

HEMLOCK ISLAND

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UNCORRECTED PROOF

PROLOGUE

I NEVER WANTED to rent out the island house. Even after a year of doing exactly that, the very thought has me raiding my tiny stash of edibles before the panic attack hits. The island is my sanctuary from the world. It's also the one thing in this world that is mine, all mine.

The island had been a wedding gift from Kit, and he insisted on signing it over after we split. The problem is that Hemlock House is not some tiny cottage perched on a sliver of land. It's a two-thousand-square-foot custom-built home on a five-acre private island in Lake Superior.

It's the sort of place that a guy like Christian "Kit" Hayes—CEO of his family's tech corporation—can afford as a getaway. It is *not* the kind of place his high-school English teacher ex can afford to maintain . . . unless I rent it out. Unless I allow total strangers to invade my private domain. Allow them to move the chairs from my secret spots, to burn down my gazebo with a bonfire, to destroy my grandmother's coffee table with what are clearly canid teeth marks despite promising their dog would stay outside . . .

I told myself to stop being so sentimental. If I want this amazing place, I need to make concessions. Just keep my insurance paid up and

be happy that the worst thing that can happen is a burned gazebo or a chewed table.

That is not the worst thing.

The worst thing is that someone now knows every inch of your private space, and they can do whatever they want to it—and, maybe, to you.

CHAPTER 1

“LANEY,” a voice says in my ear. “Aunt Laney!”

The last one startles me, gasping, out of sleep. Some parents call their kids by their first and middle name when they’re in trouble. My sixteen-year-old niece calls me “Aunt” when I’m doing something to piss her off, and right now what I’m apparently doing is sleeping when she wants to talk to me.

My mumbled “What?” comes out as a groan.

“Your phone?” The offending object appears, wagging back and forth as I struggle to focus on blurred text.

Four missed calls.

I thump back onto the pillow. “It’s the middle of the night,” I mutter. Then I bolt upright in my narrow bed. Four missed calls in the middle of the night. I snatch the phone from Madison.

“It’s not Gran or Gramps,” she says. “It’s the campground at Fox Bay.”

It takes a moment for my sleepy brain to process that. I blink, seeing only Madison’s face hovering in front of me, spiky auburn hair framing a pale oval face so much like my sister’s it makes my heart clench with grief.

“Laney?”

What was she saying? Right. The call came from a campground at—
 “Shit!” I blink fast. “Hemlock House.”

I fumble to retrieve my messages. “Please don’t tell me it’s a fire. I told the renters the area’s under a no-open-flame order, and it’s always ‘Oh, but it was just a little fire.’ If they—”

The phone vibrates. *FOXY LADY CAMPGROUND* flashes on the screen, and I jab the Accept button.

“Hello?” I blurt.

I’m quivering, rocked by visions of Hemlock House in flames. Does insurance cover it if renters light a fire after I warned them? Did I warn them by text? If it was a phone conversation, they can deny—

“What is going on in that house of yours?” The woman’s voice is loud enough that I think I have it on speaker, and when I hit the button to turn it off, I actually switch *into* speaker mode. I go to flip it back, but Madison swats my hand and leans in to listen.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Is there a problem? I’m not there right now. I’ve rented out the house—”

“I know that,” the woman snaps. “Because you rented it to me.”

“Ms. . . .” I struggle for the name. “Teller?”

“Abbas. Mrs. Abbas.”

Right. The Tellers were the last renters. Or maybe the ones before that . . .

“Mrs. Abbas,” I say. “Is there a problem?”

“No, I’m calling to ask how to use the shower . . . in the middle of the night, after driving that leaky boat five *miles* to town, and then hunting everywhere for a pay phone because our cell phones won’t work even when we’re *not* on the island.”

My first impulse is to say that the boat is in better shape than my damn car because I need to keep it that way for guests. Any “leak” was water sloshing over the sides.

