

## Chapter Three

**[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]**

**ANNELIESE:** Hi, it's me again. I know, "thanks for that clarification, Anneliese." Who else would it be, right? I guess I should start with a confession. I lied to you this morning. Not that it matters. It's not like you're ever going to hear these recordings. This is just for me, just so I can, I don't know, finally figure things out? Again? But I know that honesty is important, even--maybe especially--when it's yourself you're being honest with. So I should fess up when I'm not totally honest.

So, yeah, I lied to you. I said I was going to straighten up and get the apartment ready for the party before I went to work. And I didn't do that at all. I went outside instead. I just meant to step out for a minute, you know, feel the breeze and enjoy the morning a little. But it was such a gorgeous day I just stayed out there, sitting on the porch. Then I walked around the front yard, looking at the little flower beds around the edge. Mr. Blackwood from upstairs apparently is a big gardener, and he keeps up the yards. Bri says he's got a deal with our landlord, Molly, where he gets lower rent in exchange for doing all the yardwork. He loves it, Bri says. And it looks really nice. It's mainly grass, but he's got some little rock gardens by the street, and there are two flower beds between us and the next house, with some foxglove and some black-eyed susans and some pretty purple flowers I don't know the name for.

There's a set of stone steps leading down to the street, but they're crumbly. I can't imagine they get used very much. The street is too busy and there aren't any sidewalks. They're cool, though. A piece of an earlier time.

I checked out the oak tree, too. It's huge and old, with big spreading branches. I'll bet there's acorns everywhere in the fall. Mr. Blackwood keeps everything neat and clean. Come to think of it, Mrs. Aickmann does a pretty good job cleaning up after that monster dog she's got, too. I didn't see any dog poop. It's like the tenants are a whole community, which I guess we are, if only by default. It made me want to do something, too. I might bake something for the house, maybe scones or cupcakes or something I can leave by everyone's door. Muffins maybe. Something that says I'm a good neighbor.

There are two old pieces of rope tied up on one of the branches of the tree, cut off short underneath, way too high to reach. It looks like there might have been a swing there, a long time ago. They look frayed and gray, really old. I love that. I love all the layers of history you can see in an old house like this if you look for them. Like the old steps to the street. It's like you can see the memories. Like the experiences people have had leave marks, physical traces. Evidence.

There's a word for that. Are you ready? "Palimpsest." I love that word. It rolls in unexpected ways when you say it. "Palimpsest." It means layers on top of other layers, like a canvas that's had a portrait and then a landscape and then another portrait painted on it, one over the other, over the course of the years. The present gets layered over the past, but it doesn't erase the things that used to be there. There are always traces left. Some of them are obvious, and some are more subtle. But they're always there.

Like, I keep one of Claire's stones in my pocket. She had this little collection of smooth stones that she kept on her dresser. Some of them she found on the playground when we were in elementary school, and some people gave to her. I took her favorite one--it's this smooth gray rock with little veins of silver running through it. It's a little bigger than a marble. I keep it in my pocket, and when I'm worried or uncertain I can just slip my hand in and close my fingers around

it. I can feel all the times Claire held it, and all the times it's made me feel better, and that space on her dresser in her room. A totem. A palimpsest.

The remains of the old swing made me think of the little boy who had been playing under the tree, and I remembered that he had run into the back yard. So I wandered back there to see if he was still around. He wasn't. But wow--Mr. Blackwood has really done some work back there. There's a big vegetable garden running underneath the whole length of the back of the house. Tomatoes and peas and peppers and asparagus. Some little ornamental hot peppers, like tiny Christmas lights. There aren't any trees back there, so it gets good light. I don't know how I had missed it actually--it runs right under my bedroom window. Now I *have* to start baking, so I can trade for veggies.

Yoga lady was on her porch when I walked back through the parking lot, but she was doing some serious downward dog and I didn't do more than wave. She looks like she's in her fifties, maybe. Long silver hair tied up in a bun. Tie-dyed yoga pants. Looks like she used to follow the Dead.

