

# Chapter 1: Erasure

You don't expect your sister to disappear from mirrors. Not on a Tuesday, not ever. But the first time it happened, the world tilted, and nothing ever quite settled right again.

At first, I didn't notice the changes in her or in our family. She still left the bathroom light on, still sat too close to the TV, still shouted from the other room to ask where her hoodie went, when it wasn't hers but mine. Always mine, of course. She had a sixth sense for picking the one thing I wanted to wear.

Everything seemed as it should be, yet a faint tremor ran beneath the surface, a discordant hum I couldn't quite place. Like a single note missing from a melody, quiet enough to ignore, until you listened too closely. Then you couldn't unhear it.

It started small. The casual, breathless knocks at my door, followed by a torrent of whatever fleeting thought had seized her, just... stopped coming. She no longer visited me just to spend time together, to burrow under the sheets and watch movies, to gossip, and just be in each other's company.

It was the quiet way our parents laid only three plates on the table, their movements unhurried, as if four had never been the norm; the space where hers should have been remained a silent, glaring absence. The plates gave a quiet click against the table, too casual and neat, like a muscle memory rewritten overnight. Yet when I pointed it out, they would stop with a glazed look in their eyes, adding a fourth, and act as if the whole thing hadn't happened.

The correction never stuck. It was like the moment I pointed it out, they realigned for a flicker of a moment, and then everything reset to that same pattern again, talking, eating, drifting around the space she occupied as if she wasn't there at all. Each reset carried the same creeping wrongness, a little sharper every time. I tried not to overthink it and told myself that they're probably just tired.

The next week at the park, sitting under the shade of the old oak tree beside Hina, I kept glancing between her and our parents a little further ahead. They seemed normal enough, just talking with a stranger they just met, they were as social as ever, nothing out of place stood out to me. I almost let myself look away, relieved for a moment that maybe I'd overthought everything.

But then I caught it. That blink-and-you-miss-it shift in their faces, the way their smiles went slack and too bright all at once. Their voices followed, unnaturally cheerful as they corrected the stranger's assumption: "—no, not really, Yui is our only child..."

I half turned to Hina, waiting for her to snap at them, but she only sat right beside me, peeling the label from her water bottle with meticulous care. Her gaze remained fixed on something far beyond their words, her brown eyes hazy and lost in a silent world of their own. She gave no sign she'd heard the bizarre statement from them. I turned back to demand they stop. Jokes like this weren't funny. But when I met my mother's eyes, glazed and slack, the words caught in my throat, my tongue burned with a protest I couldn't seem to make. Everything after that moment felt muted. I don't remember the rest of the outing, or even the walk home, only the static that flooded my hearing.

One afternoon, when our parents were still at work, I found her in the far corner of the living room, with her back to me, her voice a soft murmur against the bare white wall. The warm light slanted across it, casting long, thin shadows that stretched over the plaster. I felt my body freeze at the threshold without meaning to; something in me always hesitated now before stepping into a room she was in.

No one else was there; no gleam of earbuds hinted at a call. Her words were a low, tidal whisper, rising and falling against the wall. I managed a single step, then another, my heartbeat a thin, uneven flutter against my ribs. Every part of me kept insisting I shouldn't get any closer. The moment my footfall reached her, she spun. Her face blank, small mouth shaped into a mockery of a smile, as if the last minute had been nothing more than a trick of the light.

I stayed rooted where I was. She drifted past me without a glance, as if I weren't even there. I went straight to my room after that and closed the door. No matter how much I tried to reason through what I'd seen, I still reached back and turned the lock. I kept telling myself there had to be an explanation. A normal one. Something I just hadn't figured out yet.

But every time Hina's door opened across the hall, my whole body honed in on the sound. An instinctive hush swept through me, my breath held in my chest, my limbs frozen as I tried not to make a sound. Her footsteps passed in measured taps, too controlled, nothing like the soft, impatient scuffs she used to make when she drifted through the hallway. The sound slid into the quiet of my mind, narrowing every thought until it felt hard to breathe. I couldn't bring myself to leave my room for the rest of that day.

