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THE
HOUSE
AT
WATCH
HILL

KAREN MARIE
MONING



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THE HOUSE AT WATCH HILL

PART I

There are few things more intrinsically debilitating than feeling simultaneously as if you've escaped hell yet been evicted from paradise. Sometimes it's an intimate relationship that does it. You despise what they did to you, yet ache for the love you thought was real. You never suffered such agony, yet never felt more thrillingly alive. You love, and you loathe, with the same breath.

In my case, it was a House, with a capital H.

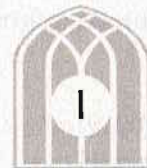
And even now, far removed from that exquisite, terrible place and time, some nights as I drift to sleep, dreams reach for me with dark, ravenous tentacles, and, suddenly, I'm in the rear courtyard of the house at Watch Hill, poised with my hand on the knob of the conservatory door, admiring, despite my horror, the glassy pool reflecting gently swaying oak branches hung with sprigs of drying lavender tied with ribbon, cobalt bottles clinking on jute cords, and strands of fairy lights.

I smell the rich, earthy dampness of leaves and coffee grounds composting in the garden, the drugging opulence of night-blooming jasmine, I feel the unevenness of cream and slate pavers, warm beneath my bare feet, note cobwebs that need sweeping from the cubby above the door, the wisteria draping the garage that wants trimming, and it's all so lovely and real, it terrifies me, as if the house is trying to suck me back to it because it's not done with me.

It will never be done with me. I was the sweetest thing the evil in those walls ever tasted.

It frightens me so much that I refuse—even in dreams—to enter my beloved greenhouse, where once I crushed herbs and mixed potions, practicing the ancient magyck of the Cailleach, while Rufus whuffed softly, watching from his perch in the jackfruit tree.

I jerk myself violently awake, deathly afraid and utterly certain, should I step through that dream door, I'll wake up at Watch Hill, only to find I never escaped at all—that my freedom is, in fact, the dream.



FRIDAY, MARCH 25

THE HOUSE AT WATCH HILL was a patient beast, born of dichotomy, a familiar stranger, a beautiful monstrosity. It seduced before it terrified.

But back then, I knew little of the dangerously fine line between good and evil, and I'd yet to suffer betrayals so staggering, so utterly unforgivable they make you willing to cross it. Nor did I know anything of traps so exquisitely baited you'd march straight into hell with a smile on your lips and wonder in your heart.

I knew only that my life was an endless shitstorm of problems, and if I didn't solve the immediate one of needing a new job, yet again, it was going to get infinitely worse. "But the sign outside says you're hiring," I said with an edge of desperation in my voice that I despised. "And your hostess, Claire, said you're down two waitresses."

The man behind the desk, in an office wedged into a corner adjacent to the walk-in freezer at Sophie's House of Pancakes, looked nearly identical to the one I'd just left at the Scrambled Diner, and the one before that at the Saucy Egg Café. Same longish crew cut, dingy white shirt, and stained tie, same quick slip of his gaze to the left as he replied, "I forgot to tell Claire I filled both those positions this morning."

"You're lying," I said softly.

Tightly, he replied, "I am *not*."

He was. And I was beyond weary. Four prior interviewers had also miraculously secured new employees moments before I'd walked in, and service positions weren't easy to fill around these parts. "Mr. Schumann, just tell me the truth. If you're not going to hire me, that's the least you can do."

My fifth interview today was going to end in a no too, and I dreaded the thought of having to go all the way into Indianapolis to find work. With traffic, it would take me over an hour to get home and gas money I couldn't afford, and the further into the city I went, the more likely they were to insist on references.

"It's because you heard my mother's ill, isn't it?" I pressed when he made no reply. Small towns gossip endlessly. Someone's husband knows someone's cousin two towns over, who knows someone's girlfriend three towns to the east, whose brother one town over is the sheriff, and the next thing you know, they're discussing your personal business on the police scanner, a thing Mom and I try really hard to avoid.

He shifted uncomfortably behind his desk, choosing his words with care. "Ms. Grey, your mother isn't just ill. She's dying of cancer, and while I'm very sorry about that, there's not a town within sixty miles of Frankfort willing to hire you. You don't show up for work. You leave in the middle of shifts. You beg for extra shifts, then don't cover them. How many jobs have you lost in the past year? A dozen? Two? I need waitresses I can count on."

