

## CHAPTER 1

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**Annalise Williams (Wolfson College),  
University Counselling Service, recorded  
and transcribed by Dr. Laurie Ambrose**

My mother picked the name Annalise for me because of a girl who was killed. Her name was Annalise Wood, and she went missing when she was sixteen. My mother was the same age when it happened. Annalise was lovely, much prettier than my sister and I ever became. She was the kind of girl you look at and think, *Of course someone would want to take her.*

Don't look at me like that. I know that what happened to her was awful. It just seems a very fine line between being the kind of person that others want to be with and be like and treat well, and being the kind of person that some others, just a few, sick others, want to take for themselves. That's the same kind of person, isn't it? The loved and lovely. Isn't that from a poem somewhere? That's what she was like. That's the risk when you're the

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kind of person who's wanted. Good people want to be close to you, but the bad people want you too.

There were two photos of her that the media used most: her most recent school portrait, and a snapshot of her laughing, with the friends on either side cropped out. Taken together, they presented the two sides of a beautiful and perfect person: poised and thoughtful, and spontaneous and bubbly. The kind of person who deserves help and attention.

Realistically, if they wanted these pictures to help strangers identify her if they saw her out and about with the bad man, they should have used photos of her frowning or looking frightened. Either there weren't any (which may well be the case; who would take a photo of that?), or they couldn't bring themselves to advertise a version of her that was less than appealing. The narrative is important. If you want the "general public" to get worked up, you have to persuade. Attractiveness and innocence must be communicated, even if emphasising those traits makes the real person harder to recognise.

In the end, she was already dead, so it's a good thing, I suppose, that they used the nice photos. They're the images that everyone remembers. My mum was a teenager when those pictures were in the paper every day for weeks, then weekly for months. Annalise Wood was the most beautiful girl in the world. Everyone

cared about her. It's what any mother would wish for her child, to be the kind of person that everyone would care about and miss if she disappeared.

It wasn't until Mum was over thirty that what really happened to Annalise Wood was discovered. Until then, several theories had become legend:

1. That she had run away and was very happy somewhere, laughing at all of us thinking she'd been taken. Maybe her parents hadn't approved of her boyfriend and she'd got her own way and taken revenge in one blow, by leaving her parents forever regretful of having forbidden her.
2. That she was still alive but captive, chained in a cabin in the woods, or maybe in a harem in some other country.
3. That her parents had killed her and buried her in the woods behind their property. This was a cruel theory, and absolutely no one believed it except for an eccentric local writer who sold the story in booklets before he was "spoken to" by the police.

None of these were true, and everyone knows that now, but local kids still tell all of these versions as if they had really happened. They no longer say it was Annalise, who is now

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known to have been dead from the day she'd disappeared, but instead "some girl" from decades before, from the fifties or wartime or even Victorian days. They always describe Annalise, though, even if they don't realise it: long, dark hair; pale pink skin; smiling. They still have details from those photos in their minds, the origin of the composite image forgotten.

A book about the investigation came out when I was three. I remember my mother crying behind the locked bathroom door. The photos were reprinted in all the papers. Mum tells me that she found me staring at Annalise's smiling face. She took the paper away from me, but I howled and demanded it back. She says I blackened my fingers fondling the page. I used to wonder if Annalise had been captive for years and then died when I was born. Maybe I was Annalise herself, reborn and recognising her own face in the news.

I wasn't. Annalise had been killed still wearing the clothes she'd been taken in, within two miles of where she'd been last seen, and the corruption had progressed at the rate one would reasonably expect for an old but not decades-old corpse.

I did wonder, though, when I was a teenager, if we had some bond. I grew my hair long, though it wasn't as thick and dark as hers. I wasn't as slim, but I smiled. I mimicked her serene school-portrait expression

in the mirror in my bedroom, and emulated her wide-mouthed laugh when in groups. I have a snapshot that's almost exactly like the one of the original Annalise: me between two friends, woolly winter hats on, red scarf. With my hair mostly hidden, and my face half-turned, I look almost exactly like her. I cropped the picture like hers, just me, only a friend's chin on the left and another friend's shoulder on the right as evidence of my sociability. I was really proud of that photo. I felt like I'd lived up to my mother's hopes for me. I was lovely (from certain angles) and popular (look! friends!). If I were taken away, people would want me back.

