

# Chapter 1

## The Voice That Wasn't

The living room was dim, curtains drawn halfway against the rising sun. The glow of the television painted the walls in cold blues and greys.

“...the third assassination in as many months...” the anchor was saying. Her voice was smooth but brittle, the kind of voice that could read you a bedtime story while announcing the end of the world. “...the Unity or Death group, known by its black hand insignia, is once again suspected...”

I pulled my knees up under the blanket, tucking my chin into the fabric. The word “Unity” sounded fake. The word “Death” didn't.

“Can we turn this off?” I asked, my voice muffled through the blanket.

Mom appeared in the doorway from the kitchen, hands on her hips. “We've talked about this, Steph,” she said gently. “We don't hide from the world just because it's scary.”

“I'm not scared,” I lied.

Grandma shuffled past me with her tea mug, wearing her fuzzy slippers that whispered against the floor. “She's twelve, Elaine,” Grandma said, shooting Mom a look. “Twelve-year-olds don't need this kind of garbage shoved in their faces first thing in the morning.”

Mom's jaw tightened, but she didn't argue.

Dad sat at the table scrolling his tablet, his tie already on even though we weren't leaving for another twenty minutes. “This is the world we live in,” he said without looking up. “She has to understand it.”

Understand it. Right.

Because assassinations, wars I couldn't pronounce, and scary people with symbols painted on their jackets were totally understandable.

I dug deeper into my blanket cocoon and whispered, “I hate Sundays.”

### A Fragile Mind: Letter #3

Grandma patted the top of my head. “Then you’re going to love pancakes,” she said.

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Twenty minutes later we were in the car, following the exact same route we always did. Dad drove like the road belonged to him. Mom double-checked the directions even though she knew them by heart. Grandma complained about potholes, and I pressed my forehead to the cool glass of the backseat window, letting the world blur past.

The streets looked tired. Empty storefronts with *For Lease* signs, peeling posters about the latest “safety initiative,” the kind where the government promised protection but never delivered. One poster had been spray-painted over with black letters:

#### **UNITY OR DEATH.**

The paint dripped like blood.

I shivered and pulled my jacket tighter.

We arrived at Miller’s Diner, the kind of place with sticky tabletops and syrup bottles that never came clean. It smelled like bacon grease and coffee that had been sitting for three hours too long.

I liked it there.

Mostly because it was familiar.

We sat at our usual booth, me on the inside seat, pressed against the window. Mom ordered oatmeal. Dad ordered black coffee and eggs. Grandma ordered “whatever doesn’t taste like cardboard,” which made the waitress roll her eyes. I ordered chocolate chip pancakes the size of my face.

For a few minutes, I let the comfort of it all sink in. The clink of silverware. The sizzle from the kitchen. The hum of conversation.

But even here, I couldn’t escape it.

### A Fragile Mind: Letter #3

A man at the table across from us was whispering about the assassination on the news. Another woman said her cousin's neighbor had been "taken in for questioning" and hadn't come home.

"Do you think they'll shut down the schools?" someone asked at another table.

I stared down at my hands.

I wasn't sure if I wanted them to.

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After breakfast, Mom announced we needed groceries. Which meant Essex Market.

I didn't mind Essex Market. It was big enough that you could lose yourself in the aisles, and sometimes I liked the idea of being lost.

The air smelled faintly of bleach and ripe fruit. Carts rattled across the uneven tile floors. I followed Mom, who was moving like she had a mission.

"Grab some cereal," she said over her shoulder.

"Which kind?"

"Anything but the neon-colored sugar ones."

"Got it," I said, and made a beeline for the good stuff.

I was scanning the cereal boxes when it happened.

A woman brushed past me.

She didn't bump me hard. She didn't even look at me. Just glided by, her coat brushing my arm.

And then I heard it.

*I wonder if she knows.*

I froze.

### A Fragile Mind: Letter #3

The voice wasn't out loud. It wasn't even a whisper.

It was inside my head, curling around my thoughts like it belonged there.

