

Chapter Six

[Sound fx: click, rattle]

Anneliese [she is sleepy, just waking up]: Good morning. Or...afternoon, I guess. It was a really late night. Ugh, the house is trashed. I mean, I don't know how it got like this. It wasn't like a crazy party or anything. I don't know how it happens. How a house can go from mint condition to disaster area in that short a time, I have no idea. I've just downsized--it's not like I have that much stuff. But the apartment looks like somebody picked it up and shook it. There are way more dirty glasses in here than there were people at the party. I know I should clean them up, but I have no plans to get off this couch any time soon.

I don't know, though. Coffee would be nice.

God, I can't wake up. Thank goodness I don't have to work today. You know, I didn't plan to sleep on the couch last night. Why did I? I can't remember when I...I know that I went outside after Alex left. And then I talked with Mrs. Aickmann.

[Sound fx: Anneliese sits up on the couch]

Oh my god. I had forgotten talking with Mrs. Aickmann.

I think she's really screwed up, that woman. I know I've talked about her being really unpleasant, but that's only because...well, because she's *really* unpleasant. And last night was no different. But now I'm worried that she might be...I don't know what.

Here's what happened. After Alex and I, well, after Alex left, I stood here in the living room, shaking. I couldn't calm down, and I couldn't catch my breath. After a few minutes, I went outside. I thought the fresh air might, I don't know, help me chill out. Make my heart stop pounding.

So I went and stood on the porch. It was something like one in the morning? There's a streelight at the far edge of the yard by the road, and light from my window spilled out on the end of the porch. Between the two it was pitch dark. I could just make out the outline of the big tree if I strained my eyes. I tried to see if Thomas was still standing under it. I guess if I'm being honest, part of the reason I went outside was to see if he was there. But I couldn't see anything.

Or not at first, anyway. It's so quiet out there at night. There's still traffic on Sycamore, a little, even at one in the morning, but this far down King it's dead. The crickets were the loudest thing out there. There was a slight breeze, and I could hear it moving through the leaves. It was cold, but not freezing.

And it worked. For a moment, standing there in the dark and the quiet, I was calm. I wasn't thinking about Alex, or Rhys, or guns. I could almost feel Claire there with me, her arm around me, watching the dark. I was at peace.

And then I heard something. Out in the yard, I heard... I don't know what it was. It sounded like a creaking, a rhythmic creaking. Creak, creak. Creak, creak. Faint but very much there. I strained my eyes, trying to see. I had gotten a little adjusted to the dark, but the light from the window still kept most of the yard invisible. But I thought I saw something moving, under the tree. A blur, a soft shifting against the black.

I went to the steps. I don't know if I really meant to go into the yard or not. I just wanted to see better. I called out, "Hello?" I thought it might be Thomas. Then I thought Alex was still here, maybe? Mad at me, or maybe sorry?

But there was no response. Just that creak, creak, creak. Like what? A rocking chair? A door opening and closing? I still thought there was something moving under the tree, but it was hard

to be sure. And then suddenly it got very cold, and I didn't feel peaceful at all. I wanted to go back inside. That get-the-fuck-out-of-dodge feeling Bailey talked about in her ghost story.

So I turned to go back up the couple of steps to the porch, and I got hit by that pain in my chest. Stronger than it ever had been--like something had blown my ribs open. The pain was huge, a bruised ache around a wet wound, radiating out to every part of my body. I could actually taste blood in my mouth. It was so sudden, so intense, I staggered and caught myself against the column at the top of the steps. And when I raised my head...

Mrs. Aickmann was standing in front of me, three feet away. I jumped and lost my balance, and fell on my knees. Mrs. Aickmann looked at me, kneeling there in front of her, and then she looked out into the yard and she whispered, "It's not Claire."

[Theme music; credits]

At least, that's what I thought she said. She was whispering, and my head was pounding with pain. She finally reached out and helped me to my feet. The pain had faded to a dull throb. I thanked her, told her I tripped or something. And then I asked her what she had said.

So she said it again, louder: "He's not there."

So I said, "Who?" and she said, "He can't be there."

I asked her again, "Who?" But she didn't answer me. She just turned and went in the house. I followed her into the foyer. I was really happy to get inside, away from whatever I had imagined in the yard. Now that my head had cleared a little I remembered when I had last seen Mrs. Aickmann, just before the party, burying that bloody thing in the back garden, crying her eyes out. At the same time I realized what I had heard in the yard. That back and forth creaking

sound--it wasn't a rocking chair or a squeaky door. It was a rope. I had heard someone swinging on the rope swing under the tree--the swing that had been gone for years.

Mrs. Aickmann was opening the door to her apartment. I called out to her and she turned around. Dim light was spilling out of her open door, so she was half in shadow, half in light. She was wearing the same housedress she always did, and her face was that same mixture of spite and sadness I had seen that afternoon when she had told me she couldn't stop the dog once it had something.

I said, "Mrs. Aickmann, are you okay? Do you need something?" And she stopped and cocked her head, like she was really considering. Finally she said, "It's late," which is one of her standard-issue phrases. Of course it was late--it was way past one and the whole big house was silent around us. She looked so frail standing there.

I pushed one more time. I said, "Were you talking about Thomas? Is that who's not there?"

She flinched, like I had said something rude or obscene. But she didn't answer me. She just stood by the open door. I had never seen the inside of her apartment, and I could only glimpse a little from where I stood in the hallway. But I could see...

I want to say this just like it happened.

