

SIX

Confession?” Alyssa stepped back from the center island, caught herself looking at the shiny knives stabbed into the wooden rack on the drainboard, then, embarrassed, actively *didn't* look at the knives. Trapped in a kitchen with a stranger was not the best prescription for good outcomes. She imagined the explanation she'd have to give to the police after whatever horrific thing that was about to happen actually happened. If she were alive to tell it. She could imagine the headlines. *Idiotic suburban housewife invites . . .*

Bree didn't look sinister, though, or threatening, just a thin-shouldered thirtysomething in a cheap sweater and a too-long skirt, but what did bad people look like?

“That's a funny thing to say,” was all Alyssa could come up with. The freezer kicked on, the metallic clank making her heart flutter. She wished her imaginary dog were real.

Bree sighed, and twisted her glass. The caramel-colored wine rippled and swayed, and Bree held it up to the light.

“I was going to keep it from you,” she said. “Because you were being so nice.”

“Bree?” Alyssa eyed her own wine, deciding she didn't need any more alcohol, now or ever.

“Oh, it's nothing bad.” Bree winced, apologizing. “I put that all wrong. But remember when you went to the bathroom? At the hotel? I googled you.”

“You—”

“Yeah. You'd told me your name, Alyssa Westland, and we'd already talked about me coming to your guest house, which was either awfully nice, or awfully—” She paused. “Unusual. So I real fast looked you up. I mean, you seemed lovely, but getting into a car with a stranger, lock, stock, and suitcase, and without checking out

of the hotel, has got to be high on the list of dumb decision-making. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Okay, wow." Should she admit she'd looked Bree up, too? No, too intrusive-creepy. "Did I pass your test?"

"Yes, eventually. But I didn't find an Alyssa Westland. Which kinda scared me. Because—why would you make up a name? But I did find Alyssa Westland *Macallen*. With a photo of you. And your husband? And there was nothing about him being mysteriously murdered, so that was a good sign. So now I know he's a big-deal charity fundraiser, and you're—"

"Not." Alyssa finished the sentence.

"Separated," Bree said, "was what I was planning to say. When I saw you coming back, I was so embarrassed that I closed the search, and I wasn't going to mention it, but then I felt guilty because I definitely would have said something to let you know I knew things, and then—that wouldn't be good. So yeah. That's my confession."

"That was prudent, of course. Looking me up." Alyssa thought about that. "What would I find if I googled *you*?"

"Do it." Bree pulled her phone out of her skirt pocket. "Here. Use *my* phone. It's open." She tapped it, and offered it across the island. "Seriously. Do it."

Alyssa reached for it, knowing if she didn't, she'd have to admit she'd already searched, and that moment had passed. Bree's home screen was black, just showing the time, 2:15, in green numerals. Alyssa's own home screen had a photo of Bill in the sunlit archway of their house in St. Barts. She should delete that.

"I don't need to," she said. "Come on."

"No, no, do it, Alyssa," Bree encouraged her. "I'll feel less guilty. We'll be even."

"Fine. But only because it's the middle of the night, and the middle of the bottle, and you're insisting." Alyssa touched Bree's screen, figuring the search would protect her in case she mentioned Mensa or something. The phone vibrated.

"I didn't—" she said, surprised. "Push anything."

Caller unknown appeared on the screen.

She held the phone, gingerly, like a live thing, showing Bree. "Is this—?"

A wash of dismay shadowed Bree's face, her forehead furrowing. "I can't take it anymore."

The phone buzzed again.

"He's just never going to st—"

"Hello?" Alyssa said into the phone.

Bree's eyes widened. "No," she whispered.

Alyssa held up a finger, listened, then shrugged. "Hel-lo?" Mouthed the word *nobody*. She stood, and put on a secretarial voice, the non-inflection of an answering service. "Who are you calling for, please?" Just like inviting Bree home, she'd answered the phone after a snap decision.

She paused. Silence.

"This number is no longer in service," Alyssa said. And she hung up.

"What are you *doing*?"

"I don't know." Alyssa paced to the windows, looked out into the empty night, turned back to Bree. "But this is nuts. If some guy is hounding you, then someone needs to tell him to go away. If you don't want to talk to him, you shouldn't have to talk to him."

Bree nodded. "I know."

Alyssa pulled up a stool opposite her. "If you're frightened, have you gone to the police?"

"No, because what would I tell them? Nothing's happened."

"Okay." Alyssa thought about that. "Proves my point. So why not just ask him? He's on the phone, not in the room. How do you even know it's a man?"