Three days later, after spending two of them avoiding Hina, I finally caved and answered when she knocked on my door the way she used to before everything shifted.

We ended up walking down the hallway together, the overhead light buzzing faintly above us, warm and dim. I was half-thinking about the tea I'd left cooling on my desk. Hina walked a step behind me, chatting about the new dress I'd bought. For a moment, it almost felt normal again.

Out of habit, I glanced at the gold framed mirror opposite Mom's plant stand. My reflection

stared back, dark hair sleep-mussed, brown eyes wilted from lack of sleep. I shifted my gaze to where hers should've been, a step behind me.

But there was nothing. No silhouette beside mine. No blur, no shadow.

Nothing. Just space.

It took me a while to tear my eyes away from where she should've been. I turned to look at her again. There she was, still talking. Still holding her phone, and gesturing to the image of the dress.

What? How could this be? My thoughts scrambled, refusing to process the void where her reflection should have been. A glitch. A trick of the light. A hallucination from too many sleepless nights. Yet an icy dread slid in, sharp and undeniable, pressing against the edges of my denial.

Perfect, just what I needed. Another thing keeping me up at night.

I edged closer to the mirror, The moment I faced it head-on, Hina's reflection flickered back as if it had never been gone. Slowly, I raised my hand and gave a small wave, waiting for the glass to glitch again. It didn't. The mirror copied me perfectly, ordinary as ever.

Great. Apparently, I'm hallucinating now.

I rubbed my dry eyes, pressing until stars sparked against my lids. Too many late nights, too little sleep, it was warping my vision, making me see things that weren't there. I told myself that over and over, clinging to it like a lifeline.

I must be tired. I forced myself to believe it, to walk away without a backward glance, all the while the image of that blank space seared itself behind my eyelids.

The next day, I checked again. Not on purpose, I just caught myself slowing near the hallway mirror as Hina and I headed for the living room. She walked ahead of me, dragging her sock-clad feet, her back slightly bent where Mom's rules usually held it straight. Hair held in a claw clip, pajamas rumpled, a sight that would send Mom into another tirade about decorum.

And then, for the briefest blink, her reflection lagged. She moved forward, but in the glass she stayed behind, a stutter in the rhythm of reality. A heartbeat later, it caught up, smooth and whole, as if nothing had happened.

My stride faltered mid-step, breath hitching,

My heart kicked once, hard, like it missed a beat, then tried to cover for it by making it hammer rapidly in my chest, a frantic drum against my ribs.

No, this isn't possible... Did I imagine it? Surely I did. My vision locked onto her reflection, perfectly in sync, perfectly normal again. But I knew what I'd seen. I saw it! Didn't I?

I stood rooted in my spot, left staring at my sister's retreating back. My legs felt like lead, my chest tight with a strange, suffocating dread. Begging myself to just walk away, I forced my feet forward, mind already buzzing with impossibilities. My mind felt a step behind my body, everything slightly out of sync, like I was moving through someone else's morning.

We took our seats at the breakfast table, the morning light seeping through the curtains in pale, dreary patches. The table was set for three again, everything placed with a tidy precision that made the room feel smaller. My parents moved around it in a slow, unbroken loop, their motions all too smoothly synchronized.

Mom didn't comment on Hina's pajamas, a minor detail that twisted in my gut. Dad said nothing either. He didn't even make her egg the way she liked it; crispy edges nearly burnt, just three soft scrambled ones, three plates lined up too neatly. No toast with the crusts cut off for 'our fussy Hina'. No joke about 'would her majesty like me to bring her breakfast to bed as she is still in her pajamas?'

Maybe I'd slipped into some parallel universe, one where Mom didn't care, Dad didn't fuss, and everything looked the same, but I was the odd one out.

Hina seemed oblivious, my parents equally so, chewing and nodding like actors hitting their marks. I shoveled food into my mouth, barely tasting it, my knee bouncing under the table.

All I wanted was to finish and escape, away from them. I could feel a silent scream of frustration mounting at the back of my throat. But I held it in. The moment I swallowed the last bite, I scraped my chair back and headed for my room. No one called after me.

