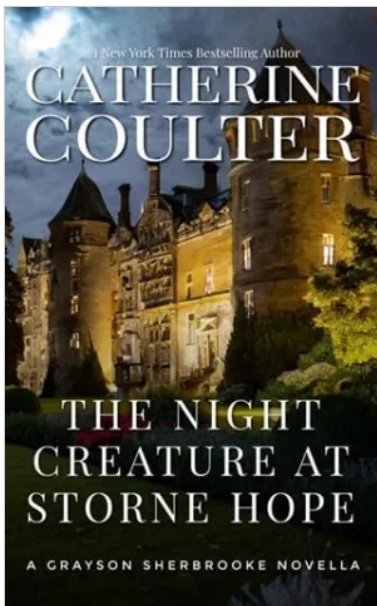




The Night Creature at Storne Hope (Grayson Sherbrooke's Otherworldly Adventures Book 7)

Author: *Catherine Coulter*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Thomas Oliver Maxwell Strickland (Max), the newly minted 6th Earl of Storne, wakes in his London apartment to find a young child hiding in his armoire. The child, who calls herself Crispin, is a runaway, but refuses to tell him any more of her story. Max, hopeful to help the child, invites her to stay at his new home, Storne Hope castle.

At Belhaven, Grayson Sherbrooke and Pip are expecting a visit from P.C., Miranda, and Barnaby, who now goes by Brady since being reunited with their family. Grayson learns that Max is with them, and will be taking up residence at Storne Hope castle, which is nearby at Piper's Hill. Grayson tells the tragic history of Storne Hope and the ghost of Lady Hilda who still roams the rooms and halls of the residence.

When one night Crispin claims that she has been visited by Lady Hilda, Max enlists the help of Grayson to further understand the child's secrets, and why Lady Hilda would take any interest. Grayson quickly learns the child hides a startling power, and that the evil she is running from is more terrifying and relentless than anyone could have imagined.

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CHAPTER ONE

Holland Square

London, England

Late April 1842

Thomas Oliver Maxwell Strickland, newly minted sixth Earl of Storne, opened his armoire to pull out a fresh linen shirt only to see his shirts dumped in an untidy pile at the bottom. He started to call for Manfred, his valet since his first year at Oxford a decade before, but then, to his astonishment, the shirts shifted, just a bit.

A varmint in his grandfather's precious mahogany armoire? No, more likely beneath the pile of shirts was Clotis the cat, usually found napping in Max's mother's sewing basket, his orange tail flopped over the side, the occasional twitch to give proof of life. At least half a dozen shirts now would have to be ironed again by Manfred, who would certainly make his displeasure known. How had Clotis managed to even get in the armoire?

Max went down on his haunches, reached out his hand, and lightly rubbed the pile of shirts. "Come on, Clotis, show me a whisker, tell me how you managed to pull down all my shirts. Will I find claw marks?"

He didn't hear Clotis's high-pitched meow—he heard a human sort of squeak, a young human sort of squeak.

How had a stray child gotten into his bachelor stronghold while he'd been out? He said to the shirts, "I believe there must be a trapped rodent beneath my shirts. This calls for drastic action—ah, yes, the fireplace poker will dispatch the varmint."

He waited.

Nothing.

It had been a long time—too long a time, really—since Max had felt engaged. He was engaged now. "All right, let's see first exactly what's hiding here in my once perfectly ironed shirts."

The top shirt moved. Two terrified eyes appeared; the rest of the face remained covered by white linen.

"Ah, so what I have is neither Clotis the cat nor a rat, more like a small human varmint. May I inquire why you are currently residing under my shirts in my armoire?"

A very young voice whispered, "How could a rat get into an armoire? The door was firmly closed until I opened it, and it was hard, the door was sticking. You should see to it."

A well-bred voice—a scared, well-bred, very young voice. Male? Female? He couldn't tell. Max said, looking into those gray eyes, "I've heard rodents are very wily, their teeth sharp. Give them wooden handles and they'll turn them into sawdust. I've also heard they're partial to white linen shirts."

Now the young voice sounded aggrieved. "That is nonsense and you know it. I would have been gone if you hadn't come into the room at this particular moment. All I needed was another two minutes to borrow one of these lovely white shirts since my

own shirt is in disrepair and I'd have been out the window and gone. I promise I wouldn't have stolen anything. I mean, what is there to steal? Very well, I'll not lie, I did look, but there wasn't a single shilling on your dressing table."

"Why would you want one of my shirts? It would be a tent on you. You would look like a ghost."

"I have trousers, I would tuck it in. I would make do. You need a shirt too. Your upper works are bare." A pause, then, "I've never seen a gentleman's bare upper works before."

There, a flash of a white cheek before it disappeared beneath a shirt.

"My bare upper works aren't the subject here. Tell me how you got into my bedchamber?"

"I climbed up the oak tree outside. Your window was open and I jumped. It would have been easier if you hadn't had the branches cut back."

"That was the whole point. Who wants an oak branch sticking into their bedchamber? Do you have a name?"

Silence, then, "Li—Crispin."

"Li-Crispin? Now that's a new name to me."

"No, just Crispin."

"You've a fast wit. Is Crispin your first name or your last?"

"I don't think I should tell you. You might spit it out to a bobby when you're in your

cups.”

There was some movement as Crispin rearranged—*itself*.

“If you’re uncomfortable, why not come out and let’s have a nice chat, face to face?”

A pause, then, “If you leave for three minutes, I promise to be gone and it will be as if you’d never seen me.”

“Now that won’t happen. You might as well come out. If you don’t, I might be tempted to call my mother.”

“Please don’t make me.” A bit of panic? Then aggrieved again. “It’s my ill luck you just happened to come in and open the dratted armoire door and now you’re carrying on a conversation with me. Your mother wouldn’t be happy to hear about me. May I take this one shirt? I can’t pay you for it right now, but once I find employment, I will, I swear it.”

Max knew he should fetch his mother or his valet or his housekeeper, maybe even Portia, the upstairs scullery maid who brought a gleam of lust to his valet’s eye, but truth be told, he didn’t want to relinquish this unexpected entertainment just yet. Who was his young visitor who spoke so very well and was obviously a runaway?

Max sat down, leaned against his father’s favorite chair, and stretched out his legs. “Employment? Hire you to do what exactly, Crispin? I ask because I wonder how long I would have to wait before you paid me back for one of my finely sewn shirts. Shirts of this quality don’t grow on trees, you know.”

His shirt moved a bit more, and he caught a glimpse of a very small dirty hand. That hand . . . Boy? Girl? He simply couldn’t tell. Who was this child running from? And why? Holland Square was an enclave of wealthy families who’d inhabited the large

mansions for the better part of forever, old stodgy families who knew their own worth and woe be to anyone who did not acknowledge their worth. They had secrets, of course, decade upon decade of dark, gnarly secrets. Had one of these families abused this child? He went through names, trying to remember children, but couldn't since until this moment he'd had no interest.

Of course his mother would know, but if he left he had no doubt the child and a shirt would disappear before he made it down the front stairs. Max sighed. What to do?

CHAPTER TWO

The young voice said, “You should be talking. If you aren’t talking, it means you’re thinking about what to do with me. Please, just leave for a moment and I’ll be gone. Just one shirt—I will pay you back. I have skills—I can fish, I can shoot a bow and arrow. I can run really fast.”

“I know you can climb trees.”

“Yes, but I don’t think anyone would pay me to climb a tree, but give me a fishing pole and I could catch anything swimming in the Thames. I could set up a fish stand in the market. I’d be rich in a matter of weeks.”

“So you’re a budding entrepreneur.”

“I don’t know what that means. Is it good? I don’t know about budding—that’s a flower, and you can’t fry flowers for your dinner.”

“It’s a French word—entrepreneur—it means someone who manages a business. It would even include a bonehead, a very young bonehead, considering catching fish in the Thames.”

Max knew he had a problem, one of gigantic proportions—a child in his armoire here to steal one of his shirts and run. How many times would this happen in a man’s lifetime? He knew on the streets a child didn’t stand a chance, particularly this clever innocent child. He knew of brothels catering to twisted men who sought out children. He thought of this child in an alley, dying of starvation.

His bedroom door opened and Manfred skipped in. Depending on the size of the room, Manfred skipped three times, then a hop—it was his latest affectation and was appearing to be more long-lived than the last one—a handkerchief tied around his head, a bright red strawberry painted in the center. When asked the meaning of the strawberry, Manfred had frowned. “I would believe it obvious, my lord.” Max had wanted to smack him, but laughed instead.

After his final lovely hop, Manfred said, “My lord, what are you doing bare-chested, sitting on the floor in front of your armoire, all settled in, your hands folded over your strong young man’s enviable flat belly, resting against his dead lordship’s favorite chair? Is Clovis hiding within the armoire? Do you need me to fetch him a bit of chicken or fish to coax him out?”

Max got to his feet, dusted off his trousers. “I was preparing to change my shirt and got tired suddenly. Yes, I bathed so I wouldn’t sweat up the shirt. What do you want?”

Manfred took one skip forward, paused a moment for Max to express admiration for his graceful high step, which wasn’t forthcoming. “Titus the All-Knowing has informed me to inform you her ladyship wishes you to join her for tea. Ah, immediately.” Manfred cleared his throat. “Titus allowed there is a young lady with your mama and she wishes you to meet her and perhaps find her suitable to be your wife, which all staff realize must now be your premier goal so you may produce an heir. No one wants the earldom to fall into the hands of your cousin Bewley who has no chin.”

Not another debutante. Ah, but the thought of Bewley becoming the Earl of Storne upon Max’s demise made him seriously consider immediate nuptials. “Thank you, Manfred. Please inform Titus, who will inform her ladyship, I will be with her shortly.”

“It appears all your shirts have somehow fallen to the floor of the armoire. Did you throw them down in a fit of frustration because Lord Pauley drew your cork? Or is this a sign you wish to punish me for skipping with too much vigor and not enough grace?”

“Go away, Manfred. Sorry, skip away.”

“I fear I will now have to work through my dinner hour, mayhap until midnight, to press all your fine linen shirts again.” Manfred did a sharp turn and took a skip toward the armoire and stared down at the lumpy pile. “What to make of this disordered heap, something I haven’t seen since your ungodly and vastly ungoverned days and nights at Oxford, my lord.”

“Go away now, Manfred.”

Manfred frowned again at the mess of shirts, still thankfully motionless, and skipped, knees high, one hop, out of the bedchamber, saying just loud enough for Max to hear him, “Mayhap I can seduce precious Portia to iron them for me. She could say yes and give me a saucy smile, or more like she will clout me. Either course of action invigorates me.”

“Close the door.”

Once Manfred was gone, Max said, “All right, enough of this. Come out, now, or I will drag you out. I want your name, your real name. I want to know why you have run away and from whom. Come on, boy, girl—Crispin—listen to me. Whatever is wrong”—he gulped—“I will help you. I swear it.”

Pause, then, “Do you believe in God?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re swearing you will not hand me over?”

He prayed God would help him. “I swear.”

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CHAPTER THREE

Two weeks later

Belhaven House, home of Grayson Sherbrooke

Near Cowpen Dale

Yorkshire, England

A blowy early May Thursday

Grayson's inner clock sounded. He laid down his pen, stood, and stretched. His study was pleasantly warm from the soft glowing embers in the fireplace. He felt good. His hero, Thomas Straithmore, was tip over arse in a den of twisting evil kelpies who, at the moment, had him tied down with magical branches from a rowan tree. How was Thomas to escape the magic rowan branches and save the old man from his brother's curse before he lost his soul? Time was running out fast.

Everything was perfect.

He straightened the pages on his desk, and consigned Thomas Straithmore to the back of his writing brain. Mrs. Elvan would serve luncheon shortly and then it was Pip time. It was cold, but not too cold, so he fancied he and Pip would go riding. If Brady and P.C. magically appeared when luncheon was served, which they many times did, afterward they would all ride together, Brady on Pepper Pot, P.C. astride Ginger, and Pip would be shouting with laughter atop his Welsh pony, Pirate. Grayson paused a

moment. Even though four months had passed since Barnaby the former barn cat had been reunited with his father, Lord George, Baron Worsley, and he once again carried the name he'd been born with—Brady—Grayson still felt the familiar leap of excitement at reuniting George with his long-lost son, a son who, P.C. announced, would soon speak perfect English so no one would dare question their future nuptials. The thought of these two children growing up and marrying made his brain cramp.

Brady had turned eleven in January, two and a half years P.C.'s senior, but P.C. was in charge. Grayson wondered how much longer that would last. As for Pip, he didn't care—Pip simply loved life and had not a single doubt everyone loved him. And tonight, he and Pip would dine with the eighth Baron Worsley and Lise Marie, Brady's stepmama, along with Miranda and P.C., at George's newly purchased manor house, now nearly set to rights. Of course the children wanted the manor to have a name, and it had quickly evolved into a contest. King Stuart, George's Golden Cup-winning Arab, was the favorite to date, and surprisingly it was Pip who'd spit out that name, grinning hugely at George—King Stuart House. It did have a ring to it.