Mr. Schumann was exaggerating. No one would hire me within thirty-seven miles, which was twenty-three shy of his alleged sixty. Carmel, Indiana, where I was currently trying to get a job, any early morning job, to supplement my afternoon and evening

jobs cleaning houses, offices, motels, and anything else I could get paid to clean, was forty-two miles from my house. Whenever I got fired, I expanded outward in the smallest increments possible. The further I worked from home, the longer it took to get back to Mom when she needed me.

"I'm not irresponsible," I said. "I only miss a shift when I have to take Mom to the hospital. I'm a hardworking, committed employee who's grateful to have a job and does everything in her power to make each shift."

"I'm sure you do. But trying," he said with a patronizing smile, "and succeeding are two very different things. I didn't *try* to go to college to earn my business degree. I showed up every day and did the work. It's not fair to the other waitresses to have to pick up your slack. I run a business, not a charity."

But you didn't have a dying mother you had to support while you were privileged enough to take those classes! I wanted to retort, but that would destroy any chance I had of changing his mind. I counted to ten before replying firmly, "Yes, I've had to rush home to take my mother to the hospital, and I've even had to miss shifts on occasion if they change her chemo appointments. But I'm willing to work doubles to make up for it. If you've heard about Mom, then you also must have heard that I'm a terrific waitress. The customers love me, and so do the other waitresses." They knew I was in an impossible position and hated seeing me get fired. Women got it; we'd been caretakers since the dawn of time, when Adam, convalescing from his missing rib, conned Eve into climbing a tree to pick him an apple, and the fairer sex has been taking the fall ever since. We knew life was challenging and could be deeply unfair. Compassion went a long way.

He said curtly, "What's the point? If I hire you today, we both know you'll only end up getting fired. I've heard sometimes you

don't even last two weeks. All that paperwork alone is an inconvenience. Then I have to start the hiring process all over again, which means more forms to fill out. It's not just the waitresses you burden."

Sometimes I hated my life. Especially on days like this, sitting across the desk from a man maybe ten years older than me who, by dint of an associate's degree in business from a local community college, was manager of this store and two others, as he'd loftily informed me when I'd walked in the door, whereas I—twenty-four years old, with no college degree, few saleable skills, and no time to acquire new ones—was reduced to pleading my case in order to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads while watching my mother die slowly and in escalating pain. How dreadful that Mr. Schumann might be inconvenienced by *paperwork*.

I clipped out, "The *point* is that, at least during those two weeks, I can afford to buy my dying mother food and medicine. That might be a small thing to you, but it's everything to me." Dying of cancer was one thing. Dying in pain or of starvation was another. Not on my watch.

He opened his mouth and closed it again, eyes narrowing, resenting that I'd just made him feel like a callous asshole.

He was a callous asshole, and I didn't care what I made him feel, so long as he hired me. This was my only day off; I took one every three weeks, and I was supposed to be spending it at home, with Mom, cherishing what little time we had together, trying to cram a lifetime into those hours. But I'd lost yet another job yesterday and didn't dare go home until I knew I had something slated for tomorrow morning that guaranteed us a paycheck, especially since I'd dropped my cell phone in a deep fryer two days ago and had to spring for a new one. Even the cheap dumb phone

I'd replaced it with was an expense not remotely in my budget. I was still pissed at myself about it, but it had been my third shift that day, I was clumsy-tired, and I couldn't be without a phone in case Mom needed me.

"I'm sorry, but the position isn't available."

To you, he didn't say, but we both heard it. I wasn't above pleading. I wasn't above anything when it came to my mother. "Mr. Schumann, please, just give me the cha—*ahhhhhh!*" I doubled over in my chair, clutching my head.

"Spare me the hysterics," Mr. Schumann said tightly. "I won't be manipulated into hiring you when I know I can't count on you. I have budgets to meet, profits I'm expected to turn. Franchises don't run themselves. I'm on the fast track to owning my own stores." When I remained hunched over, twitching and jerking silently, he growled, "*What* are you doing?" Then, sounding ever so slightly, and quite belatedly, in my opinion, worried, "Do you need a doctor? Answer me!"