Upstairs, I pulled my phone out, thumb hovering over my contacts. If Mom and Dad wouldn't talk about it, maybe one of Hina's friends would know what was going on.

I scrolled until I found her closest friend, the one she used to call every night. My chest eased a little. At least she would know.

**Hi. Do you know what's going on with Hina?**

The typing bubble appeared immediately.

**Who?**

My throat tightened.

**Hina. Your friend.**

This time, the reply took longer.

**I'm sorry, but who is this?**

**This is Yui**, I typed back, fingers trembling. **Hina's sister.**

The answer came quickly, almost too quickly.

**Sorry, I think you have the wrong number. I don't know anyone named Hina.**

My heart seemed to freeze inside my ribcage. A tremor ran through my hands, spreading all the way to my fingertips. That didn't make sense.

I stared at the screen, my vision narrowing on the words: **I don't know anyone named Hina.**

But that's impossible.

What does she mean she doesn't know Hina?

Did I send it to the wrong person? Did she change her number and forget to tell us?

After I went through two more of Hina's contacts, both insisting they didn't know her, the strength in my body left me abruptly. I sank onto my bed, the mattress dipping under my weight. My thumb shook as I backed out of each chat, scrolling through the numbers again and again. My eyes dragged over every digit, frantic, sweeping from the number to the contact photo to the old message threads. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Looking for a mistake. A typo. Anything.

There was nothing.

These were their numbers.

These were her friends. And yet ...

My grip tightened around the phone until my nails bit through the case, sending thin needles of pain up my fingertips. My thoughts snagged and tore against themselves.

What is this? Some elaborate joke? Did they plan this to mess with me? It had to be. It had to be. I latched onto that explanation with shaking hands. But the lie splintered the moment I leaned into it, thin cracks working their way through my mind, lodging sharp doubts into places I didn't want. I squeezed my eyes shut, but the fractures kept gouging at my sanity, wearing it thin, strand by strand. I could barely bring myself to go downstairs. I didn't want to face her, to face

any of them. But eventually, I forced myself out of my room.

She didn't come to dinner. Not that she would have eaten, as her plate was missing from the table again, the new routine apparently. As much as I didn't want to face her right now, I couldn't just let her starve. So, I brought a portion of my own dinner to her room: Mom had made Grandma's recipe, miso soup, rice, and tofu-the good kind, the kind we used to fight for, the kind she once stabbed me in the hand with a fork for. Playfully. Mostly, I think.

Stopping at her closed door, I took a deep breath, fixing a smile on my face that tugged painfully at my cheeks. I knocked three rapid knocks, then waited for the soft "Come in" to echo behind it. When I opened her door, she was sitting by her desk. It faced the window, backlit so her usually light brown hair looked darker at the edges. From the doorway, I could see she hadn't even turned her head toward me, just kept staring out the window. She didn't look towards me, not even at the plate I held.

"Thanks," she murmured, the sound flat, her gaze unwavering from the window. That's it? Not one glance towards me? No real acknowledgement? As I set the plate on her desk, I peered out the window, but saw nothing out of the ordinary, just our usual neighborhood, nothing that warranted such intense, vacant staring. My unease, a cold knot in my stomach, grew with every subtle, unacknowledged detail. I don't quite remember what I said back as I walked out. I kept sneaking glances until the door clicked shut.

Thirty minutes later, I was back, standing outside her door, a sleepwalker with no real idea how I'd gotten there. Hesitating at her door, my hand hovering above the crooked metal door handle, taking a slow, steady breath, I eased it open softly.

The plate sat exactly where I'd left it, the shadow from the half-drawn curtain now cutting across the desk. The steam had long vanished; the miso's surface was dull and filmed over, the tofu edges stiff, curling slightly. A faint, cooled scent of soy and rice hung in the air, stale enough to make my stomach turn. The utensils hadn't moved. The rice mound was untouched; not a single grain out of place.

She was sitting the same way I'd left her. Same clothes. Unchanged posture. Hands in her lap like she'd been carved that way. Her gaze stayed fixed on the window, unmoving.

