

# Birth Rite



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*This is dedicated to my father. May he shine on.*

## CHAPTER ONE - BREAKING RULES

The LaMascars Mansion haunted Justin Devereaux. He could see the aged Victorian from his bedroom window, and every night he watched the sun sink behind its hulking frame. The Mansion looked as if it were limned in fire as the last rays hit it. He'd hold his breath as the sun disappeared over the horizon and the Mansion vanished into the gloom of night. He wouldn't feel completely at ease again until he saw the Mansion in the morning light, confirming that it had not been burned away or eternally swallowed by darkness.

Even though he was already eighteen, and almost every other boy in town had braved the yard of the abandoned mansion, Justin had never set foot on the Hill. The other boys would run up to the door, ring the rusted bell, and rush off again. They laughed and hollered about how tough and brave they were, ignoring the fact that all of them had been as white as a sheet for hours after their adventure. Justin had never even been tempted to do that. It wasn't just because his parents forbade him from going near the Mansion, but because he respected it. Playing ding-dong-ditch seemed wrong.

The Mansion had been abandoned for as long as Justin had been alive. Despite this, its shutters still hung straight even after the long icy winters. The gray paint remained fresh and unpeeling even after enduring the lashing rains of spring. It stood perfect, composed, and still as stone. Yet somehow, it gave off the impression that there was vibrant life behind its curtained windows.

"It's not empty, you know," Ellen Shafer, Justin's best friend, had told him once. The two had been sitting outside enjoying a lazy summer day.

"I'm sure the rats are happy you're counting them as occupants," Justin had replied, his eyes drifting up toward the Mansion. It loomed over the whole of Winter Haven. "Are new people moving in or something?" His chest had clenched at the thought of people living in the Mansion. They wouldn't belong. They would be trespassers.

"No, nothing like that." Ellen had paused, her gaze sliding over to the Mansion and then away again. "But can't you feel it watching? It's always watching, and I can't help wondering what it intends to do."

That image of the Mansion watching out of its graceful windows, had stayed with him. Unlike Ellen, Justin felt comforted by it. It made him feel protected, as if the Mansion were a second set of parents, or an old friend, that was looking out for him. Ellen wasn't alone in her distaste for the abandoned home. His parents often spoke of a desire to move away, as if the Mansion were a blight. At one point, his mother had actually been bothered enough by the fact his bedroom faced it that she moved him to another room. But he took to sleeping on the floor of his old room at night. After a month of finding him there every night she had relented, and the room with a view had once again been his. He could watch the Mansion just as much as it watched him. He'd never doubted that his feelings for the Mansion were pure and good.

But that all changed at 4:30 in the afternoon one crisp fall day while he and Ellen were walking home from school.

“There are tunnels from the LaMascars Mansion to each and every one of our homes,” Ellen said suddenly. She tucked a stray bit of brown hair behind her ear.

“Wait. What?” Justin skidded to a stop and turned to face her.

“The Hill is riddled with them. Like Swiss cheese,” she said.

Justin let out a laugh. “Okay, totally random, El! Why are you bringing this up here and now?” They had been talking about the upcoming calculus test. “Besides, it doesn’t even make sense. Tunnels? To our homes?”

“I’ve wanted to tell you all day.” Ellen bit her lower lip, nibbling at the already chapped flesh. “But people kept coming up and interrupting us, or there wasn’t enough time to really tell you everything. And now ...”

“Now?” he prompted.

“It might be too late,” she whispered.

“Should I be making tick-tock noises of doom?” He tried to make his voice light and teasing, but she didn’t crack a smile. She was serious. “What’s the deal, El?”

“I just feel like I’ve missed some window of opportunity.” She shook her head.