Grayson heard Pip racing down the corridor, his nanny, Mary Beth, trotting behind to catch him if he fell, which he never did now since he was a strong little boy, growing like a prize-winning squash in Miranda's garden. Grayson grinned. He could set his watch by Pip.

Grayson's study door burst open, and the most precious little boy in the world raced in. "Papa! Papa! P.C. and Brady are here—not just here to eat Mrs. Elvan's nutty buns, but they have—Big News! But I'm first!"

Grayson laughed, scooped up his son, whirled him around, kissed him soundly. He wondered how much longer this ritual would appeal to his fast-growing son.

"Just what is this Big News?"

Pip pulled back in his father's arms. "P.C. said her grandmama Elaine said he's here for the first time since HE became worthy four months ago when HE was here for his father's funeral, but HE didn't see anyone. 'He's now worthy, and he's here. And it's about time. I wonder which of our local ladies would suit him?'"

Grayson heard two more sets of children's feet racing pell-mell down the corridor toward his study, Haddock, his butler and valet, laughing, his arms outstretched to nab them, or so everyone pretended. "You'd best talk fast, Pip. Who's here?"

Pip, five years and six something months old, frowned. "P.C. didn't tell me who exactly, Papa, so I don't know his name, but he's here and he's worthy, that's what's important, and he's got to marry, of course."

P.C. said from his doorway, panting only a bit, "You don't know his name, Pip, because your brain's too young and unformed to absorb such facts, even if Grandmama had given them to you, which she hadn't."

Grayson grinned over Pip's head at P.C., the great-granddaughter of Colonel Lord Josiah Wolffe, Baron Cudlow, known as the Great, who'd vowed not to shuck off his mortal coil until his heir announced the imminent arrival of his heir for the barony, but three months, two weeks, and three days after his heir's wedding and still no word of success. The Great declared this show of ineptitude galling.

As for Grayson, he thought a brother or sister for Pip would be quite nice, and he knew who their mother would be. Miranda Wolffe, the Great's granddaughter-in-law. Beautiful Miranda, thankfully a widow of long-standing, who made his heart kick up. She was vital, she brought joy into a room. She filled a long-empty space in his heart and his life. He smiled at Miranda's daughter, who would be the very picture of her mama when she grew up, wondered if she would ever call him Papa when he married her mother.

“Sir! Brady and I are here to tell you he’s come! At last. From London, Grandmama told the Great, and she heard he brought someone with him. I don’t know who, but I heard Old Suggs whisper mayhap he brought his latest mistress. Old Suggs saw him in Cowpen Dale, said he actually bought a saddle from Mr. Bloor. Imagine, he’s an earl and he did it himself. Old Suggs reported he’s as handsome as the prize-winning pig Sir Galahad who won at the Stonehaven fair, only he’s a lot richer and less edible.”

Brady talked right over her. “He ain’t—aren’t—isn’t—a pig, P.C., he’s a superior sort, that’s what I heard your grandmama call him—a Superior Sort and a handsome boy your mama could probably attach if it weren’t for you, sir. And my papa says a man always buys his own saddles or he’s a bacon-brain.”

Pip said, “Papa already attached Miranda, Brady, and that makes her ours, so this worthy handsome boy can’t have her. Let’s go meet him today, Papa, all of us, and I’ll tell him he must find another lady.”

Grayson eyed the children, all three bouncing about with excitement. “You still haven’t told me who this worthy paragon is.”

CHAPTER FOUR

P.C. frowned at him. “Sir, he owns that huge old castle on Piper’s Hill—Storne Hope. He is the new Earl of Storne, the sixth earl, which means there were five earls before him who are now well dead. The fifth earl, his papa, fell off the roof of Storne Hope on New Year’s Eve, ‘a right awful, wasteful thing,’ the Great said. He fell right into the old moat. There was no water in it, naturally, since the moat dried up some four hundred years ago, and now there’s this lovely drive in front of the house, so if you wish to quibble, he landed on his carriage drive.”

When P.C. ran down, Brady said, “My papa said even though he knows the new earl, he wasn’t invited to the old earl’s funeral, it was only himself and his mama and all his tenant farmers who loved him. And the vicar, of course, because he had to give his dead lordship a proper send-off.”

P.C. said, “Mama said the tenant farmers prayed the new earl would be as generous as the dead one. The Great finally agreed Grandmama could have a party at Wolffe Hall to welcome him. Grandmama promised me there’d be dancing. Brady, you will lead me out, and we will show everyone how to waltz properly.”

Brady’s eyes bugged. He looked faintly terrified. He only knew how to hop around, not this waltz business.

P.C. patted his arm. “I’ll lead so you won’t make an idiot of yourself and my judgment about marrying you would be questioned.”

“I’ll waltz with you too, P.C.,” Pip announced. “I’ve practiced with Mary Beth.”

P.C., sweet girl, gave his small hand a squeeze as she said, “Yes, Pip, you and I will whip Brady into shape. Sir, I asked Mama why the earl’s ancestors named their castle Storne Hope, but she didn’t know. The Great always says he knows everything, but I don’t think he does. He tried to make something up, but Grandmama laughed at him. Do you know, sir?”

Grayson shook his head. “We’ll ask Max—his new lordship.” Grayson eyed those excited faces, dropped his voice. “Do you know what I thought when I first saw Storne Hope last spring after Pip and I moved here to Cowpen Dale?”

The children recognized Grayson’s storytelling voice and gathered close, ready for him to scare them to their toes. And this story was true, for the most part.

His voice was smooth and deep, only a hint of menace. “It was twilight, the day cold, and so I stopped at the Black Goose. I met one of the Storne Hope tenant farmers, a grizzled old grandfather who told me over a pint, ‘The ancient monstrosity on Piper’s Hill, Storne Hope, looks grand, sure enuf, but ’tis filled with shadows and gloom, but only in certain hallways and rooms because of where the ghost Lady Hilda roams. ’Tis said her hand hovers over a teacup, but she canna pick it up since she be a ghost, after all. Many claim she chased them down certain corridors, all flowy and white, sounds like a whistling winter wind comin’ down the chimney. She runs down these particular hallways to flee from her husband, who eventually chased her down and murdered her.’

Pip ran his tongue over his lips. “If I were the new earl, I’d sleep in the stables.”

P.C. leaned in close. “Why did her husband want to kill her, sir?”

“We will have to ask the new earl.”

Brady said, “I wonder if she curses you, do you get boils all over that ooze pus and

turn green?”

Grayson loved this audience. “A very dark green, oozing everywhere, yes.”

“Tell us more, Papa.”

Grayson thought for a moment, studied those eager faces—time to make up some gore. “Well, I remember one day last year something strange came over me, telling me to ride to Storne Hope. When I neared, I saw the sky was darkening over Piper’s Hill and black clouds now hung low over the huge medieval castle as if they would shroud it, slither through the windows. Astor suddenly stopped, threw back his head and whinnied, tossed his head, and he wouldn’t move another foot. I didn’t want to move either, but I had no choice—you see, something was pushing me, what I don’t know, and so I dismounted and left Astor there to eat the new early spring grass, but he didn’t. It was like he turned to stone, as if someone or something had made him into a statue and was holding him in place. I left him and walked up the rise and over the former moat.” Grayson paused. Three sets of eyes were fastened on his face.

P.C. whispered, “It couldn’t be good, sir. Astor always loves to eat. What happened?”

“I walked to the set of massive medieval wooden doors all banded with steel, higher than two men standing on shoulders. It was then I realized I didn’t see anyone, not a single gardener, not a stable hand, not a single living creature. I heard an owl hoot to its mate in the home wood, but nothing else, only dead silence.”

“Not a single living creature, sir?” Brady’s voice was a whisper of a sound.

CHAPTER FIVE

“That’s right, Brady. I saw no one, nothing. I started to slam the huge lion’s-head knocker and announce myself, when suddenly—” Grayson sent a furtive look to the door of his study. The children’s eyes followed his, saw nothing, but they pressed closer.

“Papa, what happened?”

“A noise, I heard a noise from above me. I stepped back and looked up three stories to the ancient ramparts and to the exact place where it’s said the old earl fell to his death four months ago.

“I looked at the ancient row of stone crenellations, set like giant stone teeth with space between them where archers stood to rain down their arrows on the enemy’s heads. I saw a man stand up and stretch. He was wearing a rough leather vest, a dirty white shirt beneath, leather pants with a sword strapped to his waist, tall black boots, and he held a long bow. Sweat plastered his hair to his head, and his beard was black and thick. He looked exhausted. Beside him stood a beautiful young woman, her hair long and flowing, nearly white it was so blonde, wearing a pure white gown tossed by the wind.” Grayson leaned close. “They were shouting at each other, and he was pointing down. At the enemy? But I saw no enemy, just as I saw no archers or castle soldiers. I would swear the man and woman were alone.”

The man grabbed her, lifted her off her feet, and threw her from the parapet, her scream loud, lasting forever, and then silence, stark and empty, dead.

Grayson felt a jolt of shock, drawing him into its center, a black whirling vortex—and then it faded away. The three children drew even closer, Pip’s hand on his shoulder, shaking him. “Papa, what happened?”

Grayson got himself together, smiled at them. “I saw the man jerk about and shoot an arrow down, and I heard a yell. Suddenly, there were men everywhere. I heard them shouting down on the ground, horses neighing, and pounding hooves, then there was silence; the enemy I never saw was gone. The man and woman stood on the ramparts alone, no archers, no soldiers I could see. I saw the woman slowly smile—”

She raised a knife and plunged it into his heart. The man staggered, snarled something at her, and she pushed him over the edge. She stood on the ramparts, her hair and gown suddenly alight in the setting sun, and she was looking down at his broken body below and she was laughing, laughing wildly.

The vision was as real as the horror he felt freeze his blood. Then it was simply gone. Did the man kill her or did the woman kill him? Did either happen? Did either happen hundreds of years before? Could it be about Lady Hilda? If so, none of the accepted tales told about her were true.

He got hold of himself, looked at the children’s faces, saw excited fear, and knew they believed he was scaring them apurpose. It was all a story, at least what he’d told the children. But the other? Maybe it was an ancient tale spun out of his active imagination, but he didn’t think so. He drew a deep breath.

Brady’s voice was a hopeful quiver, and he held P.C.’s hand tightly. “She was smiling because the enemy rode away? And she and the man were safe?”

“But how, Papa? They were alone. You said there wasn’t anyone about. Where did this enemy come from?”

“A white gown,” P.C. whispered. “A beautiful maiden with long flowing hair, whipped about in the wind. He was her hero—he saved her.”

Brady shot her a disgusted look. “He just shot an arrow, P.C., he didn’t jump on a dragon and stick his sword down its gullet.”

Grayson grinned at them, the vision at last disappearing. “All I know is Storne Hope was now safe. And do you know why?” Pause, he deepened his voice. “It’s because the castle is magic, just as the man and woman were a wizard and a witch. But they knew evil would come again, it always did. Was the castle’s magic strong enough to keep them safe? Were they strong enough? They didn’t believe so. They had to do something. What would you do?”

P.C. whispered, “I would tell them to call Thomas Straithmore, of course. He can vanquish all sorts of evil.”

P.C. knew Thomas Straithmore was Grayson’s fictional hero, a fighter of evil demons and their otherworldly beings, but still—

“That’s right,” Grayson said, patted her cheek, and rose. What had really happened at Storne Hope long ago? Had the woman killed the man or had he killed her? Was she Lady Hilda? Or was his own mind simply dishing him up a scary story with two vastly different endings? He’d have to ask Max if he’d heard stories like this. Maybe there were Strickland genealogical records from that long-ago time. Was Storne Hope magic? But he did see—what exactly? He tried to recall what he’d seen, but it was shrouded in white, indistinct, retreating.

Pip said, “Papa, what were the man and the lady arguing about?”

Trust Pip and his formidable memory. “I really don’t know, Pip, I couldn’t hear their words. Now, come along to luncheon and I’ll tell you what I know about the new

earl. You will like him.” He paused, grinned. “When I knew him at Oxford, he was wild as the wind.” That certainly hit the right note. Grayson hadn’t seen Max in several years. Had he changed and become a staid peer?

When Grayson picked up his spoon to taste Mrs. Elvan’s fresh cucumber soup, he paused, smiling at the three children, all busily piling butter and gooseberry jam on Mrs. Elvan’s warm honey-filled buns. He said, “The earl’s family name is Strickland, his name is Thomas Oliver Maxwell, but he’s always been called Max. Before his father’s death, he was Viscount Ives. We were both in Christ Church at Oxford. I am three years older than Max and met him when he first arrived at eighteen.” He started to tell them about Max’s adventures at Oxford, then wisely stopped himself. He cleared his throat.