I was pretty sure I did. But answering him was out of the question. I felt simultaneously as if my head might explode, an elephant was standing on my chest, and the skin all over my body was about to burst into flames, while deep in the pit of my stomach something enormous and searingly hot had begun whipping its head from side to side, a great fiery dragon rousing from sleep, only to find itself trapped in a cage. Pain was stabbing, burning, and exploding in every part of my body, and I had no idea why.

I tried desperately to inhale, but my lungs were tight and hot, burning as if blistered, and refused to inflate. I did, however, get a sudden rush of the acrid smell of smoke and the bitter taste of ash on my tongue. It occurred to me I might be having a heart attack or a brain aneurism, which, as young and healthy as I was, seemed highly improbable and unequivocally unacceptable.

Panicking, in agony, I lurched from the chair, staggered about in a wobbly circle, then crashed to the floor where I lay writhing, flapping at myself as if trying to put out flames, thinking with horror, *This can't be happening. Mom needs me. She'll die without me!*

That she was going to die with me, too, was something I fully understood.

But I was her Charon, ferrying her across the river Styx, with all the tenderness and love in my soul, and I would, by God, see her safely and gently across that dark divide.

That was my last thought before I passed out.

WHEN I REGAINED consciousness, Mr. Schumann was looming over me with a scowl.

"Bob, what on earth is going on here?" exclaimed a woman beyond my range of vision, sprawled as I was half beneath the desk, staring up at the underside, observing with vague disgust the gum stuck to it in multiple places. Either I'd continued flopping around after I'd passed out or he'd tried to toe me out of the way. I'd have believed either.

"I didn't touch her," he said defensively, glancing at whoever stood in the door. "I don't know what happened. She had some kind of fit and fell down. She landed like that. *Exactly* like that," he stressed.

I performed a hasty mental check: my head felt normal, my heart was beating as regularly as a metronome, my body was no longer a marshmallow toasting over open flame, and my lungs were working again, but that fiery dragon still raged in my stomach, tail whipping acid and nausea into a froth. Groaning, I inched from beneath the desk, leveraged myself into a sitting position, and scraped hair from my face.

Mr. Schumann—clearly as inconvenienced by my "episode" as extra paperwork—said stiffly, "Can you get up now?" In other words, could I get the hell out of his office before I caused any more problems for him? Although I couldn't imagine how I'd made any problems for—oh!

Yanking my skirt back down and smoothing it, I glanced hastily at the door to determine who else had seen my underwear.

Another waitress, fifty or so, with kind, concerned eyes. "Are you okay, honey?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"I'm Mae. Here, I'll help you up," she said, stepping into the office and offering her hand.

Accepting it gratefully, I rose and quickly locked my knees to steady myself. I didn't feel so hot.

"Can I call someone for you?" Mae said.

I shook my head gingerly, hoping it wouldn't spike that hellish headache again. Who would she call? I had no family other than Mom, and no time for socializing. Este was the only friend I'd managed to keep through the years of incessant moving. "I'm fine. I must not have eaten enough today. Low blood sugar."

Gently, Mae offered, "Buy you lunch?"

I winced inwardly, hoping I didn't look that broke. I wasn't. I had a meager nest egg tucked away, enough that if we ended up on the street, I'd be able to get Mom back off it while I lived in my car. Pasting a bright smile on my face, I said, "I'm good, Mae. Thanks, though. I really appreciate it."

Deciding the presence of a waitress with obvious seniority—she'd called him by his first name—might be enough to guilt him into reconsidering, I turned back to Mr. Schumann and said fervently, "Please, Mr. Schumann, I need the job. Just give me one week to prove to you that I—"

"If you're well enough to walk, there's the door. Use it." He cut me off sharply, gesturing at the exit. I think Mae must have shot him a dirty look, because he added grudgingly, "Though, if you're not well enough . . . of course we would call you an ambulance." His words trailed off to an indistinct mutter, so deeply did he resent saying them, but he could hardly permit a woman who'd been seen in his office passed out on the floor with her skirt up to die on the premises. It might require some kind of paperwork.