I think it's absolutely normal to fantasise about what other people would say if you die. It's really not fair to act as if this is morbid or self-indulgent. I've even read it advised in a magazine to imagine what you might want said about yourself at your funeral. They meant for you to imagine the end of a long life, and consider what you want to be remembered for: work achievements, contribution to society, relationships with friends and family. There was no right answer, they insisted, just the opportunity to discover our own priorities while there's still time. I don't think what I imagine is all that different. Besides, we can't help what we think about. We sometimes believe we can, but I know it doesn't work.

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In my experience, there are ruts up there in our heads, sometimes with very steep sides. Sometimes in my fantasies I imagined, like I wanted to, that they chose my best photos (the cropped one, and my year nine school portrait, which is still my favourite), and that the news speculated that someone was driven so mad with lust by looking at me that he had to have me, and that I fought back so bravely that he had no choice but to kill me. Other times (and this is still inside my head but I can't control it) no one cares. No photos are published, or a blurry one, or me in the background of a scene, looking lost. Everyone thinks I must have wandered off on my own, because who would actually bother to take me?

Did I tell you that Annalise Wood was raped? The forensics said so. Well, that she'd had sex and then been killed, so one assumes. She'd also had a baby, before she went missing. Have you heard that one? This was kept secret for absolute ages but it finally leaked out. Not everybody knows but it's talked about. She'd had a baby when she was fifteen, a year before she was killed, and put it up for adoption. Her parents had sent her on a six-month exchange programme to France, they'd said, which is how it had been covered up. They never had a French student stay with them in return, so we all should have guessed, shouldn't we? We all should have told stories about how it was

the father, so enraged at having his child given away for adoption, who had punished her.

No, I don't think things like that all the time. I'm just telling you how it was. These are the kinds of things that most people think of, not that I think of just all by myself. We needed a story to make sense of Annalise dying. We still do. Another book came out last year. That makes two. Three, if you count the self-published booklet about the parents. People still care about her.

Sometimes, typing my own name into a search engine, her photo pops up among the results. That's how important her first name is; even with my surname, you'll get her picture, usually the school one. She's wearing a white blouse and the school jacket. In the age progression they made once, to try to make her look thirty, she was wearing a similar suit jacket, but she looked dowdy, like she worked in an office and was bored, like she celebrated her thirtieth birthday with a bunch of nice girlfriends from work but no boyfriend or husband or kids. I'm only twenty-four but sometimes I look in the mirror and it's like I see this age progression happening to me, and I just want to make them stop and go back to using my good photos. Go back to that year nine pic, or that winter snapshot. Sometimes I wish I could freeze there. Not stop there. I don't want to be killed, obviously. But I wish

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I could still be that person, that bright, bubbly person, and just stay there. I think that maybe the real Annalise is so loved because she hasn't had to age.

I went to my grandmother's funeral six years ago and I hated that they put a recent photo of her on the service sheet. It's not just that she looked old but that she looked broken. It was like if you stared long enough at it the tremor in her hand would act up, and her head would involuntarily bob, like it did near the end. I wanted them to use a photo from before, like when she was a young mum or when she worked at the arts centre. Mum pointed out that both of those were from before I was born, and didn't I want a photo of the grandmother I'd known? Mum didn't understand that *all of her* is the grandmother I'd known, even the bits I wasn't there for. I looked at her and I saw all of her. It didn't seem fair to reduce her to only who she was at the very end.

The real problem with age isn't just the whole falling apart business, though that's pretty fucking terrible. The thing about age, even just my age, is that a young person is judged so much more indulgently. A young person is rated on their potential. You get complimented for having interests and plans and the natural talent or intelligence to maybe act on them. For a child to want to be a doctor or an astronaut, for a child to be "good



at" maths or reading, is praiseworthy all by itself. But an adult has to actually hit the mark, not just aim for it. If you miss it, well, the wanting it, the having the potential to perhaps do it, doesn't count for anything any more.

I guess I'm feeling a bit at sea. Everyone's so clever here. I'm clever too, I know that I am. Clever just doesn't feel special here. You think getting into university is a kind of trophy, but it's not. It's just a door, and you walk through it and there's a lot of work on the other side, hard work, not a reward. The real trophy is graduation, right? Except perhaps it's not. Maybe that's just another door too, and then the trophy is getting a job, but a job isn't a trophy, it's more work too. It's all doors, doors, doors. I just want to get to where I'm supposed to go and just be there. I want to get to a room where there isn't another door for me to aim for, just a nice couch and a bookshelf and maybe a TV. And a phone. And a man, a really nice man who adores me.