But that’s not her point, and so I say, as calmly as I can, “What’s the problem, Mrs. Abbas?”

“There is blood in the green bedroom.”

Madison’s brows shoot up.

“So there seems to be blood—” I begin.

“Not seems to be. *Is*. My husband is a doctor.” Her voice goes distant,

as if she's moved the pay phone receiver away from her mouth. "Tell her it's blood."

"It is blood," a man says, his accented voice sounding weary.

"Okay, so there *is* blood in the green bedroom. The last guests weren't planning on using it, but I presume they did, and the caretaker didn't realize that and didn't change the sheets. I'm very sor—"

"The blood isn't on the sheets. It's in the closet."

"In the *closet*?" That's Madison. I dimly realize I should shush her, but my gut is clenching too hard for me to follow through.

Not again.

Please, not again.

"Yes, the closet," Mrs. Abbas says. "I woke up cold. You said not to light any fires, so we couldn't start the woodstove."

"I didn't mean the—" I stop myself. "You woke up cold and . . ."

"I'd already used the blanket from our closet. I was checking the second bedroom. I opened the closet door, and it was right there."

"The blan—? The blood?"

"Yes. On the door. All *over* the door. And scratches, as if someone tried to claw their way out."

"Holy shit!" Madison whispers as I clap my hand to her mouth.

"Blood and scratches?" I say. "*Inside* the bedroom closet door?"

There's a shuffling sound, interspersed with angry words. Then the man's voice comes on.

"We do not actually believe anyone was confined in that closet, Ms. Kilpatrick. There is no lock, obviously. We believe the last person who rented your house played a practical joke. Your cleaning woman must not have needed to access that closet, and so she did not see the damage. My wife is understandably distraught."

"Understandably, yes. I am so sorry. I'll refund the rest of your booking, of course, though you're welcome to stay for the whole thing. Monday was your check-out day, wasn't it?"

"You're refunding *all* of our booking," Mrs. Abbas says in the background. "And I'm not spending another minute on that island. There's no cell service. No telephone. No internet."

All of which they knew when they rented it. That's a selling point for

most renters, and just in case they miss that heavily bolded part in my listing, I make sure they understand before they rent it.

Still I get what she's saying. Yes, she knew Hemlock Island was remote and unreachable, but she'd only been thinking of how nice it'd be not to get work messages on her vacation. She hadn't considered what that would be like when *she* needed to contact someone.

"I understand—" I begin.

"No, I don't think you do," she says, still in the background. "You're lucky we don't contact the police. We *will* contact the rental agency—"

"No, Charlotte," her husband says. "This is not Ms. Kilpatrick's fault. It is the previous guest playing a prank. You will need to file a report on them with the agency, Ms. Kilpatrick. You might also, if I am not being too bold, suggest that your cleaning lady do a more thorough examination of the house after each rental. I can imagine it is not easy when you have such a popular property and a narrow window in which to clean."

He's right about that. How many times has Nate—our cleaner—told me that he's shown up to find the previous guests still in bed? Or had the next guests arrive hours early and grumble when he politely suggests they explore the island while he finishes cleaning?

"I'll do a thorough examination myself," I say. "Again, I am so sorry. I'm refunding your money right now." I open my app. "Then I'll head out there and see what's going on."

"I BET IT WAS A RACCOON," Madison says when I hang up. "Hopefully not a rat. We haven't seen rats on the island, right?"

I stare at her as I try to connect her words to what just happened.

"Blood and scratches in the closet?" she says. "Obviously some poor critter got trapped in there. Maybe a bat. That would make the most sense, right? A bat?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, struggling to collect my thoughts. Then I swing my legs out of bed. I head to the kitchen and flip on the coffee machine.

Madison's footfalls pad from my room, which is about ten paces from the kitchen. Yes, it's a tiny house, but it's all I could afford in Madison's

school district. After my sister died, I couldn't bear to upend my niece's life more. I'd paid Anna's remaining medical bills with the sale of her heavily mortgaged house and rented the one place I could kinda-sorta afford on the edge of her upscale suburban neighborhood.

