

Chapter Seven

[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]

Anneliese [a little pissy]: Okay I'm struggling today. I'm sitting on the couch. It is a pretty day outside, but I'm not going to look out the window at it. Because the tree is out there, and the tree doesn't have a swing in it. And I don't think there is really a boy who could swing on it. So if I look outside and see a boy on a swing, what would that mean? I can't look.

So I've pulled the blinds, and I've covered all the mirrors. I called in sick to work. I can see all the way down the hall to my bedroom, and the place is empty. But if I look away, it might not be empty anymore. So I can't not look. I'm getting hungry, but this is the only place where I can see the whole apartment.

But the real struggle is in my head. Big surprise, right? I'm...grappling...with some definitions this morning. And since you decided to *abandon* me, to, I don't know, take your well-adjusted life and move to another well-adjusted city, where I guess nutjobs like me have more money or something, I thought maybe you could help me out. Because you sort of owe me, don't you? For leaving me here with nothing? You owe me. So here are some words I'm having a hard time with this morning:

Haunted

Dead

Gun

Depression

Hallucination

Gun

Relapse

Do you have any insight into those? Huh? Because none of them are making a whole lot of sense to me right now, and I don't think it's because I haven't been to sleep. I think it might be because I've spent my whole life living with the dead. And this place is no different.

[Theme music. Credits]

You once told me that my **[searches for the word]** *difficulties* were like an addiction. That not only could I not let go, but I got comfort from holding on. Like I was somehow in love with my own grief. Like that doesn't make me sound even more screwed up that I am. "Akin to drug addiction," you said. And I joked that at least it was cheaper than cocaine, and you did that creased brow thing you always do when I don't follow your script.

And I mean on one level I guess I know what you were trying to say. It's always there, floating just above and around your head, waiting to step into reality. "The elephant in the room," right? Except in this case the elephant knows it needs to move along but it's sticking around anyway just in case you throw it some peanuts.

And the thing is--you've always got a whole bucket of peanuts, just sitting by your chair, and all you have to do is dip your hand and toss a few. And it's a fucking temptation.

In the hospital, there was another doctor. Long before you. You weren't the first. You weren't even the fifth. And this doctor, Dr. Stevens, he was an expert in memory. Or they told me he was, anyway. He tried to tell me what was wrong with me, and I really didn't understand most of what he said. But one of the phrases he kept saying was "false memory." He tried to tell me

what it meant, but I never could get it. And I thought it was because I was stupid. I'm just a dumb sixteen-year-old and I can't understand these big scientific concepts. I'm no psychologist, right?

But I've had a long time to think about it since. All through my senior year, when I was "fixed." All through college, when I could reinvent myself. All through Rhys. And now I don't think I was stupid at all. I think everything that doctor said was just bullshit. I know what it's like to be scared, and how when you're scared you make up all kinds of things to rationalize or explain away what scares you. Those explanations can get really complex and convoluted, and they can even sound like real scientific theories. But that doesn't make them true.

And all those years of thinking about it, I just don't buy it. That doctor was scared of what I told him. Of what I had seen. Of what I knew was happening. And he wanted to talk me out of it, because he needed it not to be true. And the whole time, Claire was sitting next to him, smiling that sad smile, shaking her head.

Claire knew it was bullshit.

But I was confused, even though I shouldn't have been. Because I *knew* who I should trust. I'm not confused anymore.

I don't need anybody to tell me if my memories are real. They're *my* memories. I was *there*. And so was she. It's irrelevant whether you or anybody else says they aren't true. Because you weren't *there*.

I'm the expert on this.

But here's where it gets shaky. If all that was true, then all bets are off, right? If Claire was there that whole time, then Thomas is here now, isn't he? Because let's just call this what it is. If *ghosts* are real, then they're real. And I can't pick and choose. God, even saying that out loud feels like a betrayal. But there's no reason to pretend that--

[Sound fx: Door knocking]

Who...?

[Beat]

[Sound fx: Door knocking]

Hold that thought.

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Pause]

[Sound fx: Click, rattle.]

I'm at the kitchen table. In front of me is a box that I haven't opened. I found it in the basement, and I probably shouldn't have taken it, because it's not mine. It's Mrs. Aickmann's. Or...I assume it's hers. It says "Aickmann" in faded black magic marker on the lid. It's just an old shoe box. It's dusty and taped shut with clear tape that has yellowed with age. I know I shouldn't open it.

I should back up, though. That knock on the door was Mr. Blackwood, who lives across the hall from Bri upstairs. I think I told you that my apartment is the only one that has access to the

basement? That seems like a design flaw to me but whatever. Mr. Blackwood had some things he wanted to put in the basement. He's a sweet guy, he was very apologetic about bothering me, and seemed, I don't know, small and shy. He told me how much he liked the muffins I had left for him. And we talked a little about the garden--what he had planned for next year. He told me what the pretty purple flowers out front are, but I've already forgotten. I spent most of the conversation wondering if I should tell him about what I saw Mrs. Aickmann burying next to the back garden, but I decided not to. I didn't know if I could get through telling him without seeming crazy. Anyway. He wanted to bring a couple of boxes down to the basement, some old picture albums and files and things.

I offered to help carry them down. It's the first time I've been down there, except for a quick walk-through right after I moved in. I don't like it. The ceiling is really low, and it's a dirt floor. I worry about rats. There's a bunch of old junk down there. Each tenant supposedly has a little section we can use, but it's really all jumbled, probably because nobody wants to stay down there long enough to organize it.