I blinked. My mind swirled, grasping for some explanation. Maybe she wasn't hungry? No, she didn't even eat breakfast! She's always hungry. Always. My skin prickled, a faint, crawling restlessness working its way through me. Then she turned and smiled, slowly, too slowly, as if her face had to relearn the motion.

"Oh, you're here, good. I just finished," she said, her voice even, monotone, "If you're going to the kitchen, would you mind taking the empty plate to the sink?" She gestured slowly and

mechanically towards the untouched meal.

My stomach dropped, like something sliding down a steep incline with no brakes, picking up a terrible, inevitable momentum. I looked at the untouched food, then back at her vacant smile. Was she messing with me? Playing some cruel joke? Heat gathered in my fists, nails pressing crescents into my palms before I'd even noticed I was clenching them. My throat locked, the urge to speak scraping uselessly against it.

"You know, I did sacrifice half my dinner for you," I said, pushing the plate a little closer.

"The least you could do is pretend to eat it, don't make me regret giving it to you"

Her eyes still didn't leave the window. "No, I'm not that hungry, I ate enough."

"You? Not hungry? That's a first, should I mark the calendar?" I tried to laugh, but it came out thin. "You'd eat my burnt toast even when full, just to tell me how bad it was."

Her lips curved faintly, but it wasn't a smile I recognized. "That doesn't sound like me. Maybe you're remembering wrong."

My jaw tightened, nails biting crescents into my palms. I let out a laugh that scraped more than it sounded, my voice sharper than intended. "Right, obviously. I just imagined a lifetime of you stealing my foo—"

"Could you just take the plate, thank you," she interrupted me, glancing my way for the briefest moment before turning back to the window, as if I hadn't spoken at all.

She cuts me off now. Since when? And not even waiting for my reply, that's new.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, copper blooming on my tongue. Forcing a smile towards her that felt too tight around my mouth, " yeah, sure. No problem ." I took the plate in front of her and closed the door slowly. Quietly. I stood in the hallway, pressing my back against the cool plaster, trying to breathe through the tight feeling in my throat, a knot of pure dread. The air felt thin, suffocating. She didn't even ask me why I was there. Didn't care. The normalcy of her request, her blank eyes, it felt like a performance, and the audience was only me.

Later that night, I sat in bed, phone in hand, thumbing through old photos, the screen's glow washing the dark room in a white hue. Not looking for anything in particular, just letting the images blur past. Just noise. Background. Anything to drown out the insistent whispers in my head, trying to chew my mind raw with impossible speculations.

I stopped at one photo from last year, a shot of us at the summer festival during our annual trip to Japan. Hina had a stick of candied grapes, red syrup streaking her fingers. a fan she made

me bu,y hiding the lower half of my face, the smile still obvious in my eyes.

Her yukata was navy with little cranes on it; mine a deep burgundy with a dotting of white flowers throughout the fabric.

I stared at the photo, a splinter of wrongness tugging at the edge of my memory.

Cranes. White cranes with red-tipped wings. She said it was her favorite, right?

Only... no. That wasn't right.

Her favorite was the hydrangea one, the soft blue yukata I gave her.

She'd called it her "good luck charm," said it made her feel like she was standing in a field of flowers.

... Didn't she?

No, she never had a crane yukata. I would remember if she did. Dad always made me pick them out; he couldn't tell turquoise from teal if it was shoved under his nose. The one time he tried, he brought home a bathrobe and swore it was close enough.

I tried to picture her in it: the slightly long sleeves, the way she tugged at the white sash, the matching hydrangea hair clip she always wore.

...Nothing

The entire image felt like trying to cup water in my hands, there for a heartbeat, gone the next. It shimmered, then broke apart between my fingers, leaving nothing but a maddening hollow pit.

My thumb shook as I swiped to the next photo. Then the next. Faster, faster. My breath went ragged. The phone was slick in my grip.

Nothing. No yukata. No selfies. No festival shots. No proof. Not one.

"I took a picture," I muttered. "Last year. I did."

Scroll. Scroll.

"Didn't I?"

A sharp, thread-like tingle crawled at the back of my mind, a parasitic thing. It was like walking a road I knew by heart, only now the light had failed, and every familiar shadow twisted into something alien. And the worst part was realizing I couldn't trust my own head.