"I did ask, once. And he said my name, and I said, 'Who is this?' And he hung up. It's a man. But, Alyssa? Sometimes I see a shadow. A reflection in a window. Headlights following my car. All these calls. You heard it for yourself. I got a new phone, it's one of those whatever they call 'ems."

"Burners?"

"Right. That you can't trace. But somehow he has the number. That's why I left my car back home. I took the train here, an Uber to the hotel. I'll, I don't know, take the T to work for the new job."

"When do you start?"

"Two weeks. And yes, okay, it might be idiot Frankie. *Might* be

Frankie. My kind-of ex. But maybe not. I want to be by myself for a while. Be happy.”

“How’s that working for you?” Alyssa set the phone on the counter. It was as if a third person were in the room. *Frankie*. “Got to say, ‘happy’ was not the first word that came to mind when I saw you.”

Bree drained her wine, then broke off a cracker, popping sesame seeds across the counter. “Alyssa? I know you’re trying to help, and it’s very sweet. I was lucky to meet you.” She smiled. “This was the first bar pickup in my life that didn’t end in a misunderstanding or a disappointment.”

“Ha,” Alyssa said. “But don’t try to change the subject. You should answer the phone if he calls again. Ask who it is and what he wants. If you won’t, I will.”

“Really, no. Better to leave it alone.”

“Why? We’ve known each other for . . .” Alyssa paused, counting. “Five hours in total. This Frankie person has been a major topic of conversation. So.”

Alyssa was tired, and maybe a little fuzzy-headed from the wine, but this was like—a challenge. She pursed her lips. “The caller ID is the same every time?”

“Yes. Caller unknown.”

“Bill collector, crazy boss, stalker UPS guy, unrequited suitor from high school. Spam? The bank, or wherever you worked? A *customer* in the bank?”

“You’re funny,” Bree said. “And you can list all the possibilities, but don’t you think I have, too?”

“I suppose,” Alyssa said. “Trying to help.”

“No, it’s a relief, having someone to talk to,” Bree said. “But some problems cannot be solved.”

Alyssa sighed, considering that. Elbows on the counter, she rested her face in her hands; exhausted, and over-wined, and a little embarrassed at elbowing her way into Bree’s life.

“They can,” Alyssa finally said. “Be solved. We just don’t know how to do it. Yet.”

“You think?” Bree’s eyes widened. But in hope or sarcasm, Alyssa couldn’t decide.

“I do.” Alyssa pointed to the last of the brie and crackers. “You want? Or should we call it a night?”

“Good idea.” Bree gestured toward the back. “So, should I—?”

Alyssa tapped on the kitchen’s alarm system pad, and two short beeps followed. “That opens the blue door of the guest house, see?” Alyssa pointed. “I can show you where everything is. Towels, soap, bed.”

“I can go myself, if you’re okay with that,” Bree said. “Anything I should know?”

“There’s a coffee maker. Coffee’s in the little fridge. And yogurt, I think. I’ll be up at seven-ish, so meet me here whenever. I need to set the alarm system, but you’ll see the kitchen lights come on. And oh.” Alyssa winced, remembering. “Don’t come before that, because the dog will bark.”

“That’s almost irresistible,” Bree said. “But I’ll try. And I’ll call if I don’t see you. I have your number, remember.”

“Good. We’ll have coffee, then you can decide what to do.”

“Sounds nice. Civilized.” Bree’s expression quieted. “I’m grateful, Alyssa.”

Alyssa didn’t know how to respond, to the solemnity of Bree’s voice or the appreciation on her face. She still felt surprised at the impulsive offer she’d made, and also at the comforting peace she felt in having someone to talk to.

“Not a problem. It’s one night.”

“Agreed.” Bree trundled her suitcase to the door, put her hand on the knob. “Night,” she said.

“Night.”

The door opened, then clicked closed, and Alyssa watched her guest wheel her bag along the flagstone walk. Bree stopped as she arrived at the blue door, and looked back toward the kitchen, raising her hand in a silent salute.

Alyssa raised her hand, too, acknowledging, and wondered if Bree could see her. She saw the interior lights of the guest house go on, and then the door closed.

The refrigerator motor kicked in, its hum seeming louder than usual, and the red light from the alarm system blinked reassuringly

from the panel on the wall. Alyssa stared out into the night, and watched a wide-winged moth flutter into one of the outside security lights, frantic and needy and throwing itself into the irresistible and lethal brightness.