"It's four in the morning, Laney," Madison says when she comes in the kitchen. "Why are you making coffee?"

"I need to head to Hemlock Island and resolve this before they register a complaint, which Mrs. Abbas absolutely will."

"Yeah, she's really freaked."

"I don't blame her. I'm sorry, Mads, but I might not be back until late. We'll need to find you a place to stay the night."

I brace for her to say she'll stay here, which will inevitably lead to a fight. She'll argue she's old enough to stay alone, and I'll remind her about what happened last month when some guy peeped at her while I was out late.

I start to put my coffee cup under the brewer, but she gets her travel mug in there first.

"I'm going with you," she says.

"Uh-uh. I'm *not* taking you to the island after that."

"After what? A bat got trapped in the closet?" She peers at me. "There's more to the story, isn't there?"

I concentrate on pouring exactly the right amount of cream into my empty cup. "More to what story?"

"You never even thought it might be an animal," she says. "That guy said it was a prank, and you rolled with it. Now you're rushing out to investigate."

"I'm not rushing out." I fill my mug and settle onto a wobbly kitchen chair. "See?"

"What else has happened?"

Here's where I always get stuck in this new role as Madison's legal guardian. I need to be the parent, not the fun aunt, and I'm grappling with that shift. Which is worse? Lying to her? Or sharing something potentially disturbing? Knowing my niece, I cross my fingers and make what I hope is the right choice.

"There have been other things," I say. "Other . . . incidents."

"Incidents?"

I set my mug down on the thrift-shop table. "Nate found charred animal bones in the boathouse. I found a hex circle under the crawlspace rug and then feathers and bones hanging from the gazebo."

"Ah, Halloween came early this year. Some renter's kids got bored and staged a house of horrors for the next guests." She takes a bag of Oreos from the cupboard. "Part of me wants to high-five them for their creativity and part wants to give them shit for scaring innocent people. I blame Mom for the finger-wagging. The high-fives are totally on you."

"Me?"

"Uh, remember the stories you told me when I was a kid? The haunted houses we set up? The Halloween parties that had parents telling you off for giving their kids nightmares? I always said you're missing your calling. Mysteries are fine, but you really should be writing horror." She flips me an Oreo. "So some kids staged . . ."

She stops, cookie halfway to her mouth. "Wait. How long has this been going on?"

"Nate found the bones in mid-August."

"And no one has used the green bedroom since? Nate hasn't opened that closet door since? That's not possible."

"The room has been used twice since, and Nate and I thoroughly searched the house after I found the hex circle."

"Meaning it's repeated violations. Not a one-time staging."

"Yes."

"Local kids sneaking in between guests?"

"The security system says no unexpected access. The house hasn't been empty since spring."

"Then it must be the renters." She frowns in thought. "Any repeat customers?"

"Nope, which means it can't be renters, and it wouldn't be Nate."

"So we have a mystery to solve?" She grabs the bag of cookies and her travel mug. "Excellent. When do we leave?"

CHAPTER 2

IT TAKES four hours to get to Fox Bay, and I don't leave right away. I insist on having breakfast while waiting until the sun's fully up. Once we leave the city, it's a gorgeous drive along winding roads through trees painted red and gold. It's peak fall foliage season, and while I complain about the slow-driving gawkers, I'm mostly irked because I can't be one of them. It's a perfect autumn day, sunny enough to have the windows down, breezy enough for fallen leaves to dance and swirl before us.

How many times had I made this drive with Kit, my feet out the window or my nose pressed to it looking for wildlife? He'd rip over the hills and zoom around the curves in a roller-coaster ride that always made me grin. We'd stop to buy in-season fruit along the way and pull into our favorite roadside bakery to stock up on cinnamon rolls.