Justin stared at her for a long moment. They had been best friends since they were in diapers when her family had moved next door to his. In many ways Ellen was the sister he had never had. Even if Justin had liked girls, he knew he never could have liked Ellen as more than a friend. She was the one he confessed all his fantasies and stupid feelings *to*. She wasn’t the one he had those feelings *for*. It was the same for her. Ellen was smart and focused. She was going to be a scientist, and had already gotten into MIT. Boyfriends, makeup, dresses and parties held absolutely no interest for her. When he’d told her about his fascination with the Mansion she’d expressed only a passing interest due to the fact it had no bearing on her life plan. Until now, apparently. Ellen wasn’t fanciful, and her serious tone, furrowed brow and dark eyes told him she really meant what she said.

“What do you mean there are tunnels leading to our houses?” Justin didn’t try to hide his disbelief, though he couldn’t help thinking that the idea of a physical connection between the Mansion and his own house almost seemed romantic. “Because, uh, El, I don’t have any tunnels in my house. I think I would have noticed.”

Ellen rolled her eyes at him. “The tunnels come right up to the foundation walls, but they don’t open into our homes. Well, they don’t open into most people’s, anyways.” She bit her lip. “Not yet.”

A trickle of unease went up Justin’s spine, and he hiked his backpack up higher on his shoulders to stop the prickly sensation. He could sense the Mansion behind them. He forced himself to look at Ellen instead of craning his neck around to see the last sliver of turret still visible through the trees. Her pale brow was furrowed and her mouth was twisted into a frown.

“You’re serious,” he said.

She nodded and rubbed her gloved hands together.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before? You know that I – I *like* the Mansion,” Justin said. ‘Like’ was an insufficient word for what he felt for the old Victorian. ‘Obsession’ was a better description. He felt a stab of jealousy that Ellen had known this incredible thing about the Mansion before he did. So why had Ellen found out about the tunnels first?

“I didn’t know the tunnels and the Mansion were related. Not until last night. But I was worried about telling you, anyways, because, well ... because you *do* like it so much,” she answered.

“That doesn’t make sense. You know what a big deal the Mansion is for me, but you still hid it from me.” His voice had taken on a whine that he fought to swallow down.

She stared at him for a long time, as if weighing whether or not she could tell him how she knew these things. He shifted from foot to foot in annoyance. They were best friends. She shouldn’t be keeping secrets from him, especially secrets about the Mansion. As she continued to stare, however, Justin realized that her eyes reminded him of adult eyes. They reminded him of his grandmother’s eyes. But his grandmother had gone through great trials in her eighty-six years of life, and Ellen was just eighteen.

“I had to be sure,” Ellen answered.

“Sure of what?”

“That I’m right,” she said. “It’s a lot to handle. It’s totally ... nuts.” She let out a soft laugh completely devoid of any mirth.

“I can handle it,” he assured her. “Whatever it is. You can trust me, El.”

“I know I can trust you.” The wind suddenly blew harder, and she clamped down on her hat to stop it from blowing off. Her scarf streamed out behind her like a crimson flag.

Once the wind had died down again, he asked, “Then what is it? What’s this truth you discovered?”

Her mitten-covered hands tightened on the straps of her backpack. “You remember last summer when we had people over to fix the basement? It was leaking all over the place and there was a weird smell?”

“I guess.” Justin vaguely remembered men in orange and brown coveralls with name badges stitched on the pockets coming in and out of Ellen’s house, but at the time he hadn’t really paid much attention. He and Ellen had stayed out of her basement for a few weeks, but it hadn’t affected him beyond that.

“There were cracks in our foundation. The workmen said that one wall was actually bulging inwards, as if something had been *pushing* from the other side,” she explained.

His brows drew together and he raised a hand to stop her from continuing. “Wait a minute! Pushing? From the ground outside into your basement?”

“Yeah.” Ellen’s face was suddenly paler in the weak fall light. “When they knocked down the wall to fix it, they found a tunnel leading right up to the foundation’s walls.”

“You found a tunnel leading to your house last summer and you didn’t say anything?” Justin squawked. “El! I can’t believe you! We spent every day together and you never said a word!”