The dragon in my stomach chose that moment to snort a burst of flames, and pressing a hand to my abdomen, I braced myself for the return of the crushing migraine and pain of being burned, but it didn't come. Locking gazes with him, I said in a rush of quiet ferocity, "I'm a good person and a hard worker. My mother's illness is not my fault, nor is it hers. I'm just trying to take care of her until I no longer have that privilege. You *will* hire me and you *will* give me a chance to prove myself!"

"Hire her, Bob," Mae said quietly. "We'll figure it out."

Oh, God, something was seriously wrong with me, I thought, horrified, because for a moment, I thought I saw flames shimmering in his eyes. Then they were gone, but his gaze seemed strangely glassy as he said, without inflection, "Of course, Ms. Grey. Can you start tomorrow? Breakfast shift?"

The thoughts *Maybe I have a brain tumor* and *Wow, Mae has major pull with the boss*, collided inside my head. If I did have a tumor, it'd damn well better be slow-growing. "Oh, yes," I exclaimed. "Thank you so much. I won't let you down."

We both knew I would. It was only a matter of time. Mae knew it, too, yet I suspected, like me, she'd once desperately needed a helping hand. I hoped she'd gotten it and also hoped, one day, I'd be in a position to repay her kindness.

Gathering my purse and keys, with a warm smile, I thanked the older woman profusely as I hurried out.

BY THE TIME I got to my car—an ancient Corolla with 177,000 miles on it, dents galore, and a missing fender—I was fine.

Mostly, I was still feeling uncharacteristically, wildly emotional. Even when I had PMS, I only got a smidge testy. We Greys were steady, pragmatic women; no extravagant feelings, no fiery she-dragons in our bellies.

As I opened the door and got in, carefree laughter rang out, and I glanced through the windshield to see two women a few years younger than me getting out of a shiny BMW they'd just parked a cautious distance from my beater, wearing Purdue sorority jackets with outfits that would have bought me and Mom groceries for a month, carrying purses I'd have pawned in a heartbeat.

I stared, trying to imagine what their lives were like. No dying mother. No crushing debt. Working toward a degree, partying with friends. Free. Light. Virtually weightless; bright, buoyant feathers drifting on a summer breeze infused with abundant opportunities and limitless choices.

I couldn't begin to fathom the kind of world they inhabited, any more than I could stand listening to happy, mindless pop music, and there was no point anyway. My life was what it was. I cranked the key the requisite three times to get the engine started, and as it sputtered to life, my phone rang.

"Is this Zoey Grey?" a man asked when I answered.

Something in the tone of his voice sent such chills up my spine; I didn't even snap my usual caustic *It's Zo. Like no, like I did every time someone messed up my name.* "It is."

"This is Tom Harris with the Frankfort Fire De—"

"I know who you are. I used to serve lunch to you and your crew." Four jobs ago. "What's wrong?"

"You need to come home. Now."

I VIOLATED EVERY traffic law known to man as I pushed the Toyota's beleaguered, straining engine, zigging and zagging through traffic with reckless audacity.

Tom wouldn't tell me anything on the phone except they'd been called to my house for a fire.

I spent the frantic forty-two-mile dash assuring myself it was merely a small kitchen fire, easily contained. Since I'd lied about having renter's insurance—okay, so I'd also forged paperwork, but dying mother, remember—to secure our current lease, I'd have to figure out a way to pay for repairs. As I pondered various methods of increasing my income and dealing with the landlord (who would learn of the fire soon enough, everyone talked about everyone in our town), somewhere deep inside me, in a place that was frighteningly dark and still, I knew I was only buying time, minutes and miles, to continue pretending Mom was alive, cradled in a firefighter's arms or tucked beneath blankets on a stretcher, waiting for me. Life would go on, and nothing else would happen to further fracture my fragile hold on hope or sanity.

At a stop sign two blocks from our house, I nearly broke down. Put on the brake and sat, choking on suppressed sobs, blinking furiously, trying to pull it together while drivers bottlenecked behind me and began honking angrily.

Finally, I moved forward again, only to find my street barricaded, three fire trucks blocking it, and a dozen firefighters

standing in a weary, sooty half circle, staring across the street at the charred wreckage of my house. Gawking neighbors milled about on lawns, shaking their heads. *That poor Zo Grey*, they would say. *She never had much, and now she has nothing, nothing at all.* And feel better about their own lives, such as they were.