I came back around to the front of the house and there was the neighbor boy on the porch. He was just sitting there on the front steps, smiling at me, like he was waiting for me. It startled me, but I smiled back. I said "Hi there. I'm Anneliese. What's your name?" And he said, "I'm Thomas. I used to live here."

**[Theme music. Opening credits.]**

So, it turns out that this little boy, Thomas, used to live in this house with his mother. He said he comes back to play because he misses it. I asked him where he lives now, but just gave me a

vague answer--pointing at the neighborhood behind the house and saying "over there." Like I said before, he's a cute kid, but after talking to him he seems a little, I don't know, naive. I mean, he's probably only nine or ten, but he seemed sweet. Not that kids aren't sweet. Oh, I don't know what I'm trying to say. He was just, I don't know, barefoot and wearing a plain white t-shirt, hair cut short. He's got this Opie Taylor vibe or something. I liked him, I really did. More than that, I felt like I wanted to protect him. He seems so lonely. I asked him if he had any friends in the neighborhood, and he said there weren't any other kids his age around. He said he used to play on the swing in the oak tree, and he missed it now that it was gone.

I'm making him sound really pathetic. He wasn't. We talked for ten minutes or so, about the tree and about baseball. He loves baseball. I don't know anything about baseball, so it was sort of a one-sided conversation. He seemed really happy, actually.

Well, except for one weird moment, and that only lasted a minute. We were sitting on the front steps, and Mrs. Aickmann's dog saw us through the window and started barking, like he does. That loud, deep booming bark he's got. Damn dog. And when he did, Thomas flinched, like a big exaggerated flinching where he ducked his head and wrapped his arms across his chest. It was fast and instinctive, and it was real fear, a learned reaction. I know that feeling, I've done that before when I heard a loud noise like a gunshot. He caught himself, and then grinned, kinda sheepishly, like he knew it was silly.

I said, "That dog's really loud, isn't he?"

And Thomas' face got still and, I don't know, grim. Like all the joy had drained out of him. He said, "I hate that dog." He said it flatly, without emotion. It was creepy.

I said, "Well, hate isn't a good thing to feel. He can't help it. Some dogs just like to bark, right?"

Then the dog stopped. Everything got very still and quiet. Thomas said, "He does more than bark." And again, it was dead creepy. I felt goosebumps on my arms. I'm getting them again telling you this. I don't have any idea what he meant, but it felt wrong. Or the whole situation suddenly felt wrong. Wrong and upsetting. But then his face changed, and he was a goofy little ten-year-old again.

"I gotta go," he said.

"It was nice meeting you, Thomas," I said.

And he said, "You, too, Anneliese! 'Bye!" and he ran off, around the back of the house.

And then I went in and got ready for work, and I drove into town and did my shift, and I laughed and talked with Bailey while we prepped for tomorrow morning's baking, and I stopped at the record store afterwards and talked with Alex for twenty minutes or so. And I didn't really think about Thomas during all that time.

So here I am, at ten-thirty at night, baking muffins for the other tenants, and it only now occurs to me to wonder why he wasn't in school. And to wonder why he flinched like that, like someone was about to hit him. And to kick myself for not getting a last name, or an address, or any information about his parents--he mentioned his mom but only in passing. So what should I do? Should I call social services? Should I wait and talk to him next time he's in the yard? Should I go see if I can find his house?

See, this is an excellent example of why you shouldn't have moved away. Because this isn't a real therapy session, is it? It's just me talking to a damn cell phone, and there's nobody I can ask what to do. I could call Leah. Or maybe Bri is upstairs. It's late though. Dammit.

Probably, I'm overreacting. That's what Rhys would say. And I know Rhys is an asshat. But it's what Claire would say, too. The kid looked happy and healthy, and it's not exactly weird to

jump when a loud noise startles you. Hell, *I* hate that dog, too. I should just wait for these muffins to come out, and then go to bed. I've got work at 10, and the party is tomorrow night. I should get some sleep and then get up early to finish cleaning and unpacking.

Okay, that's what I'm going to do. Good plan, Anneliese. Go to bed. Talk to you tomorrow, I guess.