They had swum in the local pool, gone to the beach, and stayed up watching movies until the sun started to peek over the horizon. They’d even talked about the Mansion. She’d never said a word about any tunnel.

Suddenly a new thought struck him. *Except, there were a few days when she was really quiet. I just thought she was depressed about her folks arguing so much.* Ellen had gone back to her normal self soon enough, and he had forgotten all about it until now. Thinking back, her quiet period seemed to coincide with the days the workmen had been there. He wasn’t sure, though.

“Like I said, I didn’t realize the tunnel had anything to do with the Mansion. Not back then.”

“But now something’s happened to make you think they’re related?” he intuited.

Ellen nodded. “At first, all I was really worried about was that there was a tunnel leading to my house, but then I just seemed to...forget about it. I meant to tell you. I intended to tell you. Only the knowledge just...went away, and I forgot.” Her arms twitched at her sides. She looked angrier about it than he did. She didn’t like things she couldn’t explain.

“You don’t forget things,” he said slowly. “Especially not something like a tunnel leading to your house.”

“I know! That’s why it’s so—so *wrong!*”

“So what happened with the tunnel?” he asked.

“The tunnel was huge. It was as tall as my Dad and as circular as a coin. And the dirt was funny. It wasn’t soft. It was hard, almost like baked clay. It was perfect.”

Justin frowned at her use of the word ‘perfect.’ She said it like it left a tart, yet pleasant, taste on her tongue, but nothing she had described so far made him think of the word ‘perfect.’ It was horrible, strange and weird. Not perfect.

“Did you go inside the tunnel?” he asked. The skin between his shoulder blades crawled as he imagined the tunnel’s ceiling arching over his head and the thick, oppressive darkness.

“No, Dad wouldn’t let me. The workmen did, though.”

“Where did it go? To the Mansion? Is that how you know—?”

“No!” she interrupted sharply. She quickly modified her voice, shooting Justin an apologetic look. “I mean, I didn’t know. Not then. The workmen only went a little ways inside before they came right back out. They said there was a smell.” Her nose scrunched up, as if she could smell whatever

they had smelled all those months ago on the wind. “Old, musty, and a little ... rotten, maybe? I don’t know. But the one guy who tried going farther down the tunnel was only gone for a little bit before he came hustling back. He was sweating and shaking.”

“Seriously? What did he see?”

Ellen started to worry at her lower lip again. A bead of blood burst out of the cracked skin, and she distractedly reached up to swipe it away. The blood left a red smear on her mitten, and she stared down at it as if the sight was unexpected. Still looking at the blood, she answered, “All he said was that the smell had gotten to him. He was a big guy with lots of muscles and tons of tattoos. But he was scared. I don’t think he’d ever been scared before in his life.”

Justin frowned. His own build was small. “Dainty,” his father, Jack Devereaux, had often joked with a laugh. Though he’d soften the insult with a playful ruffle of Justin’s black hair, the sting of his words stayed with him. Unlike Justin, his father was a big, sunny bear of a man. Justin looked nothing like him. However, Justin knew that despite his small size he wasn’t a coward. He was sure that *he* wouldn’t have run out of that tunnel like a scared child.

“No one else went into the tunnel after that. The workmen just patched up the hole as fast as they could. They pretty much just scooped up everything they had taken down and shoved it back inside. Dad said they did a crappy job, but after they were done, we couldn’t get them to come back again. And they never asked for money,” she said.

“They just up and left without getting paid?” Justin’s eyes widened.

“They wouldn’t even answer our phone calls after a while,” she said.

“Something more happened in that tunnel, something worse than just a bad smell,” Justin guessed. “Didn’t the workmen say anything else?”

“No, they just got out of our house like they couldn’t bear to stay another second. Dad didn’t even want me going into the basement for a few months after that,” she said.

Justin shifted from foot to foot. The story was disturbing, but why would something that happened months ago matter now? How could there be anything urgent about a busted basement?