I could see a small table just inside the door. There was a little tiffany lamp on it--that's where the light was coming from--and a little crocheted doily. And on the doily, right under the lamp, was a gun. A little snub-nosed revolver with a pearl handle. I could see it very clearly, laying in the lamplight like a movie close-up. It felt like all the air went out of the room, like all there was in the whole house was me and that gun.

It was only a moment, ten seconds, maybe. Mrs. Aickmann followed my gaze, saw the gun, and quickly folded the doily over it, hiding it. "Good night," she spit at me. And she closed the door.

And then I guess I came in and fell asleep on the couch? Because here I am, at **[looks at phone]** 12:45, in the clothes I wore to the party, surrounded by glasses and plates, with a pounding head and a taste in my mouth like something died.

This whole thing feels like a dream. Did this really happen? Is this just because of my fight with Alex? I know something tapped on the window while Alex was still here. Didn't it?

I don't know how to check. I can't just knock on Mrs. Aickmann's door and ask her if she has a gun. And she has a right to have a gun, right? It's none of my business if she does. She just seemed so, I don't know, wrecked. That's the word. Mrs. Aickmann is wrecked.

Okay. It's almost one. I don't have work, but I still should get up and be a human being. I should take a shower. How stinky do I have to get before it outweighs the fact that I'm afraid of the bathroom? And oh look, I've gotten, what, four texts from Alex already this morning. If I don't get up and start cleaning I'll text him back. And I don't plan on texting back. Okay, here I go. Shower.

[Sound fx: click, rattle]

[Pause]

[Sound fx: click, rattle]

Nobody but me in the shower today, so yay for small favors. I got almost everything in the dishwasher. The stuff that's left doesn't stick out above the edge of the sink, so that's success, as

far as I'm concerned. The living room doesn't look like it's been ransacked anymore. I've gotten **[checks]** six texts from Alex now, and one from Leah asking how it went after she left. I'm gonna turn my phone off, but I wanted to talk to you one more time.

I shouldn't have yelled at you last night. It's not your fault. It's mine. I should have known better than to let a bunch of people come in here. I don't do people well. And I should have known Alex wouldn't understand.

I don't know why I'm shocked at this. There's a long list of things I should have known, going all the way back to elementary school. Anneliese Glaser, queen of missing the obvious. I probably shouldn't have blown up at him, but I can't stand men telling me what to do. Like he could ever know what I need.

[Deep breath]

On the mantle, just across the room, is a photo of me and Claire taken when we were eight and ten. I can't make it out clearly from here, but I've spent so many hours looking at it I know every nuance. It's 1999, and we're standing in the dining room at the old house. Mom and Dad sold that house a year later and moved into the one Mom's still in. In the picture, we're dressed in fancy clothes, or what we thought were fancy clothes--pink dresses and fake pearl necklaces with ridiculous oversized high heel shoes we had stolen from Mom's closet--all ready to play tea party or something. We both of us look out of place; we were never girly girls, but Claire liked to dress up sometimes and I did everything she did. Claire has her arm slung around my shoulder and is smiling directly at the camera. She's dazzling. You can feel the mischievousness radiating from her, shining from those eyes. My face is in profile, looking up at her. I'm smiling too, but my

smile is more like awe. Like I'm looking at something so beautiful that I almost can't believe it's real. Claire's fingers are tangled in my hair and she's laughing. It's my favorite picture. I think it's the prettiest I ever looked.

Last night, when Alex said...what he said, I looked at that picture. And I knew what Claire would want. She wouldn't want him in our house. And you don't argue with Claire.

I can't text him back. He probably thinks I'm crazy now. And even if I am, I know I was right. He's got to go. I can't argue with Claire.

[Sound fx: Click, rattle]

[Pause]

[Sound fx: click, rattle]

Looks like my sleep schedule is all screwed up now. I guess I shouldn't have slept til one. I'm sitting on my bed, in the dark, wishing I could sleep. I was thinking about Mrs. Aickmann again. I didn't see her all day today, and I'm worried. I don't know that much about her. I know her husband died, because she told me that herself when I first met her, but I don't know any details because Baskerville started barking and cut the conversation short, like he always does. But doesn't she have any kids? Is she all alone? Maybe I'll go check on her tomorrow. I'm supposed to work, but not til 2. Why would she have a gun laying out like that? I should ask Bri what she knows.

For me, the worst thing about being alone in the dark is this ever-present idea that you might not be alone. The dark is so complete here at the back of the house that there aren't shadows, but

I can see shapes anyway. Darker patches against the black. Things moving by the door, sliding in and out of the closet. They're not scary. I know it's just my eyes inventing things to see.

What *is* scary are all the things I've spent today avoiding talking about. Like how can I hear somebody on a swing that isn't there? And why was Thomas standing outside my window in the middle of the night? If he was. I don't know if Leah actually saw him or if she was just humoring me. I told Leah that I thought Thomas was dead. Is that true? Do I think that? Or is it just because of Claire?

I wish I could ask Claire what to do, like I used to. Do the dead have an affinity for each other? Like, would Claire have any insight into Thomas because they're both dead? I want to believe that you get all the answers--Claire was always wiser than me, and it would only be right for her to learn the ultimate truth before I do. But what if the dead are as lost and in the dark as we are? What if there are no answers? What if Claire misses me as much as I do her?

This is moving in a depressing direction. I'm going to try to sleep. No dogs barking tonight. Nothing jumping on the bed so far. Maybe I can get through a night without any weird shit. Here's hoping. Good night.

[Sound fx: click rattle]

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