No, no one in particular. Not right now. Of course I've had boyfriends. I'm not ugly. I have a very normal romantic life, overall. I'm only twenty-four.

We still don't know who killed the real An-nalise. No one knows who the baby's father was either. Probably both the killer and the father (or maybe the father is the killer) were strangers, grown men, but maybe one or both

of them was a boy from school. I think that's probably right. You know how boys are.

No, no one's ever tried to hurt me. Why would you wonder that?

Boys are just boys, like boys everywhere. Girls can't do anything right. When I was thirteen, if you wore a bra, you were teased for it. If you didn't wear a bra and needed one, you were teased for it. If you didn't need one, you were teased for that. There's that awful couple of years where the girls expand, not just get taller but kind of inflate in parts, and we're so much bigger than the boys, and then when the boys catch up it's just this huge relief for everyone. [Laughs.]

The first time was fine. I was at uni, in Warwick. I didn't get into Cambridge as an undergraduate, so I went there. Everyone was taking this chance to make themselves over, just to be who they had always wished to be, except that they'd been trapped by their hometowns into being who they'd been since they were born. So I did it too. I made myself new.

I was alone with this boy. Well, we were at uni, so he wasn't a boy. But he was a fresher, like me, so not a man yet either. He was this male person. His name was Jason. I told him about what had happened to Annalise, but as if it had happened to me, years before when I was younger.

Not the dying, obviously. Not the killing. But the taking and it mattering. I cried while

I told it, which isn't surprising because it's sad, whoever it happened to. He put his arm around me. He comforted me, and touched me, and was indignant for me. I went from being this very ordinary person to being someone who'd been worth stealing, someone who was worth grieving, someone who'd been through so much and come out stronger. We did kiss that night, but nothing else. That would have been weird, don't you think? You don't tell a story like that and just jump in. But we did it later that week. He was very gentle. He kept asking if what he was doing was all right. He was my boyfriend most of the first year.

No, that doesn't matter. You're going too fast. It doesn't matter why we broke up but it matters a lot how we got together. I didn't pretend to be Annalise because I'm a rape fantasist. I know some women think about that sort of thing, not the real thing, but a titillating form of playing at it. It's not for me. I have never, ever asked any man to act out a rape scenario, and I don't do it in my head either. When I think of Annalise, I don't think of her on the ground, under that bad person. I think of her in that school jacket, or that red scarf. You know, she wasn't even wearing either of those when she died. It was too hot. But I picture her the way she lived, not the way she died. Actually, better than the way she lived. After she died she was, like, beatified. She became a perfect image

of herself instead of her whole, messy, real self. I took on that image. Anyone would want to be just the good bits, wouldn't they?

No, see, that goes back to the imagination ruts. I can take away the being killed part from what's in my head, but not all of it, not the rest of it. I wouldn't even know who Annalise was without her having been attacked, so pretending to be just who she was before . . . It doesn't make any sense. She became "Annalise the saint" when she was taken. Before that she was ordinary. Popular, but not famous. Not perfect. It's awful to think that we don't entirely make ourselves, that we get partly made by what others do to us, but there it is. It's true.

I told you, I'm not a rape fantasist. If someone did that to me I might even kill myself. I know two girls who've been raped, or mostly raped, one by a date and one by a cousin, and they were each a mess for, like, more than a year. I told you: I don't think about what happened to Annalise. I think about what it would be like to be loved that much. That's all.

Rhoda! [Laughs.] I've never met anyone called Rhoda. If my mother had called me that . . . No, I know. You mean if she had called me anything else, like Jennifer or Christine or Alison. I imagine I would be different, but . . . I don't think you understand where I grew up. It's not my mother naming me for Annalise that

makes Annalise important to me. It's me being born into a town where everyone, including my mother, is haunted by her memory to the point that my mother wanted to call me that, that's what makes Annalise important to me. Change my name, and I still would have those images in my head. Maybe everyone from Lilling does. Have you ever known anyone from there? No, I suppose you can't admit it if you did. Privacy and all of that. But if you did, you'd know.

I researched it once. The two years after Annalise went missing, the name doubled in popularity nationally. It's never been a top 100 name, so that's not a lot, but still . . . I'm not the only one.

I *am* talking about myself, Doctor. Don't be obtuse. You can't describe anything without comparing it to something else. You just can't.