CHAPTER SIX

The children focused instantly on him, the buns left unheeded. They looked like they wanted to pull the words out of his mouth. “One night at Oxford when a group of us”—were drinking ourselves senseless—“ah, when we were telling each other stories, Max said Mr. Flowers, the Storne Hope butler for a thousand years, told him the third Earl of Storne was a wastrel, and he needed money badly. He was told of a wealthy widow who lived in Venice, Italy. He went there, met her, and they married. She birthed one boy. It was said he only spoke Italian. The earl and countess gave him a grand ball on his eighteenth birthday. But it ended in tragedy. The earl fell from the gallery into the great hall and died. There were questions, of course, accusations spoken behind hands, but nothing was done because the new young earl was very wealthy and his Venetian mother ruled Cowpen Dale.”

Grayson was a writer steeped in demons, and so he couldn’t help himself, added, “It’s said whenever there’s a party at Storne Hope, at midnight there are strange noises, sort of like distant wolves howling, and all the candles go out.” His soup spoon paused in the air. “Max said there are bloodstains on the stones at the base of the gallery nothing can wash away.”

P.C. squeaked.

Brady jerked back so hard his chair nearly fell over.

As for Pip, he grinned at his father. “That was good, Papa. Scare us more.”

Grayson wondered if Max would recognize the tale he’d just told the children.

Brady said, “Did the son ever learn to speak English, sir?”

“Like you, Brady, he learned the Queen’s English perfectly.” Grayson studied Brady’s serious face that showed promise of the man he would become. He was growing straight and tall as a sapling, his proud papa would say.

Grayson half listened to the children make up tales about Lady Hilda. He remembered the first time he’d met Max, newly arrived at Christ Church, just turned eighteen, smart, irreverent, wild as an unbroken stallion. While Grayson penned his stories and played cricket and rounders, Max boxed, fenced, raced his Arabian against all comers and usually won, and led drunken young men on wild races over the Oxford rooftops at midnight, singing at the top of their lungs ditties so obscene a local vicar’s hair supposedly stood on end and stayed that way. The only reason he hadn’t been expelled was not because of his wealthy father, the Earl of Storne, but because, Grayson later found out, his own father, Ryder Sherbrooke, had intervened. Grayson would never forget what his father had said to him: “Max brought me a young boy he’d found beaten in an alley in London. It was my precious Edward. Max was only fifteen at the time, and he’d heard of my children. He acted, Grayson. He was only a boy himself and he acted.”

The boy Max had saved, Edward Pultney, was now a strong, smart lad of sixteen, thanks to Max and to Ryder Sherbrooke.

Grayson’s father had taken in discarded and abused children since he himself was very young. There were usually about fifteen children of all ages at Brandon House at any given time. He fed them, clothed them, educated them, and most of all loved them.

P.C. said as she buttered another warm bun, “Grandmama is pleased the new young worthy earl is here. As I said, she wants to have a party for him. And soon, she said, because the Great might finally croak just to annoy her and then she’d have to wear

black weeds and pretend to mourn and not be able to go anywhere. The Great told her she was a minx with a quick wit and he planned to outlive her.”

Grayson laughed, couldn't help it. How he adored this perfect little girl who led the boys around by the nose. He saw Brady and Pip were whispering and giggling as they ate their cucumber soup. Because Pip told him everything, he imagined he'd find out when he tucked him in bed tonight.

Later, as he saddled Astor, he thought of the first time he'd actually seen Storne Hope. True, it had the look of a huge brooding medieval gargoyle set above everyone on Piper Hill, but it was surrounded by larches and maples and oaks snuggled up to beautifully scythed lawns, scores of yew bushes, incredible flowers in well-tended plots. The property was flanked by rich farmlands with happy tenant farmers keeping a nice steady cash flow for centuries now, no drama in that.

Imagine Max was back in his life. He wondered how long he planned to stay at his ancestral home. If local gossip was right, and it usually was in Cowpen Dale, he'd brought someone with him. And who would it be?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Storne Hope

Early Friday morning

Crispin was only half-asleep, part of her always on alert, ready to run and hide at a moment's notice. She wondered how long it would be before her brain accepted she was safe, miles away from London, miles away from him. But she knew in her heart she wasn't safe. He'd always found her, always. If, when, he came, would he kill Max? She couldn't let that happen.

Maybe, just maybe this time, he wouldn't find her since she was far away in Yorkshire in Max's incredible country home, no, really a castle as old as the Ark. His mama wouldn't arrive until Max's cousin, Lucilla, birthed an heir for her husband, hopefully a boy this time after five girls, he'd told her. She knew his mama didn't trust her, but Max only laughed, told her not to worry, his mama would come around, she always did because she spoiled him rotten.

She thought of herself now as Crispin, not that other girl's name, that wretched girl who would have died if she hadn't escaped, but she had. She was alive, she felt hope for the first time in her short life, but was it real? Where was he? Max told her there was someone here he believed could help them. But could anyone help?

Stop it, don't think about him. Maybe that's how he always found her—maybe he could see himself in her thoughts.

The night air was chilly, only dying embers glowed in the fireplace. The window was open, but only a bit, again, so if she really had to run, she could get out faster than a bat. She knew Max realized she was afraid even as he'd tell her yet another time she was safe with him here at Storne Hope because it was magic. Good magic as opposed to evil magic. But which was stronger, more powerful?

She pulled the soft covers up to her chin over a lovely warm flannel nightshirt Max had bought her in London on their mad shopping spree before they'd left. She was drifting into a twilight dream of a seashore she'd read about in Brighton where the old king had built that amazing pavilion when she suddenly snapped awake, muscles locked, terrified. She held perfectly still, blinked into the darkness. Something was near, maybe at the end of the bed. She knew it, she felt it. She was so scared she couldn't get spit in her mouth. He'd found her.

Then she heard a sort of fluttering sound. He never fluttered, never. Then she remembered Max had told her about the long-dead Lady Hilda whose husband had murdered her and how it was written she'd haunted him until he'd collapsed of fright, or maybe, Max said, he simply drank too much and fell down the stairs and broke his neck. Who really knew? And Lady Hilda had remained here at Storne Hope. Why? Again, no one knew. Max liked to believe she kept guard, and then he'd laughed, said alas he'd never seen her.

But she was here now, Crispin knew it. She lay frozen and stiff, ready to have the ghost of Lady Hilda knock her on the head, maybe drag her off to the nether regions and eat her bones. Or give her to him.

The fluttering sound came closer, louder now. Crispin knew whatever it was now hovered over her, was looking down at her, studying her—but nothing happened, only that fluttering sound, like rustling clothes.

She lay frozen, scarce breathing, not wanting to believe in a ghost from hundreds of

years ago, but how could she not? She whispered, “Are you Lady Hilda?”

She heard the soft rustling sound again, but it seemed farther away, distant now. She heard a light, floating voice say, “A sweet, clever girl. Evil is coming. For you.”

Then there was nothing. The night air brought the scent of jasmine through the window. Or had Lady Hilda smelled of jasmine?

Crispin’s heart slowed its mad gallop, but then, suddenly, she nearly screamed—deep inside she knew he was coming, she felt him, saw him in her mind’s eye, shrouded in a roiling cloud of black, whipping and twisting about, roaring toward Storne Hope, toward her. He would kill her this time? Max too? No, she couldn’t let that happen. But what could she do?

She listened to her heart pound, loud, fast, and she wondered if a heart could burst from fright. She knew where Max’s bedchamber was—the huge room at the end of a monstrous long hallway. She swung off the bed, slid on her woolen slippers and robe, lit a candle, and slipped out the door, open a crack just in case, Max had told her, understanding.

The hallway was darker than a pit, darker than the airless small bedchamber where she’d spent so many hours—no, she wouldn’t think about that, waiting, knowing he would come, hurt her. Crispin raised her candle, saw a white marble statue of some ancient old man with a thick white curling beard staring at her from a deep niche, and nearly expired on the spot. No, no, don’t be a loon, keep going. She ran then, all the way to the end of the hall, the cold from the thick stone seeping through her slippers. His door was cracked open, and she slipped inside. Embers crackled in the fireplace, nearly dead now, like hers.

He’d shown her his bedchamber, laughed at how high the bed was off the floor, told her when he’d been a child he’d had to take a running leap and jump as high as he

could to get on top. She ran to the bed and stopped. Max was sound asleep, breathing deeply, on his back, the covers to his waist, his chest as bare as when she'd first seen him two weeks ago in London. Wasn't he cold?

She whispered, "Max?"

He didn't move, just slowly opened his eyes, slowly turned his head to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"I think Lady Hilda came to see me." She gulped. "He's coming. She saw him coming, and then I saw him, a wild black cloud, whipping toward us. He's close, Max."

He pulled the top blanket back. "Put the candle on the table, then hop up. It'll be all right." He said more to himself than to her, "I must wear a nightshirt in the future,"

Max covered himself, pulled her close, tucked two more blankets around her. "Tell me what Lady Hilda said to you."

A sweet, clever girl. Evil is coming. For you.

He believed her.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Saturday

The early-morning ice had melted into mush as Grayson rode Astor to Storne Hope, but still no sun. When would spring finally come to northern England?

Astor trotted up the steadily rising drive up Piper's Hill to the medieval castle that sat atop, still lording it over all its neighbors six hundred years later. He thought of Max's letter, delivered personally by a tenant farmer's son.

Grayson,

Your father has told me of your special gifts, your affinity with otherworldly creatures. I need your help.

Max

Was this about the ghost of Lady Hilda? Every old house had resident ghosts. As far as Grayson knew, she was nothing remarkable. Locals believed since Storne Hope had produced only one ghost in its six-hundred-year-old history the family must be a boring, bloodless lot with not a whit of hair-raising drama.

When Grayson brought Astor to a stop in front of the massive front doors, a stable lad came running from around the back of the castle waving a carrot, calling out, "'Tis fresh, sir, picked it meself. Ah, I knows about Astor, a fine purty lad, all remarks on it."

As Grayson thanked him, he couldn't help thinking of Barnaby the barn cat who was magic with horses—he'd even seduced Albert. He knew Barnaby—now Brady—had also seduced King Stuart, his father's famous racehorse.

Grayson looked up before he banged on the huge iron griffin knocker. With the morning sunlight haloing it, the castle walls appeared a mellow pale gray stone. Grayson was certain P.C. would think it vastly romantic. It was called the Great House or the Hope by locals, and all admired the abundant farmlands with its rich black soil and the deep thick forests. All knew the Storne tenant farmers considered themselves a lucky lot. Mr. Bentop, the Storne Hope steward and a fixture in the area for thirty years, and, glory be, an honest man who made swift repairs on cottages, installed new farming techniques. He gave the added bonus of gossip about the old earl who'd fallen into melancholia and become a stolid Methodist a decade ago, no jollity for him, not a single toe-tap to a fiddler's music. Why? everyone wondered. Mr. Bentop said the old earl was too old to divorce his wife and marry a young lady of wide hips to produce more heirs. As it was he had only one heir, and what man could be content with only one heir in this fragile and violent world? Mr. Bentop would shake his head. The one heir, Thomas Oliver Maxwell Strickland, presented to him by his second wife, Lady Beatrice, who, not surprising, wasn't willing to live under the old earl's black cloud. She'd decamped five years before to spend half her time with her sister in Bath, half with Max in London. She readily said to let the old varmint molder in Storne Hope—she was going to enjoy herself before she doddered into the hereafter.

After Max had buried his father, he met locals at Mrs. Surley's pub, the Black Goose, bought everyone a pint, and listened attentively to all the local news. After three rounds of pints, the locals not only liked him but believed him of a sufficiently riotous nature so he would never become a Methodist like the old earl, despite life's inevitable trials and tribulations.

When the old earl had fallen, or thrown himself, from the parapet onto the now wide

graveled front drive, gossip exploded. Was he in a drunken stupor, even though he was a thumping Methodist? Had his melancholia driven him to drink too much laudanum and he'd jumped in a sort of confused mental state? No one wanted to believe his fall was a simple accident—no drama in that mundane ending. Some chose to believe Lady Hilda's ghost had endured enough of his complaints and his carping and moaning, and shoved him over.

Grayson already knew Max hadn't come alone, but who had he brought with him? Whoever it was, Max needed his ability to control otherworldly spirits. Grayson felt his blood hum.

Grayson's hand was raised to bang on the heavy griffin knocker when the amazing doors smoothly opened and Flowers appeared, ancient, stately, dressed in his always immaculate shining black suit, his white hair a tonsure around his head. His wife, Maude, the Storne Hope cook, was a dumpling of a woman with flour in her billowy hair.

"Good morning, Mr. Sherbrooke. His lordship is in the drawing room."

Grayson smiled. "You are looking particularly sartorial this fine day."