A hot prickling started behind my eyes, a static pressure building until I could hardly breathe.

I slammed the phone face-down onto the blanket, a sharp thud muffling in the sudden quiet. Its surface felt tainted, burning against my palm, a physical manifestation of the lie it held. I sat rigid in the dark, every muscle screaming with tension, too terrified to move, too stubborn for the hot, frustrated tears that pricked at my eyes.

It hit me suddenly, a memory, sharp as a slap; it came out of nowhere.

Me at grandmother's kitchen. Cold floor, ink-stained wood.

The wood dug into my knees as I knelt at the low table in the middle of the room. An old tome sat to my left; ink and paper lay in front of me. I was eight, maybe nine. My grandmother hunched over the table, hair neatly gathered at the nape in a firm, low ponytail, eyes fixed on the mortar between her hands. Stone scraped as she ground something dried, herbs, maybe, or ink-root. The smell was sharp and bitter; it clung to the back of my throat.

She didn't look up when she spoke. I watched her, expectant, ink-stained brush in hand.

"First sign's the reflection," her voice, dry and firm, seemed to rise from the very floorboards. "If it doesn't match, or doesn't show at all, that's when you start paying attention."

"Second's false memories," she continued, her hands scraping the mortar. "Talking like they remember things that never happened. Forgetting things they shouldn't. Others, forgetting details about them."

"Third is a conversation," she said, gathering the powder from the mortar and transferring it efficiently into a tiny glass jar. "Not with you. With something you can't see. And not just once." The lid clicked shut.

"That's when you stop observing," she finally looked up, her gaze heavy. "And start asking if that person is still whole, or already half gone."

The words carried in the sudden, heavy silence of my room, Grandma's voice a ghostly echo in my ears. Half gone. The phrase settled over me like a shroud, chilling me to the bone. It couldn't be real. My mind was grabbing at anything else it could be, desperate for an alternative. Hina was just... stressed. Sleep-deprived. Maybe she'd hit her head, or was playing an elaborate, cruel joke. Yes, that was it. A joke. She loved to prank me.

But has she ever been that cruel?

No. She's never had a cruel bone in her body. Never.

The memory of her blank reflection, the hollow space in the mirror, flickered behind my

eyes. And then the plates... Mom and Dad, laying out only three plates, their faces blank when I corrected them, the yukata, the memory of the hydrangea print, shimmering and dissolving like smoke in my mind. Each one slotting too neatly into Grandma's signs. No. That's not what this is. That's not what this is. I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my palms against my temples as if to push the impossible truth away. But the words, blunt and certain, kept hammering in my mind:

First sign.

Second sign.

Third -

She's already given me two.

How long until the third?

Will she even give me one?

That night, every time I closed my eyes, the thoughts clawed from the dark, dragging me back awake until the night stretched endlessly.

The next morning, Mom and Dad were out on some errands. The house was eerily quiet. I was on the couch, flipping through my favorite fashion magazines. Not really reading it. Just buying time until I could pretend things were normal again.

Hina walked in, slow and soft, like always. She looked fine. Hair brushed. Hoodie zipped up to her chin. looking normal, too normal.

"Oh, hey!" she called, "I thought you were at work." The words felt like they'd been pulled from a script she barely remembered, eyes looking through me, not quite reaching me,

I looked up from my futile study of the pages. "No, why would I be at work? I never work on Sundays. "

"Right, I forgot that." She came over and peeked at the magazine in front of me, and then suddenly whipped her head to look at me, and in a tone that seemed too flat to be a question, she asked.

"Have you seen Thomas this morning?"

My eyes widened, my brows knotting before the word slipped out: " Thomas?"

She blinked, leaning more into my space. "Thomas. Our dog."

My heart gave a violent twist and dropped, like it had torn free and fallen somewhere lower than it belonged. Thomas... No. The name echoed in my head. He died when I was ten. Thirteen years ago. Kidney failure. We buried him in the backyard under the magnolia tree. We never got another dog after him. The facts cut through me like glass.

"What's with that face?" she asked, a slight tilt to her head, but her eyes held no real curiosity, her tone flat. "Did he sneak outside again?"