I spun around. "What?"

A man pushing a cart gave me a weird look.

Mom appeared at the end of the aisle, holding a loaf of bread. "What's wrong?"

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That woman, she said something!"

Mom's eyebrows knit together. "Stephanie, no one said anything. Are you okay?"

I nodded too quickly. "Yeah. Fine."

But I wasn't fine.

Because when I looked around, the woman was gone.

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I couldn't stop thinking about it the whole way home.

The voice.

The words.

The way they slithered into my head like they'd been waiting for me.

As soon as we got inside, I bolted to my room and grabbed my journal from under the bed.

It wasn't much to look at-black cover, frayed spine, pages already curling at the corners.

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But it was mine.

I flipped to a blank page and pressed my pen so hard it nearly tore the paper.

*I heard a voice today. It wasn't mine. "I wonder if she knows."*

I stared at the words, my pulse thudding in my ears.

*It said: "I wonder if she knows." Who is "she"? What am I supposed to know?*

I wanted to rip the page out, crumble it up, and pretend it didn't happen.

Instead, I shut the journal and shoved it into the loose floorboard of my closet, the only place no one else knew about.

I told myself it was fine.

I didn't believe it.

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Monday morning always felt heavier. Like the school itself knew it was the start of another week of survival and decided to lean on you a little harder.

Essex Middle's hallways were as chaotic as ever: kids yelling over one another, lockers slamming shut like miniature explosions, the smell of cafeteria eggs already leaking through the vents.

I stayed in my usual lane; middle, invisible, books clutched to my chest like they could shield me. I passed through clumps of kids who had clearly rehearsed their laughter for maximum volume and impact. They barely noticed me. Which was fine.

Then I saw her.

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Samantha Saunders was propped against her locker like she owned the entire hallway. She didn't have to talk loudly; her presence did all the work. People parted around her, instinctively aware that getting too close was a bad idea.

Her dark hoodie was pulled up even though the hallway was warm, and her eyes swept the crowd like radar. One sharp look from Samantha could undo you. I knew this because I'd seen it happen.

I slowed down, trying not to be obvious.

Samantha's posture shifted when Doug McKenzie appeared at the far end of the hall.

Doug looked like a walking apology. Tall but stooped, as if he was trying to fold himself down to half his size. He was digging through his locker with frantic energy, like the wrong textbook would mean disaster.

"McKenzie!" Samantha called out, and the crowd went a little quieter.

Doug froze, then kept shuffling his books without looking up.

"That's not polite," Samantha said, peeling herself off the locker. "Ignore me. I love that."

She started toward him. A small group followed at a careful distance, like they wanted to see what would happen but didn't want to get blamed for it.

My stomach twisted.

Samantha reached Doug's locker and leaned against it like she was waiting for an invitation. Doug stepped back a little, but there was nowhere to go; the lockers lined-up on one side and a wall of curious kids boxed in the other.

"What's with you today?" Samantha asked, her voice light but cutting.

Doug muttered something I couldn't hear.

Samantha tilted her head. "Speak up, McKenzie. We can't all read minds."

The kids behind her snickered.

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I wanted to disappear. I wanted to step in. Both at once.

Doug adjusted the strap on his bag and tried to move past her.

That's when she blocked him with a deliberate step to the side.

"You're not going anywhere," she said. "Not until you tell me why you think it's okay to ignore me."

"I didn't..." Doug began.

"Didn't what?"

"Nothing," he whispered.

The look Samantha gave him then was unreadable. There was something in it, frustration? sadness? That vanished as quickly as it appeared.

She reached out and flicked the edge of his binder. It slipped from his hands and hit the floor with a smack.

A few kids laughed.

I hated that sound.

For a split second, I thought about speaking up.

I could already picture it: my voice cutting through the noise, Samantha turning her attention on me like a predator switching prey. My heart doing its best impression of a trapped bird.

I swallowed it down.

Because that's what I did.

I froze.

