a noise. It was just the landscape we were in. Everything was the noise. And then there was no noise--for a long time it seemed, everything was silent. Like it was such a complete and all-encompassing sound that no other sound was necessary. Sound was done. So everything that happened next was in a silence as big as the gunshot.

But I didn't even think about any of that until later. Here's what happened.

The gun leapt up in my hand. I remember that very clearly. It moved by itself and lifted my hand up and back. It almost hit me in the face, but my whole body was moving with it. I stumbled, but I didn't fall.

A flower grew in the center of Claire's chest. Red petals that bloomed impossibly fast. Her face never changed, her eyes were still wide and staring, her mouth was still shaped around my name. She started to fall. There was so much blood. I don't know how a body that small could hold that much blood. But it was everywhere. For a moment, the whole room seemed to be awash in blood. I had dropped the gun somehow; it was lying on the floor, in the blood. Something released inside me, and I ran. I didn't know where I was going. I just ran.

I couldn't hear our mother, yelling, crashing down the stairs. But I met her at the bedroom door. I looked up into her face. She was looking over my shoulder, into the room. She was about to start screaming, but she hadn't yet. I didn't want to look, to follow her gaze, but I couldn't stop myself.

I don't remember seeing Claire's body, and I suppose that's some sort of blessing. All I saw were the footprints. My own footprints, my eight-year-old feet, tracking my sister's blood across

the hardwood floor of my parents' bedroom. It was hours and hours before anyone thought to look at my feet. By that time the blood had dried to a thick rusty brown. It took a long time to wash it off. Sometimes it feels like I never did.

[Sound fx: dog barking]

[Beat]

Did you hear that? Or is that just something I can hear? Baskerville. I think if I knock on that door, Mrs. Aickmann will be there. I don't know what to say to her, but I feel like I need to say something. I'm not helping anything sitting here. Living in the past.

[Beat]

Anyway. I hope this is what you wanted. I hope you believe me. I told you I knew. When she died. How she died. I've never forgotten. I've never denied it.

I've never forgotten the hours and days afterward, the irrelevant ambulance. The police. The time I spent answering questions from a young social worker who tried her best to hide her horror. She couldn't. We both knew I had killed Claire.

And I've never forgotten the funeral. I stood next to the grave, off to the side. I was near my parents but not right with them. They stood a few feet away, holding Jackson's hand. I don't think Dad ever looked directly at me again. It's not his fault.

But then I felt someone take my hand. I looked away from where they were lowering the casket. I expected it to be one of my classmates. The whole school was there, it felt like. But it wasn't. It was Claire. She was wearing the same clothes. The same little chocolate stain on the collar. Her hair was moving a little in the breeze, and she was smiling. That stunning Claire smile. Her hand felt so warm in mine.

She said, "Don't cry, Liese. I'll take care of you. You know I'd never leave you."

And she never did.

Dead is just a word. It doesn't mean anything.

[Click; rattle]

[Theme music; credits]