Kit and I always joked that we'd had a surprise wedding—a surprise to everyone including us. Growing up, he'd been my best friend's little brother. Then, when my sister got her cancer diagnosis, I'd taken a job back in our home city. Kit reached out and a catch-up dinner blossomed into friendship. When I sold my first book, he whisked me off to Vegas to celebrate, and we ended up in bed. Two days later, we were exchanging vows in a wedding chapel. There may have been alcohol involved.

We made it work for a while. Hell, there hadn't been much *work*

involved. We slid into marriage as we'd slid into friendship, so easily and naturally that I'd wake up, see Kit beside me, and grin like I'd won the lottery without buying a ticket. Then the pandemic hit, and we survived but our marriage didn't, and I'm not quite sure why. My surprise marriage ended in a surprise divorce, and I'm still reeling.

When I see the sign for Fox Bay, I turn left. I don't need to pass through the town itself, which can be a relief. If anyone spotted me, I'd catch shit for not stopping, and stopping means chatting and then coffee and more chatting . . . I love that about Fox Bay, but today is all about expediency. Get to Hemlock Island. See what's going on. Fix it. Get Madison back home.

We round a corner to see Lake Superior stretching out to the horizon, and I motion as if pulling a conductor's bell. "Last call for internet connectivity."

Madison flips through her phone, getting and returning messages before we'll be disconnected until we return from the island. I barely drive another half mile before the cell-phone signal indicator on my dashboard vanishes.

"We are officially disconnected," I say. "No email, no texts, no voice mail, no social media, no way to summon help if a masked killer leaps from the bushes."

"'Tis the season," she says. "Though, up here, if some guy in a goalie mask leaps out, he's probably looking for his lost road-hockey ball."

"Truth."

To my left is the local campground with the pay phone my renters had used. I slow and peer into the visitors' lot. I'll notice their vehicle if it's there. The people who rent Hemlock House do not stay in a place like Foxy Lady Campground, where the facilities can best be described as "rustic."

I turn in to the boat launch. There's a giant willow in the middle of the lot, and I'm steering around it when Madison says, "Is that Kit's car?"

I hit the brakes so fast that Madison jolts forward, and for a split second, my heart stops as I imagine her flying through the windshield.

"Oww . . ." she says as she plucks at her still-fastened seat belt.

That heart-stopping moment also makes me forget *why* I jammed on

the brakes. Then I see the back end of a silver car. Yes, it looks like Kit's, but I don't even know what model of car *I* drive—it's my sister's, and I took over payments that I can barely afford, as another part of ensuring a stable transition for Madison. I couldn't exactly teach her to drive on my motorcycle. Well, I could, and she'd have loved that, but no. Responsible Parenting 101.

I presume the high-end silver sedan belongs to the Abbases, and I cringe. They've stayed behind to give me shit in person. Great.

Behind the car, a woman stands with her back to me. She adjusts one sleeve of her chic jacket with a dark-skinned hand. Mrs. Abbas, I presume.

The woman turns, and my insides clench. It's not Mrs. Abbas. It's a woman my age, with a flawless profile and intricate braids.

Jayla.

Oh, shit.

Jayla Hayes. Kit's older sister.

In high school, Jayla and I had been best friends. In college, we'd danced around the possibility of more. Jayla had been figuring out her sexuality as she realized that guys didn't do it for her. I'd dated both boys and girls in high school, having discovered that for me it was about being attracted to a person rather than a gender.

In the end, Jayla and I didn't do more than flirt with the idea. One awkward date, a few kisses, and we realized we didn't click on that level.

After that, we should have gone back to being friends, right? It didn't work out that way. She went off to law school and drifted, and there's been a Jayla-sized hole in my life ever since.

That *is* Kit's car, then. Jayla must have borrowed it—

"Kit!" Madison shouts as she gets out, slamming the car door.