Flowers gave him a taste of a bow. "Thank you for remarking so fittingly on my attire, sir. Female staff enjoy admiring themselves in the shine."

Grayson was charmed.

"If you would please follow me, sir."

But here came Max striding across the immense black-and-white squared entry, smiling widely, showing beautiful white teeth. "Thank you, Flowers. Please tell Mrs. Flowers our guest is here. We'll be in the drawing room."

Grayson looked at the handsome, fit man he hadn't seen for two years. Max was tall, maybe taller than Grayson, a sportsman, fit, strong, his energy nearly making the air around him crackle. His dark eyes were alight with pleasure, and his black hair was a bit on the long side, nearly brushing his collar. He had a swarthy complexion gifted from a Spanish ancestor. He was wearing tight buckskin pants, a white shirt open at the neck, and black boots. He looked just as he had when Grayson had first met him at Oxford—ready to spring into action no matter the adventure.

The two men shook hands. "It's excellent to see you, Grayson, too long a time since we met in London. And now you live here where I spent my boyhood years. Amazing coincidence, isn't it? Of course your father wrote to me when you moved to Cowpen Dale, not three miles from Storne Hope, a marvelous turn of fate, he wrote, and now I know what he must have meant. Thank you for coming. I have a problem only you can help me solve."

As Grayson shook Max's hand, he said, "As you probably already know, Max, Edward is doing splendidly with my father. He particularly liked the box of mechanical puzzles you sent him for Christmas."

Max grinned widely. "Edward wrote to thank me. Actually, he writes me on the first day of every month unless something special happens, then I receive a bonus letter."

How many men, Grayson wondered, would have saved a child and followed him into adulthood? He'd never doubted Max was more honorable than most men he'd met.

The immense entryway was an odd mixture of coarse, stark medieval stone combined with the fanciful excesses of the late Baroque. Now pure white walls and pastel colors dominated. It was jarring to the eye, yet somehow it also pleased. Grayson looked up at the enormous chandelier hanging down by a massive white-painted rope from fifty feet above. "I don't think I'd want to be one of the men in charge of lowering that chandelier to light those candles."

Max laughed. “When I was a boy, Flowers told me they shot boys out of a cannon and if they happened to land on the chandelier, they planted the candles and lit them, then dropped back down to be caught in sheets held by the servants. As I recall, I was mad to be shot from a cannon.” He paused, laughed. “I never asked him what happened to the boys who didn’t land on the chandelier.”

Grayson laughed. He sobered, looked at Max closely. “From your note I gather something is very wrong. How may I help you, Max?”

CHAPTER NINE

Max said, “Yes, something is very wrong. Let’s go to the drawing room. My study is too drab and depressing at the moment.”

Flowers double-stepped up the wide staircase to open the tall white door to the drawing room. He was panting only a bit and bowed them into a large rectangular room, no vestiges of medieval left here. It was painted stark white and filled with light from the large windows. Grayson stared at incredible rococo frescos painted on the white walls. They gave the illusion of motion—you were walking in a garden or playing with musicians or singing in an opera, frolicking with Harlequin and Columbine in Venice in the sixteenth century. There was an abundance of ornamental scrolling on white columns and exquisite sculpted molding—all dramatic, a bit too dramatic for Grayson’s taste. How could the former earl suffer melancholia in this vivid setting? The ancient stone fireplace had been replaced with Carrara marble and more fluid intricate scrolling. Grayson would have preferred the medieval stone fireplace that called forth images of thirteenth-century King John drunk as a loon, throwing a golden goblet into the flames.

He was silent a moment, letting the Baroque atmosphere sink in. It seemed to him a honey scent was wafting through several large open windows. Sweetness filled the air. It also seemed to Grayson the frescos seemed to grow more animated as he looked at them—a couple moving about along the edge of a smooth body of water, the man’s hand on the lady’s arm. Suddenly, he jerked her forward and flung her into the water.

Grayson blinked, stepped back, looked again at the fresco. The man walked with the

woman, his hand on her arm—there was no violence, merely two lovers casually strolling by a lake. He shook his head at himself. His imagination was running rampant.

Flowers said in a grand voice from the doorway, “I bring you tea and scones from the hands of Mrs. Flowers, my lord. Of course she kissed one of the scones for you just as she did when you were a lad, and now, just as then, you will have to guess which one.”

Max said under his breath, “I always guess aright because she presses her thumb in the dough on the underside. Please sit down, Grayson.”

When Grayson had settled himself on a very old green brocade sofa, Max facing him, Max picked up one scone after the other. “Ah, here’s the kissed scone. See the small imprint? You may have it. I’m assured it’s always the best one and brings good luck. Mrs. Flowers said your cook, Mrs. Elvan, told her you prefer your tea with only a dollop of milk and nothing else.” Max handed him a cup.

Grayson nodded his thanks and waited.

After a moment, Max set his cup on the marquetry table beside his chair, sat forward, his elbows on his thighs. “Do you know about our resident ghost, Lady Hilda?”

“Everyone in the area knows all about Lady Hilda, although from what I’m told few have actually seen her.”

“I’ve never seen her, and I grew up here. My friends would spend the night here and we’d roam the rooms and halls calling for her. No luck. I came to accept she was nothing more than an amusing legend.

“My father said he thought he saw her once from the corner of his eye when he was

walking along a side corridor in the east wing, but then he just laughed, blamed it on the luncheon oysters. My mother never saw her either.” Max paused a moment, searched Grayson’s face. He drew a deep breath. “Lady Hilda came to Crispin some time in the night to warn her.” And he repeated her words. A sweet, clever girl. Evil is coming. For you.

Grayson set his teacup down. “The person you brought here to Storne Hope with you, this is Crispin?”

Max nodded. “Yes, sorry, let me give you a bit of background. She’s a little girl I found hiding under a pile of shirts in my armoire in the London house two weeks ago. I knew she’d run away, but from whom she wouldn’t tell me. She also refused to give me her name. Crispin came out of her mouth when I asked her. Even now she still won’t tell me who she really is, and so I call her Crispin Smith. Even though I don’t know many children, I realized immediately she was very smart, such wit in a child. I was amazed. She’s brave, Grayson, and she has more optimism than even I had at eighteen. My mother believes she can’t be more than seven or eight years old.”

Grayson said, “You made no inquiries?”

Max shook his head. “This is why. My mother told me she went into the bathing room when Crispin was washing and saw welts on the child’s back. She backed out quickly so Crispin never saw her, but she told me. This beautiful child—someone beat her, Grayson.

“I know she must be a member of one of the families in Holland Square, and that means her family is old and rich and highly placed in society. I couldn’t take the chance of questioning my neighbors for fear they’d demand to have her back. I decided to remove her from London and bring her to Storne Hope to hide her, to keep her safe. But now with the appearance of Lady Hilda and her warning, I realize I have to accept this is something far different from what I believed. I knew I either had to

remove her from England or call on you to help us.” He paused, then, “She’s afraid because she told me he always found her, always, no matter where she hid from him. She said he pretends to be human, but he’s not. So, a demon? A spirit? To be honest, I don’t know what to think.” Max shrugged. “When I say it aloud, it makes me want to commit myself to an asylum. I mean, to imagine a malevolent being living in Holland Square, someone—a man, a woman—someone I speak to many days, someone I’ve very probably dined with, and what?”

“It’s bad enough to believe one of these people would beat an innocent child, but to accept this individual is from another realm? I wouldn’t have considered such a thing even though I knew you were special, Grayson, even back at Oxford. You knew things none of the rest of us did. You saw things we couldn’t see.

“But what changed my mind is Lady Hilda. She came to warn her. Crispin knew nothing about our supposed resident ghost, but Lady Hilda came to her in the night to warn her. So yes, I have to believe this evil Crispin managed to escape in London is coming to Storne Hope. And this evil wants this little girl back. I must know who he is so I may kill him. I’m asking you to speak to Crispin, see if you can convince her to tell you what she ran away from.”

Grayson took a sip of his tea, regarded his friend. Of course Max didn’t want to believe anything he’d said about an otherworldly being, but now he couldn’t deny it. His struggle to believe in the evil, his acceptance, was what convinced Grayson. “I’ll do what I can, Max.”

CHAPTER TEN

When the little girl walked into the drawing room, Grayson saw not just a child but a little fairy princess, silky blonde hair held in place with a crown of braids atop her small head. She was as fair as a spring day, tall, on the thin side, but it was her eyes that held him. They were a light gray framed with thick darker lashes, deep eyes, eyes that held something he'd seen only a few times—she had magical eyes, a witch's eyes, and in their depths he saw grinding fear until he smiled and slowly she smiled back, her magical eyes flashed and he saw optimism and joy. Did she know she was a witch? No, very probably not.

The child said to Grayson in a clear sweet voice, "You're the magic gentleman Max told me about. You slay evil demons. He said he's known you forever and I can trust you with all my secrets. But that is what secrets mean, isn't it? No one else knows and you can hold them close and that's probably best."

Grayson slowly rose, walked to the little girl, bowed, stretched out his hand. Slowly, ever so slowly, her hand fluttered above his and finally settled. He gave it a light squeeze—little bird bones, so delicate. And he would swear he could feel her blood flowing sweet and strong, witch's blood. He said, "I'm Grayson, and I have secrets too. I am also a vault—no secret ever gets out. And you are?"

"Crispin. I'm Crispin. I see from the look on Max's face he told you I made it up, but I hope you believe Crispin is a good name, a solid name, a name with consequence. Max doesn't like it, but he puts up with it. I have to protect him, you see."

And up went her little chin, a stubborn chin, he saw. Yes, she was bright as a flame.

He nodded. "Crispin is a good name."

Max said, "Crispin, come drink your tea. I cannot give you the kissed scone, I already gave it to Grayson. But I have one with a half of Mrs. Elvan's thumbprint."

She shook her head, spoke in clear perfect English, "I'm sorry, Max, but I can't. My stomach is flip-flopping and I know I'd lose my breakfast, and this carpet is so very lovely."

Grayson sat down on the sofa again. Crispin walked to stand beside Max, her hand on his arm. Grayson was about to take the last bite of his kissed scone when he felt a sort of questing, then there was calm, a sense of peace in the very air itself. Lady Hilda? He looked at Crispin. Or was this feeling coming from her? He happened to glance at the fresco with the man and woman walking beside the water. He sensed love now, cherished devotion, not hostility. Had the presence—? And he knew now it wasn't coming from Crispin, it was indeed a presence and that presence had removed the violence from the frescos Grayson had seen. He heard a soft rustling in the air near him, smelled a light jasmine scent. Lady Hilda? Now his blood didn't just stir, it sang. He opened himself. He felt a feather touch on his cheek, then—

Max's voice brought him back. "I've told Crispin you're blessed with gifts, Grayson. Not only do you write about demons and other evil beings, but you yourself have dealt with them." He paused, smiled. "I remember at Oxford you always knew things before anyone else did. I remember when I cracked a rib riding a half-wild horse on a bet and got tossed in a mess of rocks. I never said a word, but you knew. You bound me up."

"I remember." Grayson waited.

The little girl's chin went up. "I told Max I wanted to read one of your novels, sir. He didn't want me to, he said it would scare off my toenails, but I told him I had very

stout toenails, they could bear anything—” She stopped cold, swallowed. Max smiled, took her small hand in his.

Grayson said easily, “I have a son. He’s five years old, and his name is Pip. He’s heard my stories from the moment he was born and he still has his toenails. You will meet Pip and his friends.”

Max said, “A fine idea.” He turned her to face him. “Listen, it’s time you tell me your name and about your family.” She was shaking her head before he finished speaking.

Grayson said, “Crispin, if we don’t know who is threatening you, then you are putting Max in danger, not protecting him. How can he defend himself if he doesn’t know the enemy?”

Still, she was silent as a stone, her small fingers frantically kneading Max’s jacket sleeve. Finally, she said barely above a whisper, “If I say his name aloud, I know he’ll appear and he’ll take me away and he might kill Max.”

Max opened his mouth, shut it when Crispin said, “She’s here—Lady Hilda. It’s the same sweet smell as the other night. And the air is warmer.”

“Jasmine,” Grayson said.

She cocked her head in question. Max said, “Jasmine is sweet, maybe a taste of honey. Grayson, so you smell jasmine as well?”

“Yes.” He rose and walked around the huge room. “It’s coming from near the fireplace.” He closed his eyes a moment and blanked out his thoughts. He breathed in the lovely scent, but there was no touch to his mind.

Crispin said, “But even if Lady Hilda is here with us, how can her perfume still smell

after so many years have passed since she died?”

Grayson said simply, “Because she is magic, and rules do not apply when there is magic.” He felt a light brush against his cheek, like a summer breeze wafted against his face. He raised his hand to touch his face and thought, I’m here. Talk to me, tell me what worries you.

He felt a moment of chaos, of confusion and fear, then nothing. Her scent grew faint. She’d moved away. Why?

