



THE
WHITE
WITCH

Love Beyond Death

The Inns - Book Four

Elizabeth N. Harris

The White Witch

Book four of Love Beyond Death – The
Inns

Elizabeth N. Harris

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The White Witch.

Book Four of Love Beyond Death – The Inns.

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The White Witch

The second youngest of the Nortons has zealously guarded his prisoner for hundreds of years. Sacrificing his life was rather hard at eighteen, but it was something he did without a second thought. Kit had fought one of the worst creatures to walk the earth, and an evil so great, its escape gave him nightmares.

Stephanie is recovering from an abusive relationship that could have destroyed a friendship she held dear. Thankfully, she and Cole made it through, supporting each other. Now, she owns The White Witch and is somewhat possessive of her new inn, even though it's haunted by Kit. At first, they try to be friends. Kit doesn't wish to terrorise a woman who's learned the hard way that a man can't always be trusted.

It goes against Kit's very core to harm a woman, so charming her and helping her understand what needs to happen is okay, right? Not so. Stephanie feels that, yet again, a man has abused her emotions and goes to war without Kit even realising he's in one until it's too late. By the time he listens to The White Witch, Kit is pedalling faster than he can blink.

Kit is convinced Stephanie will succumb to the evil he's imprisoned. Stephanie is rather insulted that Kit thinks she is so weak-willed. Then, there are outside influences interfering with them both. Another evil, a tremendous threat to Stephanie's safety and life, haunts The White Witch, trying to get in and end what it started. Can Kit and The White Witch keep Stephanie safe? Can Stephanie avoid an evil influence? And will The White Witch survive the both of them!

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DEDICATION.

To my Beta Team, here we go, another year! Thank you for everything you've done for me over the last few years. This one's for you!

Love

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This book was written, produced and edited in England, the United Kingdom, where some spelling, grammar and word usage will vary from US English.

*“I know my duty! Better than you
do!”*

Happy Reading!



Elizabeth N. Harris

PROLOGUE.

Kit.

A deep sigh left his lips as the for-sale sign was replaced by a sold sign. And a moment later, he sent a thought at The White Witch asking if she was ready for war?

She shuddered slightly in response and sent him a flicker of irritation.

Kit rubbed a hand over his face. This farce happened every so often. A new owner would buy the inn, not believing in the rumours. And each time, Kit and The White Witch would have to prove them wrong. None lasted over four days. Usually, Kit would terrify the life out of them, and they'd flee, often in the middle of the night.

This newcomer would be no different. They'd run still wearing their nightclothes, leaving everything behind. He hoped this intruder would leave a new laptop. The one he owned was old and clunky, and Kit wanted a faster operating version. He understood that technology was moving at a fast rate, and he'd long ago allowed people to install the internet.

Kit was amused at how different today's society was compared to his own.

At the same time, Kit was appalled at how basic human decency and courtesy had fallen by the wayside. Selfies, social media, social promotion, and now this thing called AI. What had his world turned into? It seemed everyone went for the easy option. The satisfaction of a job well done was now forgotten.

Kit wandered away from the window and moved towards the living quarters. They'd long been neglected too, as nobody ever stayed long enough to repair and restore them.

His eyes fell upon a painting of him and his siblings, CeeCee, in the middle of them. Kit understood they'd all died the same night—or been trapped in their inns. But evil needed fighting...

And Kit protected the world from one of the nastiest monsters around.

If the creature he hid were to escape, anything good would be reduced to ash.

For now, it was safely imprisoned, but knowing human weakness, Kit couldn't allow anyone to stay. Even with his enhanced skills, he had nearly been susceptible to its siren's call. Only with The White Witch supporting him had Kit succeeded in trapping it.

Somehow, Kit knew Lucian had fought Margery and defeated her. There was no other explanation. Because if Lucian had failed, Kit's imprisonment of his evil would have failed, too.

There was more at play.

If what Kit suspected was correct, there was a battle coming. One that would tip the world into perpetual darkness until the end of time should good lose.

No. With the weakness of humans, Kit could allow no one to free the evil in his inn. Should it escape from its prison, it would seek others like it. And nobody wanted to see that nightmarish scene.

CHAPTER ONE.

Kit

Kit watched as the young woman who'd bought his inn answered her phone with a happy smile. A smile that soon slipped from her pretty lips.

She slumped to the side, and Kit moved closer to hear the conversation.

"Hey, honey, it's me. I'm sorry, I don't know how to tell you this, but I just received news... Justin was found dead two nights ago," a man spoke, and the woman, Stephanie, wilted.

"Dead?" Stephanie asked with a sob. "Is this my fault?"

