

## Chapter Two

**[Sound fx: Click, rattle]**

**ANNELIESE:** Here's a memory. When we were fourteen and sixteen--so what was that, 2005?--Claire snuck me into my first club. We weren't going to drink or party--we both really loved Against Me and they were playing at this place in the next town over. Like most of the crazier things I did as a teenager, it was Claire's idea. I really wanted to see them, but our parents said no, not on a school night. For me that would have been it--I was pissed but what can you do? But then Claire was in my room that night, right after bedtime. She said "Get up Liese, we're going to see Against Me." And you didn't argue with Claire. I was terrified of getting caught, but I got up. And when Claire climbed out the window, I followed her.

We hitched to the club, which was not the smartest thing I've ever done. Luckily the woman who picked us up was nice--she lectured us on why I shouldn't be taking rides from strangers. When we got to the place, it was really sketchy, and the guy at the door gave us one look and told us to get lost. Again, I figured that was it. But then Claire was like, "Liese, we've come all the way out here. No way are you missing this show." And she took my hand and led me around the side of the club to an exit door in an alley. We waited until somebody came out, and then Claire caught the door and held it for me. The band had already started--it was loud and dark in there and I could almost feel the sweat that was going to drench me once I was in that crowd. I remember Claire grinning at me. All I had to do was step in. And I almost made it.

But we got caught. Or *I* got caught. There was a bouncer just inside the door and he grabbed me before I could take two steps. Of course he didn't even see Claire. I know you don't believe me--you never did when I told these stories--but it's true. He didn't see Claire at all. So when

they called the cops and the cops called our parents, it was just me who got in trouble. Claire was always lucky like that.

Her luck ran out eventually, I guess. Since I'm still here and she's ten years dead. Sorry, that's not the kind of thing I'm supposed to be saying, is it? These are just memories. And even though I was grounded for a month for that one, it's a fun memory. Because I know she did it for me. She would do anything for me. No one ever loved me like Claire. I was her favorite. I still miss her so much.

**[Theme music. Opening Credits.]**

So two weird things have happened in the week since I moved in. I don't think of myself as easily creeped out, but listen to this. I was unpacking books, which is a chore for me. I had like eight or ten boxes of books, and I didn't have space for all of them when I moved in. But then I got some new bookshelves--well old bookshelves from Goodwill, but new to me--so Wednesday night I sat down with a boxcutter and started opening boxes. I started packing almost a month before I moved out of Rhys' place, and I started with the books, so it had been a little while. I had forgotten what was packed where. So each box was like a little surprise, a held breath that I could release by slicing the packing tape. Little exhalations of dust. It was like Christmas, or like seeing old friends again after a long separation.

What I'm trying to say is that I lost myself. I cut open boxes and pulled out books and flipped through pages and breathed in that old book smell, and I completely lost track of time. So when I heard the noise and looked at my cell phone, I was shocked that it was after ten. And then I got a little freaked out about the noise, because it was late.

It sounded like somebody was dragging something in the hallway outside my front door. My door opens out into a wide hallway, like a foyer. Across the hall from me is an identical door,

which leads to Mrs. Aickmann's apartment, which I assume is a mirror image of mine. And then at the back of the foyer are the stairs up to the other apartments. Anyhow, it sounded like something was being dragged across the hardwood floor of the foyer, something heavy and soft. It happened in long bursts with pauses between, like it was heavy and whoever was draggin it had to stop between pulls to rest or get a better grip. I stood up and dusted off my pants and stepped over the circle of books I was in and went to the front door. I still had the boxcutter in my hand just in case. I listened at the door, and for a minute there was nothing, just that deep late night silence. But then I heard it again, *right outside* the door. I tell you, I almost screamed, it startled me so much. I looked through the peephole but couldn't see anything. It's a crappy peephole. Unless somebody's standing squarely in front of it with a bright light on their face, it's pretty useless.

I was standing there trying to decide what to do, when I heard Mrs. Aickmann coming in with her dalmatian through the front door of the house. I heard her telling him to hurry up, and I heard the dog's panting and its nails clicking on the hardwood. So I opened the door.

When I did, the dog flipped out and jumped at me, barking and growling. I did scream then, though I caught myself as quick as I could. Mrs. Aickmann pulled the dog up short by its chain. She was wearing an old-fashioned housecoat over her usual floral dress, and some crazy big rubber boots, though it wasn't raining or anything. I can't tell if she's really old or if she's just frowned her face into those deep lines over the years, like erosion. She wrestled the dog a little, saying "down, Baskerville, down!" and finally shoving him back through the open door of her apartment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to scare the dog." Though honestly I didn't care. He's a horrible animal, loud and aggressive. At first I thought it was me he didn't like, but now I think he's just a shitty dog.

"He's not scared," she said. Mrs. Aickmann always sounds like you've just contradicted her. She's always on the edge of exasperation. "He thought you were going to hurt me. He's protective."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Who knows why. That's what you say to old women.

"Why aren't you in bed?" she said. And that should have pissed me off. I'm a grown woman. I don't have a bedtime. I should have said that. But I was still thinking about the sound I heard.

"I thought someone was in the foyer," I said. But now I wasn't so sure. No one else was in the foyer, and there wasn't anything that could have made that noise. There wasn't anything at all except Bri's bike, leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

"Someone is," she snapped. "*I'm* in the foyer."

"No before that..." I started to say, but she interrupted me.

"Go to bed!" she said. "It's late!" and she slammed her door at me across the hall.

So *that* was fun. She really makes me uncomfortable. I don't know why she makes me so anxious--I get this pain like my ribcage is going to burst open, or like I've been punched really hard in the chest. Every interaction with Mrs. Aickmann is like that. She's a peach.

