

Chapter 3

I closed the door to Bea's room softly, my head pounding, and crept down the stairs. I found Adelaide in the kitchen, her fuchsia hair pulled into a messy bun, her lips a thin, grim line. She was pouring water over tea bags into two oversize mugs. The polish on her nails caught the light above the stove in a kaleidoscope of color.

She crossed the kitchen when she saw me and pulled me into a hug. I allowed her to squeeze me but found no comfort in the embrace.

"You don't have to stay," I said. "Thank you for picking us up, but it's late and—"

"Don't be ridiculous. Living room. Now."

I went, relieved to have her with me. Adelaide's supportiveness had been unwavering for the last six years, but never more so than tonight. After Callum had fled the scene, I'd found my phone wedged between the door and front seat. But I never got the chance to call 911. A tow truck had appeared, along with an off-duty policeman who introduced himself as Officer Gordon, still dressed in a suit and tie from the gala.

The officer hadn't asked who'd been driving or where Callum was because, of course, he'd already known. He spoke with the tow truck driver and asked if I had someone to call and pick me and Beatrix up. Adelaide was there in less than fifteen minutes. We'd learned from a social media

post that Officer George Gordon had been this year's recipient of the biggest award given out by Rosalie and Dustin Taylor's nonprofit. From the post's time stamp, it appeared Officer Gordon had commenced his acceptance speech mere minutes before he'd been dispatched to the scene at Seaview Terrace.

My body ached. My mind felt spongy, too tired to make sense of just how thoroughly the Taylors had manipulated events.

"Here." Adelaide handed me a steaming mug before setting her own down on the coffee table.

I took a sip.

She tilted her head, coiffed eyebrows raised. "What are you going to do?"

Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away. "I have no idea. I mean, he *left*, after driving us into a goddamn iron fence. And he got away with it. It all happened so fast."

"I know," Adelaide admitted. "Dammit! I wish we'd handled things differently. Callum was long gone when I got there, and the car had already been towed. What were we supposed to do? The goddamn hit-and-run was being covered up even as it was happening."

Adelaide fingered her feather earrings thoughtfully. "Remember a few months back, you told me that not only was Callum's drinking picking up again, but his body was reacting to the drinking in gnarly ways? Is that still happening?"

"I remember. And yeah, it is. Maybe because he's getting older? We're almost forty. But sometimes, when he's passed out on the couch and I try to wake him to go to bed, he jerks out of his stupor like a reanimated corpse, disoriented and with no idea where he is."

"How disoriented?" Adelaide pressed.

"Um, I don't know. I mean, I can tell him *why* I'm waking him up, point out that he's on the couch and I don't want him there when Beatrix gets up in the morning, and he looks at me like he

doesn't even know who I am. This can go on for minutes; either that, or he'll finally recognize me and then pass out again right there. When I wake him a minute later, he's as disoriented as before. Why do you ask?"

"Got it," Adelaide said, ignoring my question. "Now, on a seemingly unrelated note, you said he's had night terrors in the past, right? And that he occasionally gets really creeped out by certain horror movies?"

"Yeaah," I said, now even more unsure where this was going, despite her acknowledgment of the non sequitur. "The night terrors are maybe once a month? Sometimes less frequently. I think the more he drinks, the less he has them."

"But he *has* had them?" Adelaide reiterated.

"Yes. And to your other question, Cal has always liked scary movies, but he definitely gets freaked out by stuff fairly often. Things seem to stick in his subconscious more than they do mine. He'll dream about some nun with fangs standing in his closet and insist it was something from a movie we saw, and I won't have the faintest idea what he's talking about."

"You don't have to tell me twice about Callum getting freaked out while drunk." She made a face, and I knew she was thinking of the housewarming party, of the past-Callum's face flecked with glass, blood oozing from half a dozen cuts. While my money was still on some creepy-crawly, Callum had never revealed what caused him to smash the mirror, even after he sobered up. The incident instigated a brief period of sobriety, but Callum had started drinking again not long after.