The room wavered around me, slipping out of focus, until my grandmother's sudden voice in my head snapped everything back into place. Second, false memories.

False memories...

I forced a laugh, a thin sound that grated in my own ears, striving for a lightness that felt alien. "Oh. Yeah, probably chasing the neighbors' cat again. He'll come back."

Hina smiled, nodding like she'd known it all along.

"Ha, like he needed to give her any more trauma," she said, and a breathy, almost musical chuckle escaped her, a sound that felt out of sync, like a tune played in the wrong key.

I watched her, breath caught in my throat, chest too tight to let it out.

Because the neighbor doesn't have a cat. Never did.

He has a rottweiler. Huge, Old, and mean as hell.

Barks at the mailman.

Sleeps on the porch like a mountain. A mountain with fleas. God, I hated that dog.

He's the reason Hina never used the front gate alone. The reason she once cried at the sound of a chain leash snapping taut. She wouldn't forget that. She'd forget my name sooner than that damn dog. Unless...false memory... The word echoed with chilling finality, like a cold hand gripping my throat. My grandmother's voice, blunt in its certainty.

And just like that, the last thread of denial snapped. I had the truth. A cold and terrifying answer that settled deep in my bones, with a chill no ghost story had ever managed.

It was real. It was happening.

No more doubt. No more excuses.

The impossible was here, in my living room, wearing my sister's face.

Her gaze cleared, her features drawing tight. For the first time since these incidents started, she didn't look vacant; she looked frightened and confused.

“Wait, no, that's not right, Yui. Thomas is—”

The words caught mid-breath. Her face smoothed. eyes clouded over once more, and a thin, too-pleasant smile stretched across her lips.

She left immediately after that, with a chilling smile, humming the lullaby we used to sing as children: the notes just slightly off, the rhythm wrong.

I waited until I couldn't hear her footsteps anymore.

Then I sat down. Right there on the floor.

Back against the couch. Hands in my lap.

And I just stayed there.

The magazine lay open on the table, a vibrant spread of a runway show, but the colors blurred, the figures meaningless. My gaze skated over it, unable to grasp or pretend to grasp anything.

a clammy slickness, my body aware of a truth my mind still fought, trying to force puzzle pieces into a picture that stubbornly refused to make sense.

Second, false memories.

I closed my eyes.

This wasn't confusion; it was an alternate reality taking root within her, a vine curling tight around her, replacing her piece by piece. But just after that, that flicker of clarity, that second where she almost said Thomas was gone, she had looked like herself again. Like my sister, not whatever this is that's wearing her face. And then, just as fast, it was gone, smoothed over like it had never happened.

I don't know how long I sat there. But when I finally rose, I didn't, couldn't hesitate.

I went to my room, each step an effort, my feet barely holding my weight. My hands trembled as I closed the door, striving for a quiet click that felt impossibly loud in the silence. I almost forgot to lock the door in my haste.

I opened the hidden drawer at the underside of my desk. The one I hadn't touched in years. Dust puffed up like it had been waiting for this moment. I didn't know what I was doing. Not

exactly. But I knew I couldn't keep sitting there twiddling my thumbs. I needed to find out if anything was actually wrong with her. The only way to do that is by using a diagnostic ritual.

Reaching to the back of it. Fingers found the old ink jar by feel. I pulled it out. Pried the lid off and, looked inside. Dry. Like it had been empty for years.

I should've known...

The smell still lingered faintly. That mix of ash and a sharp, metallic tang I could never name. But the inside was bone dry. Not a drop left. Of course it was, why did I think it would be otherwise? I hadn't touched it since... Doesn't matter. I shook it once, anyway. Tapped the side. Nothing. Stared at it for a moment, fingers still curled around the glass. Tried again. Tapped the bottom. Still nothing.

Completely dry.

I set it down. The light catches on the glass edge. A hollow ache loomed beneath my ribs, my vision hazed at the edges for a second. This was my grandmother's last jar, and it was completely useless right now.

I was going to have to get more.

From that world I swore I'd never return to, not after what happened to Grandma.

But now, I had no choice.