

Chapter Ten

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

[Sound fx: Click, rattle.]

[Sound fx: occasional dog barking throughout opening]

Anneliese: I am trying to imagine the time between Thomas' death and Mrs.

Aickmann's...decision. Seven years. Did she think about it before that? She must have. Did she take the gun out and look at it? Sit and contemplate what it would feel like? And what happened in 1963? Why January 23rd? Was that his birthday? The day her husband died? Is that just the day it finally got to be too much? What happened to Baskerville? Seven years is a long time for a dog. Did she wait for him to go? Did she take him with her? This gun is just lying here, refusing to give me any answers.

I'm talking around it, though. Here's what I really want to know. When did Thomas start haunting this house? He couldn't have wanted his mother to suffer. He's such a sweet kid. I don't believe he was here those seven years. I don't think he was still with her. Not like Claire was with me.

I guess it's ironic I don't know a lot about ghosts. I've only had the one. And Claire was taking care of me. She was always happy. Mrs. Aickmann and Thomas are just hurting, over and over again. I don't think they know they can let go.

Or can they? Are they tied to the house somehow? Claire was wherever I was. Or vice-versa. Do ghosts haunt people? Or do they haunt places? If it's not the house, then what ties them here? Can ghosts haunt each other?

Here's another question. Why am I the only person who sees them? Am I some kind of ghost magnet? Do my years with Claire make me...what? Clairvoyant? **[Laughs]** I wish that was funny. I don't want to be the ghost whisperer.

Leah has been texting me. I think Bri must have called her after she found me in the foyer. I know what that must have looked like--Anneliese beating her hands against the door to an empty apartment, crying and raving about a non-existent woman. I don't even know what to say to them. It's not a big deal. "Anneliese is crazy" is a part I've played before. It was one of Rhys' favorite scenes. But I'm not gonna text her back. Not right now.

I've been replaying the last few days in my head. I haven't seen or heard Baskerville since the party. And I haven't seen Mrs. Aickmann since she folded that doily over the gun and slammed her door.

[Sound fx: dog barking]

But I can hear him now. I think she's there. I think that apartment isn't empty right now. At least I don't think it will be empty for me.

So I don't think I can sit here much longer. I'm going to go over there. I'm going to go talk to Violet Aickmann's ghost.

[Sound fx: Click; rattle]

[Theme music; opening credits]

[Sound fx: Click; rattle]

Oh my god. I can't believe what just happened. I think...I think it might be over? What time is it? Wow. I've only been gone an hour. It feels like...

Okay. Here's what happened.

I went into the foyer. It took me a minute to get my courage up. The last time I was there, there were...footprints. I didn't know if I could handle that, not after reliving the whole thing. So I steeled myself. And I opened the door. And there were no footprints. The floor was smooth and clean.

And Thomas was standing in the center of it. I almost screamed, but I caught myself. It was so unexpected. He wasn't...he wasn't like he was the last time I saw him. He was just a little boy: white t-shirt, blue jeans, barefoot. A clean unmarked little ten-year-old boy. A perfect unthinkable victim, just like Claire. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to talk to him now that...now that I knew.

So we stood there, looking at each other. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't look sad, either. He met my gaze calmly, almost serenely. I stepped into the hallway, and he spoke to me.

"Are you going in there?" he asked. He looked at the door to Mrs. Aickmann's apartment.

I said yes, yes I was. And then I said "I'm sorry about what happened to you, Thomas. It was a horrible thing, and I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

He smiled then. "You're nice, Anneliese," he said. And then his smile faded. "Baskerville killed my cat," he said. "I got mad and yelled at him. That's why he..." he trailed off, and suddenly, his body split and opened; he was bloody and torn up like he had been last night, at the bathroom door. It was fast, a movie cut, a lightning flash, and then he was whole and clean again.

"My mom is sad," he said. "She won't let me in." He looked at the door again. "If you go in, will you take me with you?"

So is that it? Was he here the whole time, trying to be with her? Did she just refuse to see him? Did her guilt cloud her ability to see? I know how powerful guilt can be.

I said, "Of course you can come with me, Thomas." I took the three steps to Mrs. Aickmann's door, and Thomas reached up to take my hand. His hand felt so warm in mine. I raised my other hand and knocked on the door. No answer. No sound at all. I knocked again. Nothing.

I reached out and tried the handle, and unlike earlier today, it turned. The door was unlocked. So I opened it, and me and Thomas went inside the apartment.

The apartment was...surreal. It was homey and cozy, with thick rugs on the floor and flowered wallpaper and doilies on nearly every surface. An overstuffed sofa was against the wall under the windows, exactly in the place where my couch is on the other side of the hall. A little 1950s black and white TV on a stand in front of two easy chairs.