So we go down the stairs, which are rickety as hell, and we go into the main area, which is through a wooden doorway that I had to duck to get through. Mr. Blackwood puts his box down and starts moving some stuff around to make room. My box is kind of heavy--I think he's putting books down here, which is really bad for the books--so I set mine down while I wait. But when I do, I knock over a stack of smaller boxes that was behind me. They throw up a cloud of dust and it takes a minute before I can stop coughing. Mr. Blackwood was so concerned, but it was really just dust.

I start to stack them back up. They're smallish. Shoeboxes, cigar boxes, manuscript boxes. They're old. I can't imagine they belong to anybody who lives in Hawthorne Heights now.

Except. One of the shoeboxes is labelled on the top. I couldn't be sure, in that dim light, so I turned on my cell flashlight. And I was right. It said "Aickmann" in black marker.

After we had got Mr. Blackwood's stuff stowed away, he thanked me and left. I was still worried about Mrs. Aickmann. I haven't seen her since night before last, when she had folded the cloth over the gun. I'm worried about her. She looked so broken, so angry, so lost. So I went and knocked on her door, again, and called for her. But nothing.

So I did something that I know I shouldn't have. I went back down to the basement and I got the box, and I brought it up here to the kitchen.

I don't know what I thought I would find. I just want some sort of information. Some insight. I really think she's not well. The look on her face last night, that sad whisper: "He's not there." And the gun. I'm worried about her. And I thought maybe there was something in the box that would, I don't know. Explain her.

[Pause]

I haven't opened the box. I cleaned the dust off it, and I even got a little paring knife out and cut the tape holding the top on. But I haven't opened it. Because I know I shouldn't. It's not mine.

So.

I'm going to walk away. Because that's the right thing to do.

[Sound fx: Anneliese walking to living room]

Okay. Back to the couch. I'm kind of glad Mr. Blackwood came by, actually. It threw me out of whatever that was I was doing. Telling you I don't trust doctors won't help. And I can't

imagine you care *at all* what Claire thinks about you or your theories. She always saw through bullshit. Always called it out. My sister was amazing.

I remember this time in middle school when my mother was screaming at me. I was thirteen, I guess. We had just gotten home, we had been somewhere outside, like the park or the cemetery, I can't remember, and we had tracked mud on the carpet. Mom scolded me, not bad, but you know, "look at the mess you made, Anneliese." She didn't say anything to Claire. Claire never got scolded. It wasn't her fault; she always defended me. And when I tried to tell mom it wasn't fair, she flipped out. She was crying and telling me to just stop it. That it wasn't a game, that I was just hurting everyone all over again.

I ran in my room and slammed the door. I sat in front of my vanity, trying to stop crying, and Claire was there, smiling. Her face was next to mine in the mirror. She put her arms around me and said "don't cry Liese. I'm here. They don't know anything. They don't know anything." She made me feel better. I always knew I wasn't alone when I had Claire. She even helped me clean up the muddy footprints.

Footprints. Footprints everywhere.

[Pause]

Can I be honest with you? Sure I can, what are you gonna say to stop me? If I'm being honest with myself, I'm afraid to open that box. I mean, I know I shouldn't open it because it's not mine, but that's not why I haven't. I'm afraid.

Because I think Thomas is dead. I think he's a sweet little ten-year-old kid, and I think he's been dead since before I got here. And I don't know why he talks to me. I do't know why he's still in the yard. But I think he's dead.

And I think Mrs. Aickmann is his mother. And that's why she looks so wrecked. And that's why I worry about her having that gun.

But I might be wrong. I might be jumping to conclusions, right? But here's the thing--I'm afraid that box will tell me. So I don't think I'm going to open it.

[Beat]

I think instead I'm going to go to bed early. I haven't slept at all, and I can't skip work again. I suppose that means I'll have to see Alex. Ugh. I can burn that bridge tomorrow. Tonight, I want to sleep.

I'll talk to you tomorrow.

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Whispery, scared] I think I heard something. In the house. It's **[checks phone]** 2 a.m. I was sleeping, really deep sleeping, I don't remember going to bed even, but I woke up. You know when you wake up and the silence is huge? And you know that a really loud noise has just ended? Like there's no sound but the sense that there just was one? That's how I woke up. Like I just missed something.

That was, like, five minutes ago. I haven't heard anything else, but I thought it might be a good idea to have a record of it if something else happens. And, I don't know, I've gotten used to talking to you. And I think that...wait a minute. What is that?

[Sound fx: shifting in bed]

There's something *wet* in the bed.

[Sound fx: throwing covers back]

Oh my god! My feet are covered in blood! Oh god oh god oh god oh god. It's everywhere!

[Sound fx: confused movement, sheets, Anneliese moving to bathroom]

Shit shit shit shit.

[Sound fx: water running]

It's coming off. Jesus. God, it's everywhere!

What? Who's there?

[Sound fx: water turns off]

[Beat]

Is somebody there?

[Sound fx: footstep]

Who are you?

Voice: Liese.

Anneliese [whispers]: Claire? Thomas? Who are you?

Voice: Liese... Liese...

Anneliese: Stop it! Who is it?

[Sound fx: rapid footsteps]

[Anneliese screams]

[Sound fx: Rattle, click]

[Closing theme; End credits]