I had a children's book about that. The first page showed a skyscraper. It was a photo of a cut-out piece of silver paper, rectangular with a point at the top and two columns of punched-out squares for windows. The next page was a photo of the same cutout, surrounded by cutouts of small village houses. The word TALL was printed on top. The next spread showed the same silver skyscraper dwarfed by cutouts of even bigger skyscrapers, so big we don't see their tops. That had the word SMALL, describing the same silver building. It went on like that, with the moon being both bright and pale, de-

pending on the sky, and a cape being both blue and purple, depending on the colours close to it. The last pages were of the silver building, the moon, and the cape on neutral, empty backgrounds, with the questions, "Tall or small? Bright or pale? Blue or purple?" You couldn't pick what each item was without also choosing a context for it. You couldn't judge it just by itself. Is it tall? Is it small? Compared to what?

So I talk about myself compared to Annalise. I'm pretty sure I'm allowed to do that.

I told you why I came here. I have anxiety about graduating. It's not the usual worry about wondering if my thesis will be accepted. I'm confident that it will be, and that's what upsets me. I'll have a master's, and then what? You know that room I told you I wish for, the one with no new doors? Graduating just seems like it will spit me out into a room with a thousand doors, and if I choose the wrong one I'll regret it. I may not even know that I regret it until a dozen more doors in, and then . . .

I never told Jason (my uni boyfriend) that I'd lied to him that night, about me being attacked when I was younger like Annalise Wood. I always let him believe that what I said had really happened to me, and of course he didn't betray my privacy by telling anyone else. Sometimes I brought it up again, just

the two of us. I'd share a little detail, and he'd get this emotional, pained look. He'd become very protective and it just . . . it fed me. I don't know how to explain it. It made me feel closer to him. I was strict with myself; I never brought it up more than once a month. We were together eight months, so I suppose I talked about it eight times. I haven't told that to a man since.

No, I don't mean . . . Of course I have. I had a boyfriend the summer before starting here. I never said anything about Annalise, though. I thought I'd grown out of it.

Look, it's just a comfort thing. It's like a child who has to learn to not suck his thumb so his teeth don't get wonky. He's not doing something fundamentally wrong. Sucking his thumb isn't objectively bad. But it can have a bad consequence, so you gently tell this person, this small person, "Sorry, you have to stop this now. I know it feels good, and you've done nothing wrong, but it has to stop." If you yell about it, if you go on about how wrong it is, you just add to the need to do the comforting thing that you want him to stop.

I know I have to not lie about that again, but the more I get stressed about graduating . . . It's just a comfortable story. I know it so well. I just . . . I can just put it on, and make a man feel sorry for me. It feels good. It feels safe.

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Not anyone in particular. Not yet. Just men that I look at, and who look at me.

Oh! Sorry. Of course I understand. I should have looked at my watch.

Yes, in two weeks. Thank you, Dr. Ambrose. Thank you. I feel better already.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Laurie Ambrose

THE OFFICE DOOR fell shut behind her. I didn't lean back in my chair until I heard the outer door open and close. She was on the pavement, my view striped by the blinds on the window. She was shrugging a rucksack over her shoulder and heading towards the Fitzwilliam. Typical student; typical twenty-something. But she was the second client to bring up Annalise Wood to me within months.

I shimmied my shoulders in a dismissive little shiver. Ms. Williams had been my last appointment of the day. I was eager to leave but needed to wait for Blake. He's always been late, ever since coming into the world two weeks after his due date. I tidied the desk. I checked my phone for texts and missed calls. None. Nothing to be done; adult children have their own minds.

Ms. Williams wouldn't have known this, but I grew up not far from the Annalise murder. Not in Lilling itself, like she did, but I'm almost twice her age so was alive when Annalise was killed. I was five then, and then nearly graduating from Cambridge when her body was found.

Even sixteen years after the disappearance, that was big news.

That day I had been in a charity shop buying a shimmery purple wrap to go with a party dress I was planning to wear, and the woman at the till had been the one to tell me. She'd said, "They found Annalise," without context or explanation, but it was the very bareness of the statement that had made it clear that she was talking about *the* Annalise, not just someone who also happened to have that name.

I should clarify that this was true only because of geography. I was home for Easter break at that time. At home, just the name Annalise is enough. I was surprised when I then returned to Cambridge how few people were discussing it. It was in the national newspapers, of course, but not the local one. In Cambridge, one had to say "Annalise, that girl from Hertfordshire who was killed ages ago" or, at least, "Annalise Wood." Just fifty miles away from Lilling, less than an hour's drive, and the public wasn't on a first-name basis. I grant that this is mostly to do with Cambridge having so much of a student population, constantly leaving and being replaced, often from much farther away. Still, it was one of the first times I can remember feeling suddenly foreign so close to my own home.