But it was also empty. From the corner of my eye, I could see that it was bare--no furniture, nothing on the floor, wallpaper long ago stripped away. But only when I looked sideways. In front of my face, it was Mrs. Aickmann's home.

She was standing between the living room and the kitchen, right in the doorway, facing the windows. She was in profile. She had the same flowered house dress as always. And she had the gun. As we came through the door, Mrs. Aickmann was raising the gun to her chest. She placed the barrel flat against her breast and I ran forward and shouted and Thomas cried out but we were too late and she squeezed the trigger and just like back in 1963, she shot herself through the heart.

This gunshot didn't sound like the one that killed Claire. It was small "pop," like a toy. But the effect was the same: it blew Mrs. Aickmann's chest open and blood sprayed across the wallpaper and ran down her house dress. We all screamed.

But she didn't fall. Violet Aickmann has been dead a long time and this wasn't really what it looked like. It was a re-enactment. A performance. The ghost of Mrs. Aickmann stood in the doorway of her kitchen, the red, wet hole in her chest bleeding onto her thick white rug. She looked sad, but she also looked surprised. Like she didn't know why she was still there. I had stopped when the gun went off, standing useless by the couch. But Thomas kept walking, moving to stand in front of his mother. In the aftermath of her suicide she lifted her head and saw him standing there.

Mrs. Aickmann's face fell in on itself, and she began to cry. Years of pain, years of guilt, years of being alone. She cried open-mouthed, uncontrollably. She fell to her knees and sobbed, and Thomas wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his chest. He rocked her while she cried, like she was the child instead of him. And he spoke to her, whispering into her bowed head: "Hush, mama. Hush. It's okay. I love you. It's not your fault."

I stood there, watching them. I was crying, too. The purity of his absolution. The purity of their love, bigger than the grave. And as I watched them, they started to...I don't know how to describe it. They got bright. They stood there together, her kneeling and him embracing her, and they got bright. Like they were lit from within. A white light that got brighter and brighter until I couldn't look directly at them. I turned my head away, towards the door.

[Beat]

And she was there. Claire was standing there. And she was...she had been shot. Her chest, just like Mrs. Aickmann's, had been ripped into. There was a red, wet hole where her heart should be. But she was smiling, and spread her arms out, like she wanted me to look at her, wanted me to see it all. The room was bathed in that light.

I was crying. I couldn't stop. I couldn't look away from what I had done. From the wreck of Claire's body. And she was talking to me. She was...

[Anneliese takes a moment to gather herself; she is crying]

She was saying the same things Thomas was saying. "It's not your fault, Liese. It's not your fault. I love you, Liese." She said "Don't cry, Liese."

And I stood there in front of my big sister, now so much younger and smaller than me, and I felt something open up inside me. Something let go and I felt myself empty out. I was still crying, harder than ever, but it felt different. Like it was purging something, something big and dark and ugly was being washed away.

The light was fading. I looked back at Thomas and Mrs. Aickmann and they were...fading. Like an old photograph. Their colors washed out, and they faded away. The apartment faded with them, the wallpaper and easy chairs and sofa all thinning out into nothing. I was in the bare rooms, empty walls standing above the empty floors.

But she was still there. When turned back to the door, Claire was still there. She was whole again, the chocolate stain on her collar the only mark on her unbroken body. She was my Claire. And she took my hand, and everything--everything--was okay. She led me out of the empty apartment and we came back here.

[Beat]

So I'm back where I started all of this. Sitting at my kitchen table, talking to my cell phone. The light through the window is wavy and beautiful, and I can see Yoga Lady sweeping her porch in the sunset. I feel better than I have since Rhys. Since I can remember, actually. I'm not afraid of the bathroom, and I'm not afraid of going to bed. I don't think I'm going to have to worry about Thomas, or Mrs. Aickmann, or Baskerville any more. I think...I think they're at peace. The whole house feels at rest.

I know there's still a lot to clean up. I need to go see if I still have a job. I need to talk to Leah and Bri and reassure them that I'm not losing my mind. I need to break things off with Alex. But I'm out of the woods, I think.

So that's why this is the last recording I'm going to make. Thank you for listening. It really did matter that I could talk to you, even when I was angry with you, even though you're not really listening.

But I'm much clearer on everything now. I told you from the beginning I knew when she died and I knew how she died. But I feel like really saying it, and then seeing her today like that, I feel like it's so much more real. I don't think I'll be confused any more. I was finally able to understand the how and the why, finally able to welcome her here.

So I'm sitting here, at my kitchen table, and I can feel the sunset on my face. My new apartment is perfect. I can look into the living room from here. The windows are red with light, and Claire is sitting on the couch, smiling at me. It finally feels like my place, you know? I don't

need to talk to cell phones, and I don't need to worry about anything. I know that we're okay. I know we'll be happy here.

[Sound fx: Click; rattle]

[Closing theme; credits]

