



# BIRTH RITE

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# CHAPTER 1



## BREAKING RULES

The house on the hill haunted Justin Devereaux. He could see the aged Victorian out of his bedroom window. Every night he watched the sun sink behind its hulking frame. The house looked to be on fire as the last rays of the sun hit it. He held his breath until the sun disappeared over the horizon and the house vanished into the gloom of night. He didn't feel completely at ease until he saw the house in the morning light and confirmed that it had not been burned away or swallowed by darkness forever. The house was known as the LaMascars Mansion though no LaMascars -- or anyone else -- had lived there during Justin's lifetime.

Even though Justin was eighteen, he had never set foot on the hill. Almost every other boy in town had braved the yard of the abandoned house. They ran up to the door, rang the rusted bell, and rushed off again. They laughed and hollered about how tough and brave they were. No one mentioned that all of them were white as sheets for hours after their adventures. Justin had never even been tempted to do what they did. Not because he was afraid of the house, in fact, he felt a strange kinship with it, but because he also respected the house and playing ding dong ditch seemed disrespectful.

Though the house had been abandoned as long as Justin had been alive, its shutters still hung straight despite the long winters. The gray paint remained fresh and did not peel even after the spring's lashing rains. It stood perfectly composed and still as stone. Yet somehow it gave off the impression of vibrant life behind its curtained windows.

"It's not empty, you know," Ellen Shafer, his best friend, had told him one day.

"I'm sure the rats are happy you're counting them as life." His eyes had drifted up toward the house. It loomed over the north half of Winter Haven like a raven on a perch. He had asked too casually then, "Are new people moving in or something?"

Justin's chest had clenched at the thought of people living in the house. They wouldn't belong. They would be trespassers. He had been surprised at his own vociferous feelings about it. He had never known the LaMascarens and yet, he felt like if anyone should live in that house, it should be them.

"No, nothing like that." Ellen had paused. Her gaze had slid up to the house and then away. "But can't you feel the house watching us? It's always watching and I wonder what it intends to do."

And that image of the house watching all of them out of its graceful windows stayed with him. Unlike Ellen, Justin felt comforted by it, because it made him feel protected as if the house were a second set of parents or an old friend that was looking out for him. But that all changed at 4:30 p.m. one day in the fall while he and Ellen were walking home from high school.

"There are tunnels from the house on the hill 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. He couldn't have heard her correctly.

"The hill is *riddled* with them. Like Swiss cheese," she said.

Justin let out an uncertain laugh. "Okay, that's a random conversation changer" They had been talking about the upcoming calculus test. How did the LaMascarens Mansion sneak into their conversation? Especially when he didn't bring it up! He was the obsessed one. Not Ellen. "So ... tunnels? From the house on the hill to our homes? How do you know that exactly?"

"I've wanted to tell you about it all day." She bit her lower lip, nibbling at the already chapped flesh. "But people kept coming up and interrupting us and then there wasn't enough time to really tell you everything. And now ..."

"Now?"

"It might be too late," she whispered.

"You're acting like there's some clock out there counting down to our 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 that I've missed some window of opportunity or something." She shook her head.

Justin stared at her for a long moment. They had been best friends since both were in diapers and her family had moved next store to his. Ellen was the sister he had never had. Even if he had liked girls, he knew he could never like Ellen as more than a friend. She was the one he confessed all his stuttering and stupid feelings *to*. She wasn't the one he had those feelings *for*.

It was the same for her. She was smart and focused. She was going to be a scientist and had already been accepted at MIT. Boyfriends, makeup, dresses and parties held absolutely no interest for her. The LaMascarens Mansion held even less. He'd told her about his fascination with the house and she'd expressed a passing interest in it, but nothing more than that because it had no bearing on her life plan. Until now. Ellen wasn't fanciful, but there was no joking lilt to her tone and her furrowed brow and dark eyes told him she really meant what she had said.

“Explain exactly what you mean about these tunnels.” Justin didn’t try to hide his disbelief nor his interest. He felt both disturbed and elated to think that there was a physical connection between the Victorian and his own home, even if it was a dark, dank tunnel. “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 are *underground* and they come right up to the foundation walls, but they don’t open into our homes. Well, they don’t open up into *everybody’s* homes, anyways.” She bit her lip. “Not yet.”

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

“You’re serious,” he said, saying his internal thought about her demeanor aloud for the first time.

She nodded and rubbed her gloved hands together. “I’ve never been more serious.”

“So tell me about these tunnels and what they have to do with the LaMascars Mansion,” Justin said. He felt a stab of jealousy that Ellen knew this incredible thing about the house before he did, because if he and the house were connected -- like he sometimes thought they were -- why had Ellen discovered this amazing fact first?