"Okay, lastly," Adelaide said, "tell me again why you haven't filed for divorce."

Adelaide's question hung in the air, and I felt I might collapse from the weight of it. I reached for the tea but couldn't drink it. I stared past the soot-stained hearth, my vision slipping between the stones like someone searching for meaning on the surface of a rippling pond.

“Because,” I said finally, sensing she was about to prod me for a response, “think about Callum’s drinking. He doesn’t drink in the mornings or at work. He’s not living under a bridge.” I stared hard at Adelaide. “Even after tonight, he hasn’t gotten a DUI. He hasn’t harmed anyone while drunk. He hasn’t beaten or raped me. He hasn’t put his hands on Beatrix. Any judge—especially in this town or even the state—who knows Callum’s family would see this nonexistent track record and claim he doesn’t have a drinking problem.”

I gripped the mug harder to steady my hands. “But when you live with someone day in and day out, and they drink like he does?” My voice grew quiet. “It’s a slow death, like someone carving out little pieces of you with a spoon instead of a knife.” I managed a small sip of the lemony tea, hoping to ease the rawness of my throat.

“He’s lazy, but only at home,” I continued, feeling my cheeks heat up. It was embarrassing to admit what I put up with. “At work, he excels—yet another thing a judge would point to. ‘What’s the problem, ma’am? You’ve got yourself a good provider here.’”

“Rhode Island is a no-fault state,” Adelaide pointed out.

“True, so maybe that won’t come up during divorce proceedings, but it sure as shit will when I go for full custody of Beatrix.”

“Right,” Adelaide agreed. “Sorry, go on.”

“When he drinks, he becomes the worst version of himself. His abuse isn’t physical, it’s mental. Spiritual. He consumes me. But no judge will listen to that. And even if they do, they won’t *hear* it. And I’ll be stuck having to hand my lovely, curious, intrepid, unique, spirited daughter over to a man who will consume her, too, like a goddamn vampire.”

I didn't realize I was crying until the tears fell onto my hands. "That's not even the worst part," I said. "The worst part is, despite how lucky he's been in the past, his drinking is dangerous. Look what happened tonight. If he had partial custody, I can't bear to think of what might happen."

I paused, laughing bitterly. "That's why I'm afraid to divorce him."

Adelaide's eyes were twin orbs of gleaming fire. "Let's recap," she said and brought her hands together. "We've got a man whom you cannot merely divorce without potentially deadly consequences, who drinks to the point of complete intoxication and sometimes utter disorientation, and who is known to have, if not outright phobias, then at least certain superstitions that often manifest themselves through night terrors or nightmares with some hypnopompic hallucinations thrown in for good measure."

"Hypno-what?"

"Hypnopompic hallucinations. Seeing things—like Callum's fanged nun—upon waking. They're like dream leftovers. Regardless," Adelaide said, as if we were getting offtrack, despite my having no idea what track we were even on, "there's only one way to get rid of someone like this without relinquishing control of your shared child, short of killing them."

I jerked my head up.

Adelaide waved her hands, nails glinting. "I'm kidding."

"Okaaay."

"Well, no, I'm not kidding," Adelaide said. "I mean, we're *not* going to kill him, so I don't need to kid. Therefore, *this* is the only way."

I squinted at her, confused. I was drained from the drama of the evening and longed to crawl into bed beside Beatrix, to smell her lilac-and-honeyed scent and tuck wayward strands of curls behind her ears as she slept. The idea of being rid of Callum without my greatest fear coming to

pass was intriguing, but where was Adelaide going with all this? “And the only way is . . .” I prompted.

Adelaide smiled. Her perfect teeth glinted in the glow of the overhead. She leaned in close.

“The only way is to stage a haunting in this house until he is so out of his mind with terror that he willingly walks out the door to escape it, abandoning you—and Beatrix—and coming across to any judge in the state of Rhode Island as a complete lunatic.”