But she's the only negative in the building, really. I've actually gone and had coffee with one of my neighbors. I know, right? It's like I'm turning into a party girl.

Actually, it wasn't really a big deal. The girl in the apartment above me--Bri--was out on the porch when I got back from the grocery store yesterday. She does pottery, and sometimes she paints pieces and sets them on the porch to dry. Anyway, she helped me carry the groceries in, and I asked her if she wanted some coffee. Just asked her, like a normal person who talks to people. And she said yes, and I made coffee, and we sat on the front porch and talked and drank coffee.

I know that sounds like such a basic, nothing thing. I mean, it was maybe twenty minutes, including making the coffee. But it felt like a big deal. It's been a long time since I really talked to anybody but Rhys or you. And now you're gone--still a little pissed about that--and I'm certainly not talking to Rhys. So.

This was easier when I had Claire. She was always there to listen whenever I had problems at school, or a crush on a boy, or if I just felt down. I remember lying in my bed at home, worried about whatever, and Claire would come and sit next to me and listen. She'd listen just enough that I got it off my chest, and then would give me the perfect advice. Felt that way, anyway. That's another good memory, Claire and I whispering in the dark, afraid Mom would hear us. Even that last long year, in the hospital, there were late night whispered talks, giving me advice and encouraging me, even in that white hospital bed. Like she was trying to get in all in, because she knew...

Anyway, Bri's really cool. She asked about my job, which I told her about, and my family, which I dodged with vague stuff about them being a hundred miles away. I didn't mention Claire, because I didn't want to do the whole story and hear her say how sorry she was. People look at you differently, you know? She told me a little about the other upstairs neighbor, Mr. Blackwood. He's divorced, mid-50s, which is what I would have guessed, keeps to himself. He

seems kind of sad, not creepy the way single middle-aged guys can be. Bri sort of confirmed that--he's a loner, but he seems harmless. She also told me that there *is* somebody living in the little detached apartment off the parking area. She's a yoga instructor, lives alone. Bri told me her name and now I've forgotten it. So anyway, we're all singles here. Me, Bri, yoga lady, Mr. Blackwood, and Mrs. Aickmann.

Oh right! Mrs. Aickmann! I was telling you about *two* weird things. Sorry, I'm sort of scattered today. The whole point was that I don't think I would have really even remembered that sound in the hallway if something else hadn't happened the next night. I was in bed--oh yeah! I got a bed! Leah helped me pick it out at a thrift store downtown. It's just a basic frame, but it has this really cool headboard, heavy and solid wood. It looks like mahogany, but I know it's probably not. It's pretty though. Anyway, I'm up off the floor now, like a grownup.

So I'm lying in bed--this was Thursday night, about eleven-thirty--and I was wide awake. Sometimes I just can't get to sleep. We've talked about it before, you probably remember. It had gotten a lot better while I was with Rhys but since all that happened, well... I was lying there wide awake. And that matters, because I wasn't like in that weird in-between place, you know? Where you can't tell if you're dreaming or not? I was completely awake, running through the next day's to-do list, second-guessing conversations from work, wondering if I'd be alone my whole life. You know, the usual. That was a joke--I can see you shaking your head and frowning.

Anyway, I was lying there, under the covers, and something jumped on the end of my bed. It was very distinct, not a vague impression or a maybe. We had cats when I was growing up, and they would jump on the bed in the middle of the night. *That's* what it felt like. Like a cat.

Something smallish and relatively light, but not so light that it didn't make an impact. I was lying

on my side, and I felt the thing hit the bed behind me, about halfway up my calf. It pulled the covers towards it when it landed.

I was sure it was a rat. I had seen some droppings in the spare bedroom, and I was worried there were rats in the basement. Of course I did the reasonable thing and screamed and jumped out of the bed. But there was nothing there. I turned on the light, and looked under the bed. I ended up taking all the covers off the bed and shaking them out. I couldn't find anything. Nothing at all.

Isn't that creepy? It probably *was* a rat, and it probably freaked out as much as I did, and ran under the dresser or something before I got to the light switch. I know that. But right then I was absolutely terrified. I'm going to pick up some traps today. Actually, I should get going. I finished my coffee a while ago. I've got to straighten up--the unpacking is almost done, and Leah's throwing me that housewarming party tomorrow. And then I've got work at 2.

Look, I know I'm not really doing what I'm supposed to be doing. With this recording I mean, I know this is to talk about my own issues, about Claire and about...after. I'm getting there, I promise. I felt like I lost a lot of ground over the last couple of months. To say Rhys was not supportive is an understatement. Towards the end he would say things, really horrible things like...

But I know I'm not crazy. I'm a survivor, right? I can do this. I remember how you showed me.

Thanks for listening. I wish you hadn't moved away, but it's more comfortable talking to you here from my living room than in your office. No offence. But here I can look out the wavy glass of my big window. It's a beautiful day, blue skies, a slight breeze in the big oak tree outside. The little neighbor boy is playing in the yard again. He's cute--white t-shirt, blue jeans, sort of Dennis

the Menace. He's swinging from the low branch on the tree. He doesn't live here--I asked Bri and she didn't know anything about him. He doesn't bother me, it's actually sort of sweet to see him out there running around. But he seems lonely. I wonder why he's never with friends? It sucks to be a lonely kid. I was lucky to have Claire. Oh, he's just run off around the side of the house. Such a happy little guy. I should introduce myself.

Okay, enough talking. I need to get off my butt and get going. Talk soon.

**[Sound fx: Click, rattle]**

**[Theme music; end credits]**