“So why tell me all this now?” he asked.

She swallowed hard. “The tunnel opened up again. Last night.”

Justin froze. “What?”

Ellen stopped, too, but she didn’t look at him. She stared ahead, unseeing. Suddenly the words rushed out, as if she was afraid if she didn’t get them out right then and there they would evaporate, “I was in the kitchen after my Mom and Dad had gone to bed. I was studying, you know, and got thirsty. I had the refrigerator open when I heard a loud thunk. Like something heavy had fallen down in the basement.”

“And you went down there?” Justin yelled. He and Ellen had watched enough horror movies together to know that you never go by yourself to investigate a strange noise in the basement, especially at night.

Their years of horror movie watching had led them to put together three rules that they swore they would observe at all times. Rule number one was to never go into basements or attics after hearing a spooky sound, especially if you were alone. Rule number two was to never run into the woods while wearing shoes that could cause you to trip. Rule number three was to never break the first two rules.

“I know I broke the first rule,” Ellen answered ruefully.

“You broke two of them! El, you’re lucky the monsters didn’t chow down on you for that!” He laughed, but his amusement quickly dried up when she remained silent.

“That’s the thing, I didn’t really believe that something bad could happen. I’d never believed in monsters, Justin.” Her complexion had gone as white as snow.

*Didn’t believe that something could happen ... had never believed in monsters ...* the words hung between them in the air like frost. The skin between Justin’s shoulder blades twitched.

“What *did* happen?” he asked.

“I flipped on the light and went downstairs. At first nothing looked wrong, you know?” Her lips thinned as she pressed them together tightly. “But then I heard another noise. More ... subtle? Like it wanted me to know that I hadn’t imagined the first one.”

“Where was the sound coming from?” Justin held himself still.

“From the back room in the basement, that area where all the old furniture is,” she said. “I flipped on the lights as I went over. I kept expecting them not to work, but they did. Although, even if they hadn’t, I think I still would have gone forward. I—I *had* to go see.”

Justin suddenly felt the pull of the Mansion. It was almost like a physical tug on his head, but he fought not to look. “What does all of this have to do with the Mansion?”

She raised one hand to stop him. “I’m getting to that. Just let me tell it like I want to.” She then whispered, “Like I have to.”

“All right. All right. Tell it however you want to,” he said.

“The workmen didn’t fill the hole up with cement. After they tossed everything back in they just bricked it up. I don’t think that’s safe, but—but that’s what they did.” She wrapped her arms around herself protectively. “When I got back there, I saw that a few bricks had fallen out or—or had been pushed out.”

*Pushed. Jesus, when did ‘push’ start sounding scary as hell?*

“Which do you think it was?” he asked.

Her gaze met his as she gave him a shaky smile. “Oh, pushed. Definitely pushed.”

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. “G--go on.”

“The bricks were scattered on the ground. And there was this hole,” she stopped.

Justin grabbed her arm gently. “Jesus, El. A hole? The tunnel?”

She didn’t answer him. Her gaze was slightly unfocused, her mind lost in the telling of her story. “I went up to the hole. It was a little higher than my eye level. I got up on my tiptoes to look inside.”

“You didn’t!” Justin’s throat felt like it was closing up.

“I know.” She let out a high-pitched giggle that was completely unlike her. She quickly slapped a hand over her mouth as if to stuff it back in. “It was stupid, but I just had to!”

“What did you see?” Justin felt the same way he did when he watched the sun go down behind the Mansion: a strange mixture of expectation and formless anxiety.

“I didn’t *see* anything, but I heard him,” she answered.

“Heard ... *him*?” Justin’s voice rose.

“That’s how I found out about the tunnels. He told me. He said that there’s one connecting every house in Winter Haven to his,” she said. “There are miles of tunnels. Miles and miles and miles.”

“Are you saying that he’s—he’s ...” Justin’s voice broke off.

She answered calmly, “He’s the man who lives in the LaMascars Mansion.”