I dimly hear Madison greet Jayla, too, and there's more said, but I don't catch it. I'm frozen in the driver's seat as Kit appears. He looks toward my car and shades his eyes against the sun. Then he lifts a hand in a tentative wave.

If Madison were still in the car, I might have hit reverse, peeling from the lane. That's silly, of course. Our split was amicable. *Hey, we tried, and it didn't work, no hard feelings.*

That's the story.

That's the lie.

Still, I've put on my happy face for Madison. She adores Kit—has since she was a baby—and I'm not about to take him out of her life. Neither of them deserves that.

I steel myself and open the car door. In three long-legged strides, Kit's there and holding it for me. I look up to feel my heart twist as I see the Kit I know—dressed in a hoodie, faded jeans, and hiking boots. It's so much easier to see him in an expensive suit, all corporate CEO, a far cry from the little kid with a skateboard, the teen with dreadlocks and a guitar, the husband who'd come to Hemlock Island every weekend, looking exactly like this.

"Hey, you," he says.

"Hey, yourself." I wave at his face. "Check out the new look."

He rubs a hand over the short and perfectly trimmed beard. "You hate it."

"No, it makes you look very distinguished."

He crosses his eyes and sticks his tongue out the side of his mouth, and I laugh, the tension slipping away, as hard as I try to gather it back in.

"So distinguished," I say, and his dark eyes light up in a grin.

The moment lingers two heartbeats and then fades. He clears his throat. "I, uh, heard what happened. With the renters."

Tension snaps back as my gaze shoots to Madison.

"Nah, it wasn't Mads," he says. "Bill at the campground called me this morning. I decided to come up and check it out for you."

He glances at Jayla, who's walking toward us with one arm looped over Madison's shoulders.

"Yep," Jayla says. "That's exactly how it happened."

I narrow my eyes at her. She meets my look with one that warns me if I call out Kit on this particular lie, I'll be dealing with her.

"So," Jayla says. "We hitting the high seas? Or hanging out awkwardly until nightfall?"

"Ooh, we *should* wait until night," Madison says. "Get the full-creep effect."

They riff on that, but I don't hear it. I don't hear anything. Don't see anything either, until Kit's face is lowered right in front of mine.

"Laney?" he murmurs.

I snap out of it, and pull my jacket tighter. "I've got this. You guys go into town for an early lunch. The fish-and-chip place is open."

"What?" Madison says. "We're all going out—"

"I've got it." I head toward the dockside lockbox.

Jayla jangles the keys. "Not without these." She walks toward the boat. "Someone put blood in your closet, Laney. From what we heard, it isn't the first disturbing thing that's happened out there. You are not going alone."

Without waiting for a reply, she starts the boat. "Pile in. Last one on board is swimming."

I TELL Kit and Jayla what's been happening on Hemlock Island. They say little, and I struggle not to hear judgment in that.

Kit is at the wheel. He's the expert, having grown up with boats. No yachts. The Hayeses might be that kind of rich, but they aren't that kind of family. No country clubs. No yacht clubs. No dinner clubs. Not his scene, and definitely not Jayla's.

I look over at him, piloting the boat, and the sight is so familiar that I need to lock my knees to keep from walking up beside him, leaning against his shoulder, feeling his arm go around my waist . . .

I shake off the thought and glance over at Jayla. Her stylish jacket looks out of place here, but otherwise, she's dressed for Hemlock Island, in sneakers, tights, and a baggy men's shirt. She's comparing sneakers with Madison, who's wearing her "October specials"—a pair of horror-themed Vans. Then they're trading shoes, and I'm watching them, remembering when Jayla and I used to do that. I'm imagining I can hear her laugh over the motor and the surf and—

"What happened to the boat?" Kit calls.

I give a start and glance over at him. He waves me up to the helm. I hesitate, and then make my way there.

"The engine sounds different," he says.

"It needed some work."

"Seems like a total overhaul."

I shrug. "Renters. Insurance covered it."