Max looked from one to the other, sighed. “All right, I accept Lady Hilda’s ghost is here in the drawing room with us. I will even accept the two of you can smell her perfume. But what I cannot accept is your hiding the truth about yourself, Crispin. I must know if I am to protect you.” He paused, eyed her, knew her Achilles’ heel, and used Grayson’s words. “And know how to protect myself.”

Crispin froze, mute, her fingers bunching his sleeve now still. Max raised her hand, lightly squeezed her fingers, and looked her in the eye. “Crispin, magic is all well and good, but if you ever want to be an entrepreneur you have to tell me who I must fight so I can win and set you up in your own fish stand. You told me Lady Hilda warned you evil was coming. Tell me, Crispin.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Her child's voice was soft and insubstantial as a ray of sunlight, but Grayson heard the underlying fear, a fear that had been part of her for a long time. "If I tell you, he'll know exactly where I am. I told you, Max, he always knew where I was. Even when I was quiet and hiding he knew where to find me." She paused, frowned. "But once I was so scared I sort of pulled inside myself, let my mind go blank, and he didn't find me. But then he did. I tried it again, and I felt him looking, looking, but then he lost interest and went back to his books and potions. Until later."

Grayson looked at her clear gray eyes, eyes deep with magic. And he knew she'd cloaked herself without realizing it.

Max lightly cupped a small hand in his, knew he had to tread carefully. His potions? He couldn't find her but then he did? Max had always hated anything he couldn't understand, couldn't explain or grasp, but now everything had changed. He said quietly, "It's time, past time. Is he part of your family? Tell me, Crispin, all of it."

It was clear she didn't want to, but Max said nothing more, kept his eyes on her face. Grayson could see she trusted him implicitly, ah, but she was so afraid.

She darted a look at Grayson and said, "I lived with my parents in our house at 33 Holland Square. We were very happy. My papa—Viscount Fielding—loved trains. My aunt told me he invented things to make them better and he owned shares and loved to ride everywhere in them even though Mama said they were dirty and loud. My aunt told me he and my mother died when their railcar went off the tracks and plunged into the Detmer River. I was four years old." Her breathing hitched and tears

swam in her eyes. “I look at their portraits, and I scarce remember them.”

Max pulled her against him for a moment, rubbed her back, then set her away from him. So she was Laurence Sandifer’s daughter. He said, “I knew your father. He was kind to me, a charming man, and yes, he was obsessed with trains. I never met your mother. Tell me what happened after your parents died.”

“Aunt Cora and Uncle Reginald moved in. He was my father’s younger brother and the new Viscount Fielding. I loved them. They took care of me. We were happy, then everything changed three months ago. My uncle changed. When my aunt was out of the house, he would yell at me, slap me, threaten me not to tell my aunt or he would hurt me more. I didn’t understand. My aunt found me crying, and I couldn’t help it, I told her. I knew she believed me because I realized she was now afraid of him too. But then one day I heard them yelling at each other. Miss Briggs, my governess, pulled me away and took me up to my room. She knew my uncle had changed, and she knew when he hit me. She was afraid too, for me and my aunt and for herself. But she didn’t know what to do. There was no one to help us.

“Then my aunt fell down the stairs and died. My uncle dismissed all the servants, even Miss Briggs. It was just the two of us. He didn’t have to pretend any longer. He beat me whenever he wanted to, and as I said, he could always find me no matter where I hid.

“Max, I knew so many really good hiding places, but he’d still find me.

“He changed a bedchamber into a sort of laboratory. I snuck in once and saw him mixing something in a glass bottle. It was sort of thick looking, a green and brown. It looked really nasty. I knew he drank it three times a day. Once he saw me while he was drinking this awful potion and he smiled, licked his lips, and watched me while he drank down the entire glass.

“He was mean and vicious and acted like a madman. Sometimes I heard him speaking to himself, a dark voice filled with hate and spite. I didn’t understand, but I knew he wasn’t my uncle anymore and I knew I had to escape.” She fell silent, looked down at her soft leather slippers.

Grayson said, “What did you do, Crispin?”

She swallowed, looked up. “I put laudanum in his drink—I knew it made people sleep. It was in a labeled bottle on a shelf in his room with a lot of other bottles. I was with him—he usually kept me with him, sometimes he locked my wrist to a chair arm so I couldn’t run and hide. That day he forgot to lock my wrist to the chair arm, and when he turned away to do something, I dumped the whole bottle of laudanum into that horrible green drink.” She shuddered. “It took a long time, but finally he fell asleep in his chair in front of the fireplace. That’s when I ran. But I was in a ragged dress—you saw it—and I knew I had to have something else to wear, and that’s why I was in your armoire, Max. I planned to tie my belt around your shirt and it would look better than what I was wearing.”

“Where had you planned to go?”

“To the police.”

“That was very smart,” Grayson said, but he imagined if she’d made it to the police, they would have taken her back to her supposed uncle, of course. He was, after all, Viscount Fielding, a peer.

She said, “I know he pushed my aunt down the stairs. I saw him looking at her portrait over the fireplace in the drawing room and he laughed, called her an old cow. My real uncle loved her—they loved each other, and me.” She swallowed. “One night I asked him who he was.”

Grayson leaned forward. “That was very brave of you. What did he say?”

She looked at Grayson and saw a man like Max, strong, solid, and she wondered if his son loved him as much as she’d loved her father and her uncle. And she recognized there was something more to him, something deep and mysterious, and when he looked at her, as he was now, she felt comforted, safe. She licked her lips again, shot a look at Max, then said in a clear child’s voice, “He laughed and laughed and rubbed his hands together and said, ‘Why not?’ He ordered me to call him Master Prithius. He said he could do anything—taking over my pathetic uncle was nothing. He could rule the land and the seas, and people like my uncle were fools and weak, and he would use me in the future when I was no longer a child, if I pleased him. He told me how lucky I was. He’d chosen me. And he laughed, a horrible sound. He always laughed, and most of the time there was no reason to. He said laughing was the only thing humans did he liked. So I knew he wasn’t human, he was some sort of evil spirit.

“He left most nights after he’d tied me down to my bed, to go on one of his pleasure parties, he called them, and always he’d laugh that horrible sound, rub his hands together. Once he said the ladies adored him, always welcomed him, and wondered about their dreams when they woke up the next morning and felt guilty. I looked in one of my papa’s dictionaries and looked up evil spirits and there was this drawing of this creature, long and slithery like a snake, and his head was flat and his eyes looked like they were burning. It said he was an incubus and he visited ladies, went into their dreams and had intimate relations with them. I didn’t understand. I still don’t.

“He’s evil and scary. He looks like my uncle, but he isn’t. I’m afraid my uncle is dead. I love him—he’s kind and loved to tell jests and he loved my aunt. And he’s gone. And Prithius killed my poor aunt because she knew he was bad and evil and he had no use for her.”

Grayson slowly nodded. “Yes, he did. He also couldn’t take over more than one

person, and he chose your uncle.” He looked at this young witch and knew the incubus Prithius had come to London for her, but he didn’t say it aloud, not yet. “What is your name?”

“Lilybeth.”

Grayson said, “Did Prithius call you Lilybeth?”

She cocked her head at him, and he could practically see her thinking. “He never called me anything. Wait, I remember, after one of his pleasure nights, he called me Lilith.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lilith, the queen of the succubi, evil spirits who took over women, seduced men, ruled them, made them slaves. Which meant Prithius was an incubus, Lilybeth was right about that. Had Prithius wanted this child because he'd sensed magic in her? Because he wanted to raise her to be Lilith? Because—why? Didn't Lilith want him? "You said Prithius drank the green potion three times a day?"

She nodded. "Maybe more times, but I think it was three."

Grayson said, "I think the potion allows him to keep control over your uncle, allows him to pass as human as your uncle. If so, we must find out what his powers are, then we can figure out how to defeat him."

Max said, "I don't believe I've ever known a real demon. I wonder how many ladies in Holland Square he's—" He shot a look at Lilybeth's upturned face, at the bruised innocence too young to be destroyed, the intelligence and determination, and changed course. "Lilybeth—a beautiful name, it rolls off the tongue like smooth chocolate. No, not chocolate, it's more like a song, a song about flowers and springtime. It sings on my tongue."

"Everyone called me Lily. My aunt said my name tasted like ice cream." She looked like she'd burst into tears, but she got hold of herself. She was eight years old. It was amazing.

"Max, I don't want to be Lily or Lilybeth, I want to be Crispin. I know it was Lilybeth who brought the monster here, and he took over my uncle and killed my

aunt.”

Max took her face between his hands, looked her in the eye. “Lilybeth, you had nothing to do with it. I don’t want you ever to say that or think that again.”

She looked at him for a very long time. “My aunt told me my mama called me Lily.”

“Then I shall too,” Max said.

Suddenly, Lily whirled around, stared at the door, flung out her hands. “No, no!” Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fell against Max.

Max yelled, “Grayson!”

Grayson felt a wild turbulence in the air, not here in the drawing room, but close, and he felt the incubus Prithius searching, searching. He sensed the essence of an evil he’d never encountered before. He felt Lady Hilda beside him, felt a cloak of warmth, heard her voice, a faraway echo of sound. “I can feel him. He’s searching, Grayson, he’s searching. For Lily.”

Then the air was empty, everything was still. Max pulled Lily into his lap, rocked her. When she opened her eyes there was a moment of blankness, then she frowned up at him. “Why are you holding me, Max? What happened?”

Grayson said matter-of-factly, “Prithius is near, he’s searching, but he didn’t find you. When I felt him near, I cloaked all of us. I’m going to teach you how to cloak yourself, so he can never find you. You’ve already done it without realizing it—those times you said he didn’t find you—but now you’ll learn how to do it whenever you need to.”

Lily moved to sit beside Grayson on the sofa. He took her small cold hands in his. He

knew she was afraid, for herself and perhaps more for Max. But she was brave, and even though she didn't fully realize it yet, she was magic. "I want you to remember the times you pulled into yourself, blanked yourself out and he didn't find you. What you did was cloak yourself. When you're cloaked, he can't feel you or scent you. It's hard to keep cloaking, it's very tiring, and because there are so many distractions it's nearly impossible for your mind to hold it."

"But what is it?"

"A sort of invisible bubble he can't penetrate. That's what you're going to learn to do since I can't be with you and Max all the time. You will have to learn to control it yourself."

Lily whispered, "Can Lady Hilda feel me when I'm cloaked?"

Grayson cocked his head. "I have no idea. When you see her again, ask her. What you want to learn is control. Are you ready?"

"Can I learn to do it without thinking about it?"

He nodded. "I have no need to do this often, but what I've learned is that it will come to you automatically when needs must."

Max was looking at them, back and forth, listening to them speaking this strange foreign language. Like Grayson, was Lily magic too? He watched her lick her lips. She looked over at him, and Max saw her gray eyes were somehow different, darker perhaps, and very adult.

She said, "I can't hide Max and me from him for the rest of my life, Mr. Sherbrooke. I have to kill him."

Grayson heard Max suck in his breath. He smiled at Lily, squeezed her hands. “I don’t know if either of us can kill him, Lily, but we can try to send him back to hell. When I go home, I’ll do some reading, see if I can find out why he chose you.” He paused. “Then we’ll take care of him.” And he asked her again, “Are you ready?”

“I am ready, Mr. Sherbrooke.”

“Call me Grayson. Max, show Lily your signet ring. That’s right, let her hold your hand so she can see it clearly. Lily, look at the signet ring, study it, focus on it.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Belhaven House

Saturday night

Pip was in bed after his nightly story. Grayson was reading from an ancient manuscript about the succubus Lilith, who, it was written, had seduced more men and led them to their destruction than any other of her kind. There was a light knock on his study door. He realized he'd been waiting.

He called out, "Come."

Haddock opened the door a crack and slithered into the room, closed the door behind him. He looked a bit white around the mouth. "Sir, there is a strange gentleman at our front door, and he asks—no, he demands—to see you. I saw no horse, no carriage. I must say there is a repellent coldness about him that quite puts me off. He is arrogant, and worse, he is slovenly."

Grayson's heart began to pound. He'd hoped Prithius would come to him since he'd left himself wide open. And even better, it meant Lily was holding control. "Did he give you his name, Haddock?"

"He said he is Viscount Fielding, but he did not present a card as a gentleman must if he is indeed the gentleman he claims to be. Shall I call Mary Beth? We would undertake to remove him. She would enjoy that."

Grayson slowly rose to face the door. “If there is a removal to be done, I will do it. Show him in, Haddock, and go to bed and stay there.”

A slender older man slowly navigated his way into Grayson’s study, a snake-head cane in his hand. Haddock was right, he did indeed look slovenly, his clothes wrinkled. His curling grayish-blond hair was thin and lank. He had a sharp chin covered with straggly gray whiskers. But it was his eyes—they were so colorless they appeared silver, not natural those eyes. They were another’s eyes, flat and shining like mirrors.