Doug knelt to pick up his binder, his shoulders rigid, his face carefully blank. Samantha didn't help. She didn't move at all until he stood again, clutching his things so tightly his knuckles turned white.

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“See you around,” Samantha said finally, and walked away like nothing had happened.

The crowd scattered as if the spell had been broken.

Doug kept his head down as he retreated into the flow of kids heading toward first period.

I stayed rooted to the spot for a long moment, my chest tight.

Because part of me wanted to be relieved it wasn't me.

And part of me hated that I felt that way.

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By the time I got home, I felt like I'd lived three days instead of one.

The house smelled faintly like Mom's cooking. Something with garlic and onions. The faint hum of the dishwasher filled the quiet spaces between footsteps and muffled voices. It was such a sharp contrast to the hallways of Essex Middle that I had to pause in the entryway, just breathing it in.

At school, I was a ghost ducking through a storm. Here, I was supposed to feel safe.

But I didn't. Not really.

“Homework before dinner,” Mom called from the kitchen. “I mean it this time.”

“Got it,” I said, even though I was already walking toward the stairs.

Grandma was at the kitchen table, shelling peas like it was 1950 and the world outside wasn't burning. She glanced up as I passed, her eyes squinting in that way that made me feel seen even when I didn't want to be.

“You've got that look again,” she said.

“What look?”

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“The one where you’re carrying something in your head that’s too heavy for your shoulders.”

I froze for half a second, then forced a shrug. “Just school stuff.”

She hummed like she didn’t believe me, but she went back to her peas.

I bolted upstairs.

My room had always been my hiding place. My walls were cluttered with posters, sketches and little scraps of things I couldn’t throw away. Books stacked in half-organized towers. The closet with its loose floorboard. My secret vault.

I flopped onto my bed, stared at the ceiling for a moment, then rolled over, stretched, and with a failed gymnastics move, grabbed my journal from its hiding place.

The cover was worn soft from my hands. I opened it to the next blank page and let the pen hover before it hit the paper.

*Today was awful.*

I paused. My handwriting looked like it was yelling at me.

*I watched Samantha Saunders tear into Doug again, and I just stood there like a statue. I didn’t say anything. I never say anything. And I hate that about myself.*

I let the pen scratch faster.

*I think Doug and I are the same, in different ways. He’s invisible because people make him that way. I’m invisible because I hide and hope it keeps me safe.*

I stopped writing to listen. The distant TV downstairs was covering more unrest. Protests, speeches, another “security sweep” in some city I’d never

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been to. Somewhere in there, a reporter said the words “Unity or Death,” and my stomach tightened like a fist.

I went back to writing.

*How do I fix this? How do I fix a world that is so broken  
that existing feels heavy?*

I stared at that line for a long moment, my pulse thudding in my ears.

*What if I am broken?*

I set the pen down and stared at my room. Late light slanted through the blinds, carving the space into stripes of gold and shadow. Dust floated lazily in the air, catching the light. My room was quiet, safe.

And yet...

A prickling started at the base of my neck. The kind of tingle you get when you know someone’s watching you, even if they aren’t.

I froze.

The house was silent except for the TV downstairs and the faint hum of the fridge. No footsteps. No creaking floorboards.

And still, I felt it.

That awareness.

Like someone had leaned close enough to read over my shoulder.

I reached slowly for my journal. My fingers brushed the open page. The air felt heavier than it had a second ago, pressing down on me, waiting.

Nothing happened.

No voice. No whisper. No sound but my own shallow breathing.

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I let out a shaky laugh. “Okay. I’m officially losing it.”

But even as I said it, I knew I existed somewhere in between. I set the journal down on my desk and slid into bed while the last stripes of sunlight stretched across my blanket. I stared at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come, but it didn’t.

It was hard to sleep when the world felt like it was holding its breath.

My last thought before drifting into a restless doze wasn’t about Samantha or Doug or the woman in the market.

It was this: *For the first time in my life, I wasn’t sure which thoughts were mine.*