Not true. The engine blew right after the warranty ran out. I'd tried going through insurance—I pay a small fortune to allow renters with boating experience to use it—but they called it normal wear and tear, and it cost me another small fortune to fix.

"You should have an old beater for the renters," he says. "Save this one for you."

"I'm fine."

He takes out his phone with one hand and brings up his notes. "I'll have an old one here by next—"

I put my hand over his phone screen. "No, Kit. Please."

He looks away, his jaw working. Does he think I'm punishing him by not taking his money? Making him look bad?

I already seem like "that woman"—the one who marries a rich guy in Vegas, sticks around for a few years, and then puts out her hand for a divorce settlement. I won't be her. I won't even risk being mistaken for her.

"I'm good," I say. "Really. Have I told you how much people pay to rent Hemlock Island?"

"You don't need to rent it out, Laney."

"I want to."

"Bull. Shit." He meets my gaze. "Look me in the eye and tell me that you honestly don't mind having total strangers living in your house. And now this? I know you've been up here writing, alone, at least once while all this has been going on. It isn't safe."

"I'm thinking of getting a dog."

His eyes narrow. "Really? Or are you blowing me off? If you actually want a dog—" He stops, and I tense for him to say he'll buy me one. Instead, he rolls his shoulders back and says, "That's a good idea. I know Mads would like one."

"She would."

"Maybe a poodle? I remember the one you had growing up. Ginger, right?"

I relax. "I've been thinking of a standard poodle, too. They're good stealth watch dogs."

He grins. "They are. Remember the time you tried to sneak out to meet Jayla, and Ginger woke up the neighborhood, barking like you were being abducted by aliens?" He snaps his fingers. "Wait. Isn't that what you told your parents? That you'd seen what looked like an alien ship, gone out into the yard and that's what Ginger was barking about?"

"Hey, it worked. Mom and Dad didn't think I actually saw aliens, but they bought that I'd go outside for a closer look if I thought I did."

He laughs, and I am caught in the tractor beam of that laugh. This is how I want things to be between us. The happy version, where we can still laugh together and pretend he didn't walk away during the worst time of my life, pretend he isn't desperate to buy his way out of that guilt.

I want the lie.

We move to the bow, where I lean out, catching the spray as I focus on the distant green and gray mass that slowly takes form as Hemlock Island. When I see it, my heart speeds up, and I find myself leaning forward until I can just make out the solar panels atop the house.

People talk about their "happy place," and I thought that was sentimental nonsense until Kit brought me to Hemlock Island. It wasn't just that he'd bought me a damn island as a wedding gift. He somehow figured out exactly the sort of place my soul longed for, even when I didn't know it myself.

And now someone is fucking with that. I've stomached renters' intrusions and incivility. I've chirped "Accidents happen!" when my things are destroyed. I've weathered the screaming when I politely inform renters that I can't get someone out until morning to fix something *they* broke. I've endured the bad reviews complaining because I lock up my personal boathouse . . . and I've endured those locks being broken, my kayak and paddleboard used. But this? Staging weird ritualistic shit as a prank? Scaring off the guests I desperately need?

This I will not endure. I'm going to find who the hell is behind—

I freeze. I've been gazing up at the wooded bluff where I like to sit and write, my legs dangling over the rocky edge, surf crashing below. Now I'm gazing at that spot . . . and someone is gazing back.

My foot slides as I reel backward. Kit is there in a heartbeat, catching me. For a second, I let myself stay there, secure in his embrace. Then I grip the railing, straighten, and stare up at the bluff, searching for what I'd seen.

"Laney?"

I snatch the binoculars and fumble to get them up to my eyes. My gaze sweeps the top of the bluff. I stop at a tall tree stump, scorched by a lightning strike. Through the binoculars, it is clearly a stump, but when I lower them, it looks like a human figure.

"Laney?"

Madison's there with Jayla, joining Kit in frowning at me.

"I thought I saw a . . ."