It took me repeated clumsy attempts to unfasten my seat belt and open the door, my hands were shaking so badly, but I finally managed and began to walk unsteadily down the street, gaping, with shock and horror, at the smoking ruin of our home. A total loss, the insurance company would call it. Provided the landlord actually had insurance and wasn't already planning to sue me. He could get in line.

The fire chief hurried forward to meet me. "Zoey, honey, I'm so sorry," he said quietly.

Dragging my gaze from the smoldering heap, I searched his eyes. "But you haven't found—" I swallowed several times before I was able to force out, "A body?"

Tom opened his mouth and closed it again, glancing over his shoulder at the still-popping, hissing remains, before looking back at me, hoping I wouldn't make him say it.

Fisting my hands at my sides, nails digging into my palms, I said more strongly, "Did you find a body?"

He exhaled gustily. "It burned too hot. Too fast. Didn't stand a chance. We did everything we could. The roof and three of the walls had already collapsed by the time we got here. The fourth went while we were getting the hoses ready. No, we haven't found a body. Yet. But, Zoey," he added softly, "we will."

"Zo," I corrected him numbly. "Like *no*." I knew they would. Mom had difficulty walking unassisted; the cancer had spread to her bones. She no longer cooked, and she never left the house. She wasn't about to give me more to worry about.

I'd kissed her cheek that morning, promised her Alfredo pasta for dinner—always high calorie, cancer is a hungry bitch—and ice cream topped with the final jar of strawberry jam we'd made last summer. Told her to call me if she needed me for any reason, however insignificant. I'd apologized for having to go interview on what should have been one of our rare days together, and she'd apologized for being so sick that I needed to. There'd been so much love in our house this morning. There always was.

I stared past Tom at the embers of my life, the heaps of splintered, blackened trusses and beams, the ashes listing soddenly into a leaden March sky, trying to process that my mother was no longer dying of cancer.

Joanna Grey was dead.

I had no place to go, no bed in which to sleep, no idea what to do next. I had nothing but the clothes I was wearing and the purse on my arm. I got briefly fixated on the inane observation that I had no toothbrush, tampons, or Q-tips, no soap or shampoo—and God, those things were so expensive—then detoured into tallying the myriad painful absences in my world that actually mattered.

All trace of our life together was gone. Our photo albums, our ancient laptop, my diaries, the cheap mementos and magnets we'd collected at various Cracker Barrels as we'd traveled from state to state, the birthday cards, the steno notebooks of silly notes and drawings we'd left each other over the years when we'd been on different shifts, before she got too sick to work. Oh, God, my old phone! Mom had ingrained her deep distrust of cloud storage in me. Every photo of her, every voicemail and text she'd left me was gone, destroyed the moment I'd dropped the only smartphone I'd ever owned into a vat of boiling oil.

It was as if my mother had finally been fully and completely erased from the life we'd taken such diligent pains to erase ourselves from, time after time, as we'd fled from town to town, careful to leave no trace behind. It was too much to bear. I didn't even have a piece of her clothing. Nothing to bury my nose in, inhale the scent of the woman who gave me life, an exquisite perfume of safety, love, belonging, home. Nothing to remember her by or clutch to my heart while I sobbed.

Everything—ash.

"Your mother died of smoke inhalation, long before the flames reached her," Tom said gently.

Balling my hands into fists again, I smiled faintly, bitterly at the kindness of his lie. Tom Harris was a good man.

But I knew better.

What I'd felt in Mr. Schumann's office was the death my mother had suffered. The sensation that my body was about to burst into flame, lungs tight and hot, burning as if blistered, refusing to inflate, the acrid smell of smoke and the bitter taste of ash on my tongue. Impossible though it was to explain, I'd experienced my mother's death, as if our love was so deep, so strong that I'd empathically shared, to a lesser degree, the final, horrific moments of her life. I could find no other explanation for what I'd suffered at the precise moment our house was being devoured by flames.

My mother hadn't died easy.

Like witches of yore, Joanna Grey had burned alive.

"Mom," I whispered, and began to cry.