He stood in the middle of the room and announced in a tinny voice, “I am Lord Reginald, Viscount Fielding. And you are Grayson Sherbrooke.”

Grayson said slowly, “No, you are not Viscount Fielding. You are Prithius, the incubus who took over his body. Is the viscount still alive?”

Prithius threw back his head and laughed, wild, unrestrained, not quite a human laugh, and it echoed all around the room. Grayson remembered Lily saying he loved to laugh, but he certainly hadn’t perfected it.

Grayson waited. He’d seen many drawings of incubi and succubi, ranging from horned devils with forked tails, like Satan, to elongated twisted bodies with blood-dripping mouths, giant phalluses on the incubi and large breasts on the succubi. He remembered too well the succubus at Ravenstone, occasionally wondered what had become of that particular demon. Had she found a witch to accept her? Probably so. Now he was faced with an incubus. He wondered if the incubus looked like any of the drawings he’d seen when he shed Fielding’s body at night. Now it was up to him. Grayson had to engage the demon, learn his weaknesses, learn how to destroy him.

When Prithius finally stopped laughing, he said in a contemptuous voice, “That pathetic human? Of course he is alive. I have to keep his human heart beating else I

could not use him.” He paused. “I know of you, as many of my kind do, and when they speak of you, it is with respect, even some fear.” His long white fingers tightened around the snake-head cane. “But I see you clearly. My brethren are wrong. You are merely a mortal of little account. You are nothing to me and my kind, less than nothing. Even if you are a wizard, it makes no matter since you are still human and thus not worth spit. I read one of your absurd books. I found it amusing.” He laughed.

Grayson merely smiled, waited.

His laugh cut off suddenly, leaving only the echo of a hollow sound. He closed his mouth, frowned.

“Does a human smile scare you, Prithius? Have you tried to smile yourself and failed?”

“Do not be ridiculous.”

Grayson leaned back against his desk, crossed his arms. “Where do you come from, Prithius? Hell?”

“I come from a magnificent place, a place above and below and beyond, a place a mere mortal could never comprehend. Not hell, hell is another place entirely.”

“Then why did you leave this magnificent place and come here? Why did you take over Viscount Fielding’s body?”

The incubus stood stiff, silent.

“Tell me, were you forced to leave this magnificent above and below and beyond place?”

“All of us go where we please. All of us are strong. We can defeat any paltry human.”

“I know you can enter our realm for brief periods of time and only at night, but unless you can attach yourself to a witch, unless a witch accepts you, you cannot remain.” Grayson prayed it was also true of an incubus. That it was his potion that enabled him to stay. What was in it?

“You speak nonsense. I have no need of a paltry witch. I can roam your benighted land as long as I like.”

Grayson saw the lie in those demon eyes, a sort of a flash over those flat silver mirrors. He said, “What is the name of this magnificent place? Is it some satellite of hell Satan rules?”

Prithius said nothing, walked slowly toward the front bowed windows, looked out over the still winter-bare gardens Miranda had laid out for him. Could he see the row of hemlocks, some bowed from the ferocious North Sea storms, but stout and unbreakable? Could he also see the curving cobblestone walkway? Since he was a night creature, probably so.

Prithius said without turning back, his voice pensive, “This is an ugly, barren land. But I will accustom myself. But that hideous sea—ripping, thundering, destroying. It is too close and angry, always angry, eager to kill.”

His voice had deepened, the echo darker, and Grayson heard fear—of the sea? It was true a North Sea storm was something to behold, but tonight the water was calm and flat. He said easily, “It is March. Did you not know in two months everything will turn green, trees will be laden with leaves and plants will flower, and there will be beauty everywhere? You came here too soon, Prithius. It is still winter. Do you still go out at night to seduce women in their dreams, leave them wondering why such a dream came to them? And you set mind traps to drive women mad?”

Prithius turned to face him. He looked sly. “It is fine entertainment for my kind to cover your females, make them moan and thrash about. Ah, and the screams of pleasure, it is exhilarating. And you stupid males, you don’t even know your wives compare us to you and find you lacking. If the pleasure is too great, the female could scream her way into madness.” He frowned. “I only wish we could impregnate them. My kind would rule the world.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Again Grayson laughed. Prithius stared hard at his mouth, as if to pull the laugh out of him and take it into himself. “You made a grave mistake, Prithius. You miscalculated. You expected the witch you scented to be fully grown, expected she would gladly accept the power and years of additional life you would grant her, but instead you found a child.

“What I don’t understand is why you’ve terrorized her, why you’ve beaten her. Why would she ever want to mate with you when she’s a woman grown?”

“I’m training her, nothing more, showing her I am her master in all things, but she’s stubborn. Still, once I have her again, she will learn I am her only future.”

Training? Grayson smiled again, laughed, watched the demon stare at his mouth. “Listen to me. You won’t ever have her again. Don’t you understand she is smarter than you? She drugged you and escaped? You will not find her. And I’m wondering how much longer do you think you can remain in our realm, even with your potion?”

The demon’s voice was low, vicious. “She told you about the potion, but it makes no difference. You will tell me what you have done with Lilith—” His tongue flicked out. “I mean Lilybeth. I know she is with one of your absurd English peers. When I find her, I will kill him like that,” Prithius said, and he tried to snap his fingers but couldn’t manage it. He drew himself up, eyed Grayson. “You are nothing compared to me. You are merely a paltry earth-bound wizard.”

“Paltry, am I?” Grayson looked him up and down. “It is you who are nothing

compared to me, Prithius.” He snapped his fingers just as the demon had tried to do. “I am a mighty wizard, and I can destroy you, send you back to hell where you belong.”

“I am not from hell!”

Grayson would swear he could see himself clearly in the demon’s flat mirror eyes, eyes he would swear were shooting out sparks. “But Satan is your master. What do you think he will do to you when he learns you were bested by a human wizard and a witch child?”

“The master does not muck about the doings of his princes. Enough. I have told you, I do not live in hell—it is a horrible place, there is only suffering and plaints. The master doesn’t like us to visit hell. He believes we bring a moment’s pleasure to the benighted souls in his keeping.”

“If not hell, then where do you come from?”

“I came to consciousness in Manna, a place of infinite ease and pleasure, where it is always blessed night. I hate your land with its burning sun and you ugly humans who scrabble around, breeding and killing each other and living your short, useless lives.”

“Do you know the word manna means unleavened whole wheat bread? And it is magical, this bread, constantly renewing itself. It is written manna kept the Israelites alive during their forty days in the desert.”

“Trust your kind to steal a word one of us planted in the mind of a long-ago witch.”

Was that possible? “Who rules in Manna?”

Hatred washed over Viscount Fielding’s face, the mirror eyes sparked. “He is an

accursed demon called Thurian. He is an incubus of great age and cunning and strength. Through the ages many have tried to defeat him, but none have been able to, but I know I could. If only Lilith, beautiful perfect Lilith, had chosen me, together we could have defeated that accursed demon. But she chose him. She admires his arrogance, his cruelty, his ridiculous pride.”

Grayson slowly nodded. “So Thurian banished you and you came here to find and mate with a witch. You scented Lily and decided you would make her your Lilith. What a mistake you made—you found not a woman but a child.

“Tell me, Prithius, did you plan to call her Lilith after the queen you wanted who didn’t want you?”

Fielding shrugged his scrawny shoulders, but his voice held barely suppressed rage. “I knew when I scented her she was meant for me. When she gains years, she will be as beautiful as Lilith and she will be mine, she will choose me, mate with me, become one with me. And we will have limitless power.”

Grayson shook his head. “Believe me, she will never accept you. Did she not escape you? She hates you, she will never change. It’s time for you to give it up, go back to Manna, if the incubus Thurian allows it.”

Prithius tried a laugh, but it came out a croak. He slashed the air with the cane and nearly lost his balance. “I will make her change. I will keep her close until she is a woman and she understands what I offer her, then all will be as I wished. I will shed this ridiculous human form and enter her, become one with her, leave her dreaming sweet dreams when I must go out at night.”

“You intend to remain here in Viscount Fielding’s body until she is old enough?”

“Of course.”

Grayson said, “Did you not consider Viscount Fielding could sicken and die while you wait? And then what would happen to you?”

“He will not die, I will see to it.”

Grayson arched a brow. “I ask you again, Prithius, how can you expect her to accept you if you beat her?”

He shrugged. “I told you—I mark her, nothing more, to show my ownership of her.”

Grayson paused, said slowly, “I think when you now go on your nightly ventures to mate with human women in their dreams you have found you are unable. Does the potion make you impotent? And that is why you beat Lily, isn’t it? It is your frustration at your continued failure. A demon must perform his purpose else he will weaken and eventually cease to exist. You’re already weakening, aren’t you? Soon, Prithius, will you be sucked back to Manna? Or will you simply crumble into dust?”

The demon’s silver eyes flashed hatred and—fear? Prithius said, “What you say is ridiculous. Now I will not kill you if you tell me where she is.”

“Tell me about the potion you must drink three times a day, Prithius, a concoction that enables you to remain in Viscount Fielding’s body.”

“Shut up, you benighted wizard. I will have her. I know you have taught her how to hide herself from me, but not before I knew she was here. I know she isn’t with that ridiculous earl because I searched that absurd ancient castle of his with my mind, but I scented only that earthly ghost. Tell me where she is or I will destroy you and your lady, Miranda Wolffe, and your precious son. Tell me now.”

Meaty threats from a harmless-looking older gentleman with a demon’s flat silver eyes. So he’d encountered Lady Hilda. Had she protected Lily, somehow help

cloaking her? Evidently so.

Prithius was now leaning heavily on his snake-headed cane, nearly panting. Grayson would swear he looked more frail, more insubstantial than he had when he'd come into Grayson's study. He did indeed look ill. And Grayson believed he knew why.

Grayson laughed again, knowing well it both incensed and fascinated the demon. "I know you must have your potion, but you didn't bring enough, did you? And here, in Yorkshire, you won't find your ingredients to brew your potion. How long has it been since you've had any?"

Grayson saw both violence and, yes, fear in those demon's mirror eyes.

He pushed. "An eight-year-old child bested you, Prithius. She put laudanum in your potion so she could escape you. Tell me, if you do not have your potion, what will happen to you?"

"You humans, you gnaw and gnaw, imagine you are so very clever. But you are nothing. I promise you a horrible death if you do not tell me where she is."

"Oh? And just how will you kill me, Prithius? Hit me with your cane? Curse me with some sort of ridiculous incantation? Viscount Fielding is slight, a middle-aged man. Do you honestly believe you can hurt me so long as you are in his body? I see your hands are trembling. You look ready to collapse. Are you losing control?" Grayson paused, cocked his head to the side. "I think the viscount's body is only a temporary salvation. Without your potion, it is now your destruction."

"I will kill your bloody son if you do not tell me where she is!"

Grayson laughed yet again. Prithius made a deep growling noise, more a hiss like a snake, and in the next instant, he walked slowly, carefully, from Grayson's study, his

body bowed, the cane striking heavily on the floor. Grayson heard the front door slam, heard Haddock's voice calling him a knobby-kneed buffoon.

If only he knew.

But what could Prithius do if he left Fielding's body? What powers did he have? Not physical, no, not without his potion, or he would have used them on Grayson. Did he have to shed Fielding's body to use a demon's magic? Grayson said quietly to himself, "Lily, you are amazing. You're holding control so he can't find you." And he gave thanks to Lady Hilda, who protected Lily when she was learning to cloak herself.

Grayson had to kill the demon or somehow send him back to Manna, and he could only do that by forcing Prithius to leave Viscount Fielding's body. He turned back to his books. He thought of Pip and felt a brief twinge of fear. Could Prithius find a way to hurt his boy? Hurt Miranda?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cowpen Dale

Church service

Sunday morning

Pip was fidgeting, nothing new in that. Grayson took his son's hand, gave it a light squeeze, and whispered against Pip's ear, "By my watch, we have three more minutes before Vicar Harkness gives the benediction. Three minutes, Pip, I know you can hold still for three more minutes."

Pip gave his father his never-fail adorable kid smile and pinched Brady's elbow. Brady took Pip's fingers and squeezed them, making Pip squeak. P.C. smacked her fist down on Brady's thigh, frowned at him, and scooted closer to her mother in case he retaliated.

After Vicar Harkness gave his too-long benediction, Mrs. Mason blasted the congregation with her favorite organ recessional.

Once outside, the Wolffe ladies were trapped by Mrs. Harkness, leaving Grayson with the children. P.C. said to Grayson, "Sir, Mama told me she's heard the new earl looks like a romantic prince. When I told her she looked like a romantic princess—I must be honest—Mama looked interested. But then I reminded her if she were untrue to you, you might never take us on adventures again. She laughed, kissed me, told me our future adventures were safe—and that's a good start."