I see their faces, and I anticipate their reactions, Jayla thinking I'm just spooked, Kit worried, in case I really did see a person.

I did *not* see a person. I have an overactive imagination—that's why I'm a writer. When I'm stressed, it's an explosive combination.

"A moose," I blurt. "I thought I saw a moose."

"On the island?" Jayla says.

"Hey, they can swim," I say, forcing my voice light.

"They can also dive," Kit says. "They eat along the lake bottom."

"Mmm, unproven," Madison says. "That's one of those weird facts that gets passed around, but it may not actually be true."

"Ugh," Jayla says. "Can you please stop educating this child, Laney? She was so much more fun when I could tell her that vegetables would make her hair curly, and she'd believe me."

"I never believed you," Madison says. "I just humored you."

As they keep bantering, I turn to look at the bluff again. There's just that blackened stump. That's what I saw.

It must be.

CHAPTER 3

HEMLOCK ISLAND. The name refers to water hemlock, the deadliest plant in North America. It's not supposed to grow this far east, and certainly not on an island in the middle of Lake Superior. We suspect someone planted it here many generations ago. Kit bought the vacant island from a holding company that didn't even know about the hemlock. It was the locals who warned Kit about it, and he'd used that detail to lower the price, claiming the island was fairly teeming with a highly toxic plant and that's why no one ever built there.

Not true. There's a single patch of hemlock in a marshy area. Before the holding company bought the island, it'd been owned by our cleaner Nate's family, having been passed along through the family, who only used it for tent camping. Then the holding company made Nate's great-grandparents an offer they couldn't refuse, put the land up for sale at double that price, and anyone who could afford it was turned off by the remoteness.

"It never sold because it was waiting for you." That's what Kit said the first time he brought me here, and . . . is it weird that even while I laughed, part of me felt as if he was right?

While Kit docks the boat, Jayla and Madison hang back, chatting, and I stride toward Hemlock House. She is a thing of beauty, in a way I never

imagined a mere building could be. Scandinavian in design, sleek and minimal, blending into the scenery with thick wood beams and walls of windows that give amazing views from all sides.

I climb onto the massive front deck and punch in my door code. Once the whir sounds, I zip through to disarm the alarm. I stop myself at the last second and confirm the red light is on. Yes, the alarm was engaged. Everything is fine. The house is empty.

Why wouldn't it be?

I tell myself that I'm just thinking of the Abbases, in case they chartered another boat and returned to gather any forgotten belongings, but it's more than that. I'm unsettled, and it pisses me off because this is the one place where I can truly relax. Now I'm checking the lock and the alarm and then fighting the urge to go around to the other doors.

It's fine, Laney. Everything is fine.

No, it's not, and it hasn't been fine since Kit walked out and Anna died and—

Breathe, just breathe.

It *will* be fine, and part of that is becoming the parent Madison needs, which means getting my ass up these stairs to check that closet before she sees it.

I zoom up the sweeping open staircase, only to have the railing wiggle under my hand. I pause and give it a shake. It's loose, which means someone decided it'd be fun to slide down the curved banister again and that someone probably wasn't even a child and—

Stop.

I continue my flight up. The house has four bedrooms: a huge main and three smaller chambers. When Kit first showed me the architect's plans, he'd stumbled over himself to explain why there were so many bedrooms. One for Madison, when she came to visit, and one for Anna, if she visited with Madison, and if my parents came, too . . . See? We need four bedrooms. Same as if Jayla came and their parents came or any other combination of guests. It was a vacation house; you couldn't have too many bedrooms.

What he hadn't said was "children." It was too early in our marriage, which had happened so fast that we never had that conversation, and so he wasn't comfortable even joking that we needed rooms for future kids.

Good thing he hadn't, or it would be just one more thing for me to regret. Another shimmering dream of the future to mourn.

The green room—where the Abbases saw the blood—is right beside ours and also the smallest. I stop in the doorway and look at the closet. The door is shut but light shines around the edges.