Back in that charity shop, the woman behind the till had looked blank and stunned and that's how I'd known that Annalise was dead, not found alive. I must have naturally assumed that that would be the case by then, but knowing it for certain was terrible. It really was. She wasn't the girl in the school uniform any more, or whomever that girl would have grown into. She was just a body, not even a whole body by then, surely. She would be bits and pieces.

I wrapped my arms around myself. The heating in our office hadn't yet caught up with the autumn chill.

My phone rang, quivering in my pocket. I snatched it up. "Blake?" I said, without first checking that it was actually him.

“Sweetheart!” Dad said, and he sounded unstressed, ready for a chat. I gave in, to give Blake more time.

Mum was fine, Dad told me. Everything was the same. We talked about my sister, Helen, and how Dad used to come to all of my tennis matches.

“Dad, do you remember Annalise?”

He hesitated. “Sure! Uh, who? Was she a friend of yours?”

I hesitated too. Maybe Dad’s memory was going, like Mum’s. No, I assured myself. *Maybe just not everyone is wrapped up in collective concern for a singled-out and taken-down teenage girl.*

“Never mind. She was just a girl I . . .” I almost said “knew.” That’s what it feels like sometimes, when you grow up in the shadow of something like that. I had forgotten that. This new client was bringing it all back.

“I can look in your mother’s phone book. I can see if her parents are still—”

“Aw, Dad, that’s sweet but it’s all right. I don’t need—”

“Did she play tennis with you?” Dad asked, not letting go.

“She was a school friend, Dad,” I said expeditiously. It was easier than trying to explain. But even in lying I didn’t take the simpler road of saying yes, yes, we played tennis together. I’ve never seen a picture of Annalise playing tennis or any reference to sport in her life at all. It didn’t feel right to lie about the dead more than strictly necessary. “Remind Mum that we’ll all be coming for Christmas.”

“Christmas!” he said, sounding pleased and surprised, but I’d told him weeks ago that we’d be there for the looming holiday. It was already November; not long now.

And November is a busy time at the University, first term of the new academic year. No sense waiting any longer for Blake, or chasing him up. I should be relieved he has better things to do than meet his mum for dinner.

“I have to go, Dad,” I said, ending the call with just a few more

back-and-forths, and fumbled in my handbag for my car keys, which reminded me of taking away Mum's car keys last Christmas, and how it had shamed her. But she would have kept driving if we hadn't. Nothing short of an accident was going to convince her she wasn't able to any more. Now Dad has to keep his keys where she can't reach them. It was one of the most difficult things I'd ever been part of; thank goodness for my sister and father. I don't know if I could have resisted her tears and pleading by myself.

As I stepped outside our old Victorian office building, and breathed in the sound and smell of the rush-hour traffic on Trumpington Street, the office phone inside rang brightly, chipperly. I wouldn't have been able to get in fast enough to pick it up, so I waited a few minutes at the door and then dialled into the office voice mail from my mobile.

"Dr. Ambrose?" said a young, female voice. "This is Anna, from today. Annalise Williams?" She paused as if we were talking together, waiting for me to fill in the blank with an acknowledgement. "I just want to say thank you. I'm already thinking of what else I'd like to tell you. Well, everything, really. It's good to talk. Sometimes everything is all tangled up inside but when it comes out in words somehow the mouth has funnelled it all into a straight line that makes sense. It makes a proper story. I can't wait to see you again."

There was no click, just a hanging-on. I listened to that airy sound of being connected for about twenty more seconds before there was a staticky *clack* and the recording cut off. I wasn't sure if she'd hung up, or if it was the system that had automatically limited the message. It was discomfiting, the way the message had stopped but not properly ended. Sometimes clients get a little too close. It was best to take care.

I looked around before descending the steps. It was darkish al-

ready, the normal but somehow always surprising autumn early dark, and thoughts of dead Annalise made me stupidly anxious. The murder had never been solved. Her body had been eventually found, but not her killer. I wondered if any police were still looking.

Once in my car I made a note of the client's call, to put in her file. I abbreviated her name as "Anna," which is how she'd booked the appointment. The full "Annalise" felt taken.