Pip said, “I told you, P.C., this romantic prince can’t have Miranda, she’s ours.”

From the mouth of a five-year-old. Grayson could see Miranda only yesterday lifting Pip over her head and laughing, then kissing him all over his face when he’d told her she had a tear in her stocking.

P.C. said, “Sir, when will we meet Lily? Why isn’t she here? Why isn’t the earl here? Is he a sinner? Grandmama said the nicer looking the man the more wicked he is. Mama said your name and allowed that could be true.”

Grayson rather liked the sound of that.

Brady said, “That ain’t—isn’t nice, P.C. My papa said good things about the earl, not a word about any sinner business. I do wonder why the earl didn’t bring Lily to church. Nice name, not all mortifying like your name, P.C.”

To forestall fisticuffs, Grayson said easily, “We’re all invited to Storne Hope for luncheon. You’ll meet Lily. Max—the earl—has a lot to do before he can properly welcome us. This is your treat for behaving so well in church.” Well, it was somewhat the truth.

Grayson was as sure as he could be Prithius would not appear at Storne Hope, not in the chilly harsh sunlight of this fine Sunday. He was a night demon, only hunting when it was dark and quiet and his prey was alone and asleep. He prayed he now knew enough to deal with the wretched incubus, to send him back to Manna. Tonight. And when night fell, Grayson planned to return to Storne Hope. Lily would drop her cloak and Prithius would scent her and come.

Even though he believed he knew what to do, Grayson still worried. What if those pages penned hundreds of years ago by the ancient wizard crouched in his cave in the Bulgur were figments of a fractured brain? You could never be certain if a wizard

was outright lying or giving honest instructions as he knew them—like throwing the dust that came from inside a long-dead priest’s thigh bone into a demon’s face. He had to remind himself he was a wizard, he could make things happen. But would it be enough?

But today in the bright sunlight the children would all meet, and hopefully they would all like each other.

Miranda and Grayson sat close as the Great’s carriage bounced on its way to Storne Hope, each very aware of the other, listening with only half an ear to the children’s word game they didn’t understand at all but still brought gales of laughter and ferocious insults. He felt the warmth of her, smelled the light verbena fragrance. He said close to her ear, “Did you really look interested when you heard Max looked like a romantic prince?”

He looked into her beautiful eyes and saw his reflection—and devilry. She leaned close. “Can you doubt it, Grayson? As a local romantic princess, don’t you think it would be a perfect match?”

Grayson wanted to kiss her, maybe lightly bite her lip. He said, “It’s true what Pip said, you’re ours.”

“Well,” she said, squeezing his hand, “there is that.” A pause, then another wicked smile, a whisper. “Ah, but to be a princess—it’s difficult, Grayson, so many choices to make, so many hearts to break—” And she grinned, touched her gloved hand to his, and thought about how very fascinating life had become since a wizard had moved into her neighborhood. Odd how she’d never considered wizards actually existing out of the pages of books, but now—oh yes. He was her very own wizard.

She tucked her hand into his, and together they watched Pip giggle as Brady tickled him and told him he was a right proper little pickle, P.C. looking on, so pleased with

Brady and his nearly perfect English she didn't correct his grammar when he slipped. At least not on Sundays.

He heard P.C. say, "Brady, Cook told Grandmama the new earl has a big orange cat named Clotis. Do you think we should introduce Musgrave to Clotis? Maybe they'll like each other."

Pip said, "They'll either lick each other or fight to the death."

P.C. said matter-of-factly, "You know Musgrave is too lazy to hiss at another cat or puff up his tail. He'll start licking and hope for the best."

Brady grinned. "Papa told me before church Mr. Harmon's got a litter of King Charles spaniels—you know the dogs with the floppy ears? Papa said they feel like silk and I can pick out the one I want. Maybe two. I think Musgrave will like a puppy, probably lick him bald."

"Papa, can I have a King Charles puppy too? Remember, you said you'd think about a dog—"

Grayson's first thought was to wonder what would happen to his new Turkish carpet when a puppy forgot himself. Did Haddock like dogs? He didn't know. But who could resist a puppy?

Thankfully, before he could answer, Brady said, "What should I name him? Or them?"

Name discussions led to arguments and insults until ten minutes later when the Great's old creaking coach with its shining eagle on the side pulled up in front of Storne Hope.

P.C. looked up at the stone crenellations, the ivy-covered walls, the shining windows, and said to her mama, “It looks very romantic, Mama, just like it should with a romantic prince living here. I will tell you what I think of the new earl so you will know whether or not to show him any interest.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Storne Hope

Miranda straightened her bonnet's lovely lavender ribbons and sat forward, her mother's eye on each child's face. "All of you listen to me. Lily is a stranger to the neighborhood. She doesn't have friends yet. You will be kind. Understood?"

There were nods and a "Yes, ma'am," from Brady.

Pip said, "Is she pretty like P.C.?"

This won him an approving nod from P.C., and Pip's proud papa wondered if a five-year-old little boy could possibly have that much guile. Grayson said, "Yes, she is. Ah, here they are, waiting for us."

Max and Lily stood on the ancient deep stone steps, Max holding her hand. Grayson had assured Max Prithius was a night demon. He wouldn't come today, not with a crowd of people, not in the bright daylight. All would be just fine. This was to be a day of fun for the children, Lily making new friends.

Tonight, though, Prithius would come, and they'd be ready for him.

After everyone was introduced, Grayson watched the children eye each other, and then slowly but surely, each began to talk, then they were talking over each other, some laughter, until Pip said in his clear child's voice, "Lily, drop your cloak so maybe this bad demon Prithius will come and we will all pound him into the ground."

Grayson felt the spit dry in his mouth. How had Pip known about cloaking and Prithius? Then he remembered—he'd written it all down, then read it aloud, refining his plans as he spoke. He didn't doubt Pip had eavesdropped.

P.C. and Brady, even Lily, surrounded Pip, to his great delight, demanding to know what he meant by Lily dropping her cloak, and who was this Prithius, some silly French name? But it didn't sound French, so maybe Russian? The three adults listened unmoving as Pip told P.C. and Brady what was happening, and amazingly he was relatively cogent. P.C. and Brady appeared to understand. The adults were holding their breath, dreading the worst, but like children with little experience with violence or mayhem, they took it in stride. As for Lily, she was studying each of them, watching their faces as Pip spoke.

When he finished, Lily said to Pip, "You're smart."

"Papa tells me I'm smarter than a groundhog in a field of daisies."

Even though it didn't make sense, Lily patted his shoulder. "You're smarter than any groundhog."

Max said, a dark brow arched up, "You're right, Lily. Grayson, you have a very precocious son."

Grayson said, "He also has big ears and never passes up a chance to eavesdrop."

Max looked tired and worried, but more, he looked angry, ready to kill, truth be told. He'd watched Lily speak to the other children, always ready to grab her up if Prithius suddenly appeared.

Flowers, Max's ancient butler with snow-white hair, a lovely highlight with his beautiful white teeth, called them into the massive entry hall of Storne Hope. As he

ceremoniously led them all into the drawing room, P.C. whispered to her mother, “Mama, Lily is very pretty, and I am hopeful she will make a good friend for me if she doesn’t flirt with Brady.” She turned to Brady. “You will not forsake me for her, will you?”

Brady, no fool, said quickly, “She looks scared. You ain’t—aren’t—ever scared, P.C. After she teaches us about this cloaking business, you can teach her how to make frogs hop and braid her hair like you do.”

This met with P.C.’s approval. She walked to Lily, took her hand, and the two of them skipped ahead into the drawing room. Miranda said to Max, “She is a precious little girl. Neither you nor Grayson will let anything happen to her. Grayson assures me the demon won’t come until it is dark.”

Max nodded. “Please call me Max. Lily also told me he was a night demon and abhors the daylight. I pray they are right.”

Miranda nodded, gave him her hand. “And I am Miranda, Miranda Wolffe.”

Max took her hand, lightly squeezed her fingers. He said, “My life has changed more in the past two weeks than in all my years on earth. Now I am the protector to a little girl who is also a witch. And I know I’d protect her with my life from a demon, an actual demon that shouldn’t even exist outside your novels, Grayson. I know this is but another encounter for you, but for me? It fair to curdles my brain. I am profoundly grateful you’re here, or I don’t know what would have happened. To me. To Lily.”

Miranda said, “I was like you before I met Grayson, Max. Then, much to my surprise, he and I once battled a demon.”

Max’s right eyebrow went straight up. “When this is over, I want to hear about this

demon from ancient Egypt.”

Flowers cleared his throat, stepped away, and gave them a sweeping gesture into the amazing drawing room. Grayson immediately looked at the fresco. The man and woman were walking next to a lake, smiling at each other, all was serene, no violence. He drew a deep breath and prayed. He wondered if the resident ghost, Lady Hilda, was about. Probably. If Prithius came tonight, what would she do?

Flowers herded the children to the far end of the drawing room to old chairs and sofas set in front of a mammoth fireplace. The adults heard snippets of conversation, Lily telling them what happened in London, only a trace of fear in her young voice. He was aware Max was listening as well. He saw Lily look up every few minutes and meet Max’s eyes. The bond between them was obvious, and they’d only known each other two weeks. She had indeed changed his life, set Max on a new path.

A maid appeared in the doorway carrying a huge tray. Flowers gestured for her to take the tea and biscuits to the children.

There was a huge meow from the doorway, followed by a large orange cat, tail high and twitching, strolling into the drawing room. He paused, stared around at all the strangers in his house, then padded to Max and jumped up onto his lap. Max automatically began stroking his broad back. The purring volume was amazing. “This fine fellow is Clotis. He hated the trip from London, even though Lily nearly petted his fur off him the entire trip to keep him calm, but now he rules the house and appears quite pleased with Storne Hope. Ah, here is Flowers back with provisions for us.”

Grayson scarce had the cup of tea to his mouth when the demon came.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The front windows shattered, hurling glass into the drawing room. Wind gushed in fast and heavy like blood from a giant open wound. Framed portraits in oil and photogravure were hurled into the air, a lamp toppled, crashed to the wooden floor. The huge room turned black as midnight, but oddly they could still see.

Suddenly, the wild wind simply stopped. Dead silence. The children came running. Max jumped to his feet, grabbed Lily up into his arms, and plastered her against him. P.C. ran to her mother, and both Brady and Pip came to press themselves against Grayson. Clotis arched his back and fluffed into a huge orange ball, hissing toward the destroyed window and something none of them could see.

Grayson couldn't believe it, he'd been so certain Prithius wouldn't come until tonight, not now, not during the day, yet here he was. He'd been wrong, dead wrong. Grayson knew soul-eating fear for the children and Miranda, his heart lodged in his throat as he felt both Brady and Pip shuddering against him. He hugged them both, whispered, "Stay still. It will be all right."

He blanked the fear from his mind. He said aloud, his voice amused, "A bit of drama with flying objects and shattered glass, but I have to tell you it wasn't very impressive, Prithius, it was all flash, really quite predictable, nothing original. No one is scared. You have nothing more? Why don't you show yourself? Are you too afraid? The children enjoy laughing at cowards." He nodded toward Lily and P.C., squeezed Brady and Pip. It was Pip who shouted with laughter, the others following until the children's laughter filled the vast drawing room. Their laughter sounded hollow, but it was still laughter. Max and Miranda followed suit, a valiant effort

Grayson hoped would fool the incubus. Slowly, Grayson felt their fear lessen. Good.

He called out, “Where are you, Prithius? Did your pathetic little show drain you since you have no more of your potion to give you strength, to give you substance, to allow you to remain in Viscount Fielding’s body? You’re too weak, aren’t you? And you’re too cowardly to show yourself in your demon form.”

Miranda raised her voice, pleased it didn’t quiver. “P.C., did you find this demon’s show anything out of the ordinary? Did it bore you?”

P.C. licked her lips, squared her small shoulders, and said, “Mr. Straithmore—ah, Mr. Sherbrooke—believes your demon show was pitiful. Brady and I agree. Brady?”

Brady drew himself up. “You aren’t anything special, just like Mr. Sherbrooke said.” But still he was pressed tightly against Grayson’s side.

Max held Lily so close to him there wasn’t as much as a breath between them, but both looked in full control. Grayson noticed for the first time the knife in Max’s hand.

There was silence now, all their taunts echoing in the vast room. There was no more wind, no movement, only stillness.

Miranda said to Grayson, her voice amused and only he heard the tremor of fear, “Now, my dear, when this pathetic demon appears, if he dares to, do away with him so we may continue with our party.”

Grayson said, “Do you know, Prithius, I had only to lower my cloak and, predictably, you came, like a dog when called by its master. But I admit I am surprised you’re here in the daylight. Only it isn’t daylight in here, is it? You’ve managed to bring the night with you, but you couldn’t blind us, we still see all perfectly well, but I don’t see you. Are you hiding behind the draperies, too afraid to come out, too spineless?”