I rub down the hairs on my neck. The closet lights come on automatically when the door is opened. They're also supposed to shut off automatically after five minutes, in case the closet door isn't closed properly. Our solar and battery array is amazing, but we still can't afford to waste electricity.

The automatic sensor must be broken. It's not the first time that's happened. Kit wanted the house to be state-of-the-art, and I love all the little touches, but each one is also another thing that can break.

I reach the closet and yank open the door. Something swoops from inside. I fall back with a yelp . . . as a thick woolen blanket crumples at my feet. I curse under my breath. Mrs. Abbas must have pulled it partly out.

I kick the blanket aside and open the door all the way to see the inside. When I do, my breath catches.

There's blood smeared down the inside of the door.

I fight a shudder as I make out fingerprints in the blood, whorls and ridges. I push the door open farther, and the light illuminates gouges. I lift my hand, and my fingers fit in the marks.

"Bat or rat?" a voice says, and I jump as Madison and Jayla walk in.

"Holy shit," Madison says, stopping with a squeak of her sneakers.

"Those are *not* from a trapped animal," Jayla says as she walks over.

Madison joins her and examines the blood smears. "The marks are human. I mean, staged, obviously." She glances at me. "Right?"

"Yes," I say as firmly as I can. I glance at Jayla, who nods, and I relax.

Madison does the same thing I did, placing her hand a half inch over the gouges. They fit her fingers, too. It really does look as if someone had been trapped in there, trying to claw her way out, someone like Madison—

No. That's my writer's imagination. No one was locked in my closet. For one thing, there's no lock.

What if someone braced a chair under the handle. What if—?

“That is one sick prank,” Jayla says. “We’ll find the asshole who did this, and I’ll sue their ass for you . . . and strongly suggest court-ordered psychiatric counseling.”

Madison nods, and they file from the room, the situation dismissed. I stand there, staring at the gouges. I put my own hand up to them again and imagine—

“Laney?” Madison says, peeking back around the hall door.

“Coming,” I say, and hurry after them.

I’VE SHOWN the others the site of the charred bones in the boathouse and the hex circle under the rug, along with photos from before Nate and I cleaned up. The last stop is the gazebo.

Jayla looks around. “This is new. Why did you put the gazebo *here*?”

The gazebo sits atop a windswept hill looking out over endless water, the distant land hidden by a light mist. The hill is topped with sparse trees, all stunted from the lack of soil and gnarled from the wind exposure.

“Uh, ‘cause it’s awesome,” Madison says, lifting her face to the wind.

“It’s dead-ass creepy, that’s what it is.”

“Like I said, awesome.”

Jayla looks between me and Madison, and her eyes pop wide. “Wait! Are you two, like, related or something?”

I lift my middle finger.

“It’s atmospheric,” Kit says. “Very Laney.”

“Dead-ass creepy?” Jayla says.

Kit’s right. It’s atmospheric. Jayla is also right. It’s dead-ass creepy, which might be why I love it. I’m loving it a whole lot less right now, remembering what I’d found here. Two macabre wind chimes—raven feathers threaded through hollow bones, with human hair tied at the ends.

Jayla says something, and I’m turning to her when a whisper floats up from below. I follow the sound. The others don’t notice when I step away from the group. They’re busy discussing the grotesque wind chimes.

The wind has picked up in the last hour, rustling the trees and whipping Jayla's braids. The forest is below, and I shouldn't be able to hear anyone in it, but I swear I catch whispers on the wind.

I'm about to turn away when another sound slithers up, and this time, there is no mistaking what I hear. A single word.

Laney . . .

I wheel toward it.

"Do you hear that, too?" Madison says, and I audibly exhale in relief. I'm not losing it. Someone *is* out there.

"Oh, yeah," Jayla says. "That's a boat motor." She shades her eyes and squints toward the dock as I pick up the distant sound of a motor. "We are about to have visitors."