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

“That doesn’t make sense. I’m just ... *interested*. The house interests me. Of course, I’d want to know about something like this! Who wouldn’t want to know about something like this? I mean secret tunnels make me think of pirate treasure or something,” he said, keeping his voice light and airy despite her grim demeanor.

She stared at him for a long time as if weighing whether she could tell him how she knew these things. He shifted from foot to foot in annoyance. They were best friends. She shouldn’t have secrets from him especially about the house. But 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 finally.

“Sure of what?” He resisted the childish urge to stamp his feet. Wouldn’t she just speak plainly?

“That I’m right,” she said. “It’s a lot to handle. It’s totally ... nuts actually.” She let out a soft laugh that wasn’t mirthful at all. “What I’m about to say will probably make even you think I’ve lost my mind.”

“I won’t think that. I can handle it,” he assured her. “Whatever it is. You can trust me, El.”

“I know I can trust you.” The wind blew harder then and she clamped one hand down on her hat to stop it from blowing off. Her scarf streamed out behind her like a crimson flag. “I just didn’t trust myself.”

When the wind let them speak again, he asked, “What’s going on?”

Her mittened hand left her hat and tightened on the straps of her backpack. “You remember last summer when we had workmen over to fix the basement? The foundation had cracked and when it rained it would leak all over the place and there was this ... this *smell*?”

“I guess.” Justin vaguely recalled men in orange and brown coveralls with names stitched on the pockets coming in and out of Ellen’s house, but he hadn’t really paid attention to them. He and Ellen had stayed out of the basement for a few weeks, but that was as much as the incident had touched him.

“The workmen said that one of the foundation’s walls was actually bulging inwards like something had been *pushing* from the other side,” she explained.

His brows drew together and he raised a hand to stop her from continuing on with her story. “Wait a minute. Pushing *in*?”

“Yeah.” Ellen’s face was suddenly paler in the weak fall light. “When they removed the concrete over that area, 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 until *now*?” Justin squawked. “El! I can’t believe you! We spent everyday together this summer and you never said a word!”

They had swum in the local pool, gone to the beach, and hung out watching movies until the sun started to peek over the horizon. They’d even talked about the house. But she’d never said a word about any tunnel.

*I remember her being quiet for a few days, but I thought she was depressed about her folks arguing so much. She snapped out of it though. That was when the workmen were there, I think. I’m not sure though.*

“Like I said, I didn’t realize that the tunnel was connected to the house on the hill. Not then,” she said.

“But you didn’t think a *tunnel* leading into your house would interest me? I admit I’m a little obsessed about the mansion, but I do have other interests,” he said. “I’m positive I would have wanted to know about the tunnel.”

“I know!” Her shoulders hunched forward. “I can’t explain it! I would have told you, but I ... *I forgot*.”

“How could you forget?”

“I don’t know! I can remember wanting to tell you. I remember *intending* to tell you before we went to the movies one night. Only ... I didn’t. The memory just went away and I forgot all about it.” Her arms flapped at her sides. She looked angrier about it than he did. She didn’t like things she couldn’t explain and this was unexplainable.

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

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

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

“That’s where it gets even *weirder.*”

“It’s already pretty damned weird,” Justin said.

Her eyes went distant as she remembered. “The tunnel was *huge.* It was tall as Dad and as round as a marble. The dirt was ... was *funny.* It wasn’t soft. It was almost like baked clay.” She paused. Her eyes seemed to go misty for a moment as she whispered, “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 about the tunnel would make him think that it was “perfect.” It was strange and weird and perplexing. Not perfect.

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

“No, Dad wouldn’t let me,” she said and Justin felt a wash of relief go through him. “The workmen did though.”

“Where did it go? To the house on the hill? Is that how you know --”

“I don’t know,” she interrupted sharply then softened her tone. “I mean I didn’t know. Not then. The workmen only went a little ways inside, maybe fifty feet or so. But then they came right back out. They said there was a ... a *smell.*” Her nose wrinkled as if she smelled on the wind whatever they had scented months ago. “Sweet and a little ... *rotten,* maybe? I don’t know. But the one guy who went down the tunnel further than the others came hustling back first. He was sweating and shaking. He kept babbling something in another language. I didn’t understand what he was saying, but the other workmen did and they all went pale.”

“They wouldn’t tell you what he was saying”

She worried at her lower lip again. A bead of blood burst out from the cracked skin and she swiped at it with her mittened hand. She stared down at the red smear on her glove like it was unexpected. Still looking at the blood, she said, “They claimed that all he said was that the smell got to him, but I didn’t believe them. He was a big guy. Muscled arms with a lot of tattoos running up and down them like sleeves. But he was scared. I don’t think he’d ever been scared in his life. He ran out of our house after that.”