**[Pause]**

Damn. Okay. I can't go to bed without one more confession. There was another lie this morning. Or not a lie, but something that you would...disagree with. That story about Claire sneaking me into the club. I said the bouncer didn't see her, and I could see you shaking your head, saying "of *course* he didn't see her, Anneliese, because she wasn't there." And I know that she wasn't. Or no. I know that she *couldn't* have been there. But that doesn't mean she wasn't. I know it doesn't make sense, and that you'd say both things can't be true. But you'd be wrong about that. It's not like I just have to choose which memory is real. Both things happened.

I haven't forgotten, so don't worry. I know how she died and I know when she died. I remember everything that happened in the hospital. I know that she couldn't have...

Anyway. Just so you know, I'm not relapsing. I remember. And if the memories don't always line up, that's the way memories are, right? You said to record what I remembered. Like it was straightforward. But there's nothing straightforward about it. Nothing about Claire is simple.

It's too late tonight to figure this out. I've still got to do the dishes and take a shower. But I wanted to come clean. Honesty matters, even if it's just you talking to yourself.

**[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]**

**[Pause]**

**[Sound fx: Click. Rattle.]**

It's two a.m. I can't sleep. The dog keeps barking.

**[Sound fx: Dog barking]**

See? Ugh! I don't know why she doesn't just muzzle him or something. Surely she's not sleeping through that.

I wasn't sleeping anyway, though. I'm not exactly scared to live alone, but I guess maybe it's taking me a while to get used to it. I don't miss Rhys. I really really don't. But I miss someone sleeping next to me. The bed feels really big. Even when ghost cats are jumping on it.

That was a joke. But it *has* happened twice more, once earlier tonight. I don't think I'm imagining it, but there's never anything there.

**[Sound fx: Dog barking]**

Okay, I'll admit, I'm a little scared. It's been a weird night. When I was getting ready for bed, after I had put the muffins in tupperware and done the dishes, I thought I saw something in the mirror. It was just my imagination, but it sort of put me on edge.

Here's what happened. I had just gotten out of the shower. The bathroom here is tiny and narrow, so you just step out of the tub and bam, you're in front of the sink. Everything was steamy from the shower. I toweled off and then used the towel to wipe the steam from the mirror, so it was streaky and wet. Then my phone buzzed. It was laying on the edge of the sink. This guy Alex has been texting me--he works next door to the bakery and he and I have been talking--doesn't matter. I looked down at my phone, saw it was Alex. Then when I looked up I saw...

I know it had to be my imagination. But it looked like... I saw somebody peeking around the edge of the shower curtain. A quick glimpse, and then they ducked out of sight. The shower curtain moved slightly as they dropped it. It was fast and the mirror was wet and half-obscured by steam. I had just been in the shower. I know it was empty. But I also know...

I ran to the bedroom. I got dressed. I watched the door of the bathroom for five minutes, waiting for my heart to stop pounding. When I finally got the nerve to go back in there, of course it was empty. Nothing in the shower, nothing in the bathroom at all. And no way for anybody to get in or out without my having seen them.

It took a little while before I could calm down and get in bed. And then, right after I turned the lights off, that thing jumped on my bed. Or whatever it is. So big surprise I haven't been able to get to sleep. And then Baskerville the Wonder Dog starts his thing.

Maybe I am just losing it.

When I was a kid, I would wrap the covers around my legs so nothing hung over the edge of the bed. Because there might be something underneath, waiting to reach up and grab me. Would you laugh at me if I said I briefly considered doing that earlier tonight? I know Claire would laugh at me.

Claire would say, "There's so much out there you should *really* be afraid of, Liese. There's no need to make up stuff." But then she'd hug me and lay down next to me so I wouldn't be alone, until I'd drift off to sleep. She'd be gone when I woke up.

And I suppose that's another example of that kind of thing I shouldn't be...

**[Sound fx: Laughter]**

What the hell was that? Jesus, who's giggling at two in the morning?

**[Sound fx: Laughter]**

It sounds like it's right outside my window. What should I do? No way am I looking out that window.

**[Sound fx: Laughter]**

Oh my god. Screw this. I'm calling Leah, even if it is two in the morning. I can't handle this.

**[Sound fx: Click Rattle.]**

**[Closing theme. Credits.]**