Lily called out, no tremor in her young voice, “Prithius, you cannot hurt me anymore. Mr. Sherbrooke is right, you are a coward. Have you left my uncle’s body? I want to see you as you really are.”

There was nothing, no sound, no movement.

Max called out, “Listen to me, demon, I know you have no more potion, and you need it, don’t you? Without it, you cannot remain in his body. I imagine he would very much like to be free of you and enjoy a cup of tea.”

Pip said, his child’s voice ringing out, “Papa said you come from hell. We will send you back there, and the vicar says demons roast in hell.”

And suddenly there he was, not the demon in his own form but as Lily’s uncle, disheveled, his hair greasy and standing on end, leaning heavily on the snake-head ebony cane, his breath heaving, looking like he would fall over.

A hollow echoing voice shouted from Viscount Fielding’s mouth, “I told your miserable wizard father I do not come from hell! I have come for what is mine. Give her to me and I will let the lot of you live.”

Grayson saw Max was ready to leap on Fielding, shook his head at him. He said calmly, “Thurian came to me in my dreams because he said he could not reach you. He wants you back, Prithius. War is coming, and he needs your help. Will you go back and fight with your own kind?”

The echoing voice shouted, “No! You lie. Thurian wants me back only to destroy me. I will remain here, with her, with Lilith—no, Lily. I must have her.” He raised the snake-head cane and waved it madly about, nearly tottering over. Suddenly, Viscount Fielding fell to the floor, and like a snake shedding its skin, what arose from Fielding’s body was an incredibly beautiful man, tall, well-formed, golden hair

swirling about his perfect face as if blown by an unseen wind. He wore only a loincloth, his golden flesh glistening. In his hand he held the snake-head cane. “I will smite all of you if you do not give her to me!”

Max growled in fury, shouted, “You will not have Lily, Prithius. If you try to take her, I will kill you,” and he raised the knife.

Lily took Max’s hand, squeezed. He stared down at this precious child, realized suddenly there was something very different about her, something he didn’t understand. She seemed filled with light, her eyes bright as diamonds. She called out, her voice sounding older, sarcasm dripping from her words, “I know you must have a witch to stay in our realm. Do you think I would accept you, you ridiculous creature? You present yourself as this golden god, but you are hiding your real self. I can smell you, demon. I can smell your foul ugliness. Go back to your realm or I will let Max kill you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The beautiful golden god rose straight off the ground, hovered six feet in the air. His voice boomed out like thunder. “How dare you call me ugly! I am beautiful, a human man all your women here want. They all beg me to take them. I am sought after, I am welcomed. Come to me, Lilith—Lily—accept me, and together we will rule this benighted world.”

Lily laughed again, a mocking, adult laugh. “Show yourself in your true form, demon, and if you please me, I will consider becoming one with you.”

“Do you prefer this, little witch? Do I now please you?”

The glorious golden young man seemed to flatten in the air itself, then slowly what emerged was still a man, but he was black and white with no depth, like a piece of foolscap. What emerged from the flat slash of a mouth was, “I live in the world of dreams I make and control. I glory in them. Little witch, I can be anything you wish. Behold.”

He began to whirl around, showing figures—men both old and young, some ancient, wearing togas, some in long-ago armor, until Lily, still in that adult voice, yelled, “Stop, Prithius! You bore me with your absurd show. I would not want you in any form, in any age. You are nothing to me. I do not need you to govern this land. If I wish, I can do it by myself. Now, you pathetic demon, show yourself as you really are. I command you.” She thrust out her hands toward him.

Slowly, a large, nearly transparent column rose eight feet into the air. It moved this

way and that, undulating as if pushed from side to side by unseen currents. They could see no bones, no skeleton. At the top of the gray column sat a long, narrow head of sorts and a face with protuberant nearly white eyes, a long flat nose, a seam of a mouth, the whole of it smeared nearly flat into the column itself. Long arms waved like seaweed. No muscles, no bone, and at the end were hands of a sort with long waving fingers like spiders, twisting and spinning in the air. His undulating arms rose over his demon's head, higher and higher until the spider fingertips touched the vaulted ceiling. A voice came out of that flat-seamed mouth—a chant, strange guttural sounds that seemed to flow together. Oddly, Grayson understood, and he said the words aloud as the demon spit them into the silent air. “By all the spirits here and below, by all my brethren from before and after, come to me, destroy these humans. Give me the child!”

Thick air swirled about the drawing room in mad bursts as if spewed from the demon's unseen mouth. “Bring the winds, destroy, destroy! Now!”

Suddenly, the thick air shimmered around Lily, grew calm, and a filmy white veil surrounded her. Then the white veil moved in front of Lily and a woman's hollow voice rang out, deep and harsh, as if unused for a very long time, yet all understood the words. “None of your brethren are here, Prithius, none claim kinship with you. You have taken a forbidden human body and imprisoned a child. You are a pestilence. Go back to Manna. You will not take the human child.”

The huge pillar began to shimmer, still swaying, and from the flat mouth a voice yelled, loud and vicious, filling the room, “I know about you, you accursed ghost. You are known as Lady Hilda. You were nothing in life and nothing now but a specter trapped here for eternity. I can destroy you with but a thought. My brethren will come, they must. Get away from the child! She is mine.”

One of the demon's boneless arms stretched itself toward Lady Hilda, and a bolt of red lightning shot out the tips of the undulating fingers.

Before Grayson or Max could act, Lily jumped in front of the white veil, shouted, “You will not hurt her!” She grabbed the red bolt before it went into the filmy white and hurled it back toward Prithius.

It sank deep and all could see it, violent deep red spreading out, filling the column. There was a loud groan. Red sparks flew outward. The column shuddered wildly, moving back and forth, side to side, folding upon itself, nearly touching the floor. Then it steadied and was once again a gigantic column. The red dissipated, disappeared, and the column that was Prithius was once again transparent.

Lily said, her voice ringing out, filling the room, “Heed me, demon, I am a witch. I accept my power. Now I will kill you.” And the small child, her blonde hair now haloing her head, her eyes focused on the demon, raised her fists. She said, her voice powerful, “You will fade into nothingness, Prithius. You will go back to your kind, you will never come back to my realm again, or I will cut you into small pieces and burn them in a deep pit.”

All stood mesmerized, silent, adults and children. Pip and Brady were each squeezing one of Grayson’s hands so hard his fingers were white. P.C. was plastered against her mother’s side. Miranda looked calm, expectant. As for Max, he was pale, disbelief and amazement a potent mix on his face, the knife still clutched in his hand. He was staring at Lily, then at the white filmy creature that was the ghost, Lady Hilda.

Slowly, Lily raised her arm, pointed a finger at the column. She smiled, said to Grayson, “Please, sir, remove this pathetic demon. I know you read how to dismiss him forever from our world.”

Grayson said slowly, his voice somehow carrying throughout the large room, “Your kind is waiting, Prithius, to escort you to hell where your master awaits, ready to punish you for eternity.” And he waved his fist at the demon.

Everyone stood watching, breaths held, a silent tableau. The huge column pulsed and swirled, undulating madly faster and faster until there was a sudden whoosh, as if the air had been sucked out of the shattered window, and the demon was gone. Then there was no wind, only silence.

Lily's voice called out, again a child's voice, "Lady Hilda, thank you."

The soft white film very slowly faded, leaving the echo of a distant voice. "I am at last free. Thank you, Lily." Then she was gone.

Sunlight filled the room through the shattered windows.

Pip said, "Papa, was that the ghost, Lady Hilda?"

It was Lily who answered. "Yes, Pip, she was very, very old, trapped here because she murdered her husband, not the other way around as the legend goes. She felt to me she could only be free if she performed a good deed, and she did. She's gone now." She took Max's hand, smiled up at him. "We're free too, Max."

P.C. said, "Mama, after what she did to that horrible creature, I don't mind if Lily flirts with Brady. I will willingly share him with her. Since she is a witch, I know she will teach me things so I can protect you and the Great."

As for Max, he slowly slipped his knife back into its sheath at his waist. He picked Lily up in his arms and squeezed her tightly against him, kissed her cheek. "I love you, Lily."

She stroked a small white hand over his cheek. "I love you too, Max."

Pip said, "Do you think the demon is in hell, Papa?"

Grayson nodded. “Yes, yes indeed he is.” And he simply knew Prithius’s sin was so grave he’d never be allowed to return to Manna.

Suddenly, all eyes were on Viscount Fielding as he slowly sat up and looked around at the massive old drawing room and all the strange people. He said, “How very odd. What was I doing on the floor? Look at me, I am excessively untidy. I do believe I smell. How can this be? Lily, would you ask my valet to draw my bath? I say, I’m not at home. Where is this place? Who are all you people?”

Max took the viscount’s hand and pulled him to his feet. “Sir, both Lily and I will tell you all about it, but first, would you like a cup of tea?”

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later

Wolffe Hall

The Great—Josiah Wolffe, Baron Cudlow—stroked Musgrave Jr., who was sprawled across his bony knees, snoring heroically. The Great looked at each child's excited face. "That is a remarkable tale you've told me, and each time you've given me a new, more potent variation." He pointed his cane at P.C. "You said this time the ghost of Lady Hilda sang to you? What did she sing? Everyone sings, according to you."

Brady punched her arm. "I told you not to tell him she sang. Everyone knows ghosts don't sing."

"She wanted to, I know it, but she had to fight that horrible demon to protect us."

Pip, not to be left out, said, "Sir, she swayed around, all white and flowy, sort of like she was waltzing, so that's close to singing."

Brady's father, George, and his stepmother, Lise Marie, and Grayson and Miranda sat watching this performance. Grayson said, "They're so eager to impress the Great, I'm thinking Lady Hilda just might produce a pitchfork to hurl it at the demon."

"While she sings an aria," Miranda said and laughed.

“True enough,” Grayson said, squeezing her hand, “but you know, what’s more amazing is that none of them appear to remember what actually happened.”

Lise Marie said thoughtfully, “Maybe because Lily is a child too, it’s too frightening for them to remember. I wonder if they will ever remember what really happened?”

Old Suggs appeared in the doorway, a large tray in his spindly arms. The children sniffed the cinnamon and sugar and jumped to their feet, raced toward him. The old man grinned, showing his few remaining teeth, and carried the tray to a marquetry table.

George said as he watched the children each take a plate Old Suggs handed them, “It seems to me, Grayson, that no matter where you are, sooner or later, a demon or a ghost or a kelpie arrives. And now an eight-year-old witch.” He shook his head. “I will never forget the succubus at Ravenstone.”

Grayson pushed a dangling hank of honey-gold hair back behind Miranda’s ear, smiled as he watched the children stuff Cook’s seed cakes in their mouths, always a favorite. “Nor I, George. I wonder if the succubus found a witch in time before—well, before what? She ceased to exist? Who knows? As far as we know, she had no potion like Prithius.

“Now, while the children are occupied, let me tell you about the letter I received from Max this morning. He writes Lily and Viscount Fielding found one flagon of the demon’s potion hidden in the laboratory he’d fashioned in a bedchamber. They took it to a chemist, who was able to identify only one of the ingredients—garlic. The other ingredients he didn’t recognize. He asked all his respected colleagues, with the same response. So who knows?

“Max wrote the viscount has no memory of what happened, only that he’d lost three months. Amazingly, he is hale and hearty. He and Lily and Max and Max’s mother will be arriving here next week. Viscount Fielding agreed to making Storne Hope

their home.” Grayson paused a moment, shook his head, smiled. “Max thinks his mother and Viscount Fielding are becoming friends, maybe more in the future.”

P.C., ears like a bat, swallowed, called out, “Lily will move here, sir? Really? Oh what fun we’ll have! But, Brady, you will not give her more attention than you give to me. You will be pleasant, perhaps let her pet your new puppies, Horatio and Emma, maybe pet your horses, but you will dance only one waltz with her and at least two with me, all right?”

Brady had a mouthful of cake, gave her arm a poke, and solemnly nodded, which made his father smile. The boy had promise.

Pip said, “I’ll play rounders with her, P.C. She won’t pay Brady any attention at all, I am that good.”

Grayson lightly ran his thumb over Miranda’s hand, watched her turn to smile at him. He marveled at the vagaries of life, from the unpredictable to the incredible and everything in between.

Later that evening when a sliver of a moon hung low and wind ruffled through the oaks, Grayson sat alone in his study, a lone candle at his elbow, reading once again Max’s letter. He knew the bond between Max and Lily would last all their lives. And now they would become part of the fabric of his life.

He remembered what Max had said to him before he’d stepped into his carriage to return to London: “Grayson, can you begin to imagine what will come to pass in the years to come? I am a man blessed.”

Grayson rose, picked up the guttering candle, and walked up the shadowed stairs to his bedchamber. As he drifted into sleep, he wondered what demon would find him next.