Justin frowned. His own physique was small. “Dainty,” his father, Jack Devereaux, had said with a laugh. He’d softened the insult with a ruffle of Justin’s black hair, but the sting of his father’s words still hurt, because Jack was a big sunny bear of a man. Justin looked nothing like him. But Justin knew for all his small size, he wasn’t a coward. He knew that he wouldn’t have run out of that tunnel like a scared child.

“No one else went into the tunnel again. The remaining workmen just patched up the hole as fast as they could. They scooped up everything they had taken out of it, the dirt, the concrete, the plaster, and they shoved it back in. Dad said they did a crappy job, but they wouldn’t come back to fix it. Dad let it go, because they never asked for any money either,” she said.

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

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

“Something happened more than just a bad smell in that tunnel,” Justin guessed.

“They just got out of our house like they couldn’t bear to stay another second. Like they were terrified to stay. Dad didn’t want me going into the basement for a few months after that,” she said. “Remember? We stayed at your house a lot more for the last month before school.”

Justin shifted from foot to foot. He did remember that. He even vaguely remembered being confused why the basement where they had spent all their time before was suddenly off limits. But parents were weird. They got ideas into their heads and teenagers just had to roll with it. He had assumed it was one of those things. But now he realized that the reason for being barred from the basement was far weirder than a bug up a parent’s butt. The story was disturbing, but why would something that happened months ago matter now? How could time be running out on a busted basement?

“So why tell me all this now?” he asked. “I mean I’m glad you’re doing it. But ... it’s been months. Did you just remember the tunnel or something?”

“Or something.” She swallowed hard. “The wall opened up again. Last night.”

Justin froze. “What?”

Ellen started to fuss with her jacket, plucking at it as if picking off invisible lint. It was a nervous tick she’d developed as a child, but had long since banished. It was unnerving to see it back again. She didn’t look at him as she talked. She stared ahead of her, unseeing.

“I was in the kitchen after Mom and Dad had gone to bed,” she told him. “I was studying and got thirsty. I had the refrigerator open and then I heard a ... a *thunk*. Like something heavy falling down in the basement.”

“And you went down there?” Justin guessed.

He and Ellen had watched enough horror movies together to know that the person who checked out sounds in a basement late at night ended up eaten by monsters. Based on these films, they had put together three main rules that they said they would observe at all times. Rule number one was never go into basements or attics after hearing a spooky sound, especially if alone. Rule number two was never run into the woods in shoes that would cause you to fall down. Rule number three was to never break rules number one or two.

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

“Damned straight! El, you’re lucky that the monsters didn’t chow down on you for that!” He laughed, but his amusement dried up when she didn’t join in.

“That’s the thing, I didn’t really believe that something bad could happen. I didn’t believe in monsters, Justin.” Her complexion was now white as snow.

Her words hung in the air like frost. The skin between Justin’s shoulder blades twitched this time. She was speaking in the *past* tense. She clearly believed something different now.

*Ellen believes in monsters? My scientist believes in dark, scary things?*

“So what exactly *did* happen when you went into the basement?” he asked.

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

“Where was the sound coming from?” Justin held himself very still as if afraid any movement might scare her off from telling him the rest and he was suddenly very desperate to hear the rest.

“From beyond the washer and dryer. The space where all the old furniture is,” she said. “I flipped on the lights as I went. I kept expecting them not to work, but they did. Even if they hadn’t, I think I still would have gone forward. I -- I *had* to go see.”

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

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

“All right. All right. Tell it how you want to,” he said, though he had to push down his need to get it all out of her right then and there.

“The workmen hadn’t fill the hole with cement. After they tossed everything in, they had just bricked it up and smeared plaster over it. I don’t think that’s safe, but -- but that’s what they did.” She wrapped her arms around her torso. “When I got down there, I saw that a few bricks had fallen out or -- or had been *pushed* out.”

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

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

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

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. “O—okay. Go on.”

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

Justin grabbed her arm gently. “Jesus, El. A -- a *hole*?”

She didn’t answer him. She was lost in her story. “I went up to the hole. It was a little higher than my eye level. I got up on my tippy toes to look inside.”

“El!” Justin’s throat felt like it was closing up.

“I know.” She gave out a high-pitched giggle that was so unlike her. She 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 like he did when he watched the sun go down behind the LaMascarens Mansion: expectation mixed with formless anxiety.

“I didn’t see anything. It’s what I *heard*. I heard him,” she answered. Her eyes glowed with this fervent, feverish look.

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

“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 the LaMascarens Mansion,” she said. “There are miles of tunnels. Miles and miles through the dirt, through the dark.”

“Are you saying that he’s – he’s ...” Justin’s voice broke off. He didn’t know what he meant to ask.

She answered calmly, “He said he traveled through the tunnels to my house. He said he came from the LaMascars Mansion. It’s where he lives.”