"Steph, he was beyond our reach, sweet girl. There was nothing you could have done to save him. Our love for him wasn't enough. And no, we shouldn't attend his funeral."

"But, Cole, it would look bad if we didn't," Stephanie cried.

"Oh baby," Cole replied gently.

"I loved him, Cole; why wasn't that enough? People will say nasty things if we don't go, your aunt and uncle, for one. We should pay our respects. I just wish we could have saved him from himself," Stephanie whispered, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"Stephanie, we released him a long time ago. Who knows who'll attend? You could put yourself in danger," Cole argued. His tone stayed soft.

"Do you think that somebody after Justin might target me?" Stephanie asked, horrified.

"Let's not give them the option, honey. Stay in your inn where it's safe, grieve, but don't blame yourself. Justin's death has nothing to do with you. He made his decisions, and they were bad ones. It was never your fault."

Kit frowned. It sounded like this Justin was a nasty, abusive piece of work. A scoundrel of the lowest order. He

watched intently as Stephanie ended the call and slid to a sitting position on the dusty floor. She drew her knees up, and a sob left her lips. Despite this, despite Cole telling her not to blame herself, Kit could see she was.

This was a dilemma for Kit. He didn't like to kick anyone when they were down, and this girl couldn't stay. She had to leave, but at this precise moment, she was extremely vulnerable.

"Damn you, Justin, why wasn't my love enough for you?" Stephanie asked the empty room.

Kit wanted to answer her. Many men were bounders and had no idea how to cherish the adoration of a good woman. This Justin clearly had been one.

His eyes narrowed as Stephanie rubbed her wrist. But it wasn't in a comforting way. It was as if it hurt or pained her from a lingering injury.

Kit stiffened. Had this girl been abused?

Stephanie

It was hard to accept Justin's death. Once, they'd been so close and so in love, or so she'd believed. Instead, Cole's cousin had been a wolf in sheep's clothing. His charm vanished the moment she professed her feelings for him. Justin turned cold and calculating, overjoyed at taking someone from Cole. Every time Stephanie had visited with her friends, and that included Cole, Justin had punished her.

Cole spotted marks Justin had left on her once, and he'd nearly punched him. Luckily, she'd been able to calm Cole down that time. But Justin had been just waiting for an excuse. Any excuse to get Cole in trouble. And Stephanie swore she wouldn't be the reason.

A few months later, Justin beat her badly, and Cole had seen the results. There'd been no stopping him, and he'd beat Justin black and blue. Even if she'd wanted to stop it, she wasn't able to.

Justin had wanted to call the police, just as she'd known he would. But Cole's parents stepped in with some very detailed threats, which shut Justin and his parents down. Basically, Cole's parents had threatened to cut the entire family off, which, as his parents were paying Cole's aunt and uncle's mortgage, forced them to behave. But it bred a hatred in Justin that spiralled. Stephanie hid at home and stayed out of his way, but their paths occasionally crossed, and the spite in Justin's face made her cringe.

Cole and her friends had surrounded and protected her ever since.

At first, Stephanie had been a mess. She'd hidden in her little house and not left. Cole and his parents arrived and removed everything of Justin's from there, giving her a reprieve. One of the girls picked her up in the morning and took her to work, and Cole always brought her home. And bless his heart, he'd insisted on checking her house was empty before letting her in. Stephanie knew why. Justin wasn't above plotting revenge against her and Cole.

It had taken a while to break free from the chains Justin had wrapped around her heart, emotions, behaviours, and home. Such as making sure all tins were lined up with labels facing forward and all cup handles faced the same way. Stephanie slowly broke the rules Justin had placed upon her. But recovering from the emotional abuse had been harder than the physical. Stephanie woke at night for months, crying in fear and horror and certain that Justin was in the house. Finally, Cole had moved in so she could sleep easier.

Stephanie wiped the tears from her eyes.

"No more, Justin, shall I cry over you. You nearly destroyed me in your hate for Cole. I wish you peace, but I doubt you'll find it. Go with God's blessing and leave me alone," Stephanie whispered and pushed to her feet.

"You're nothing but a memory of pain and violence, abuse and misery. I'm free of you, Justin, and will remain so," she said louder and stronger.

Her shoulders straightened, and she stood tall. No stupid man would ever tear her apart again.

Kit

He bit his lip as he listened to Stephanie's words. Blast and damnation, she *had* been abused, and Kit was stuck. He had no intention of terrorising a girl already a victim of a man's abuse. But she couldn't stay. Kit knew what a target and prize she'd be to what he guarded and protected the world from. Her delicate stature and emotional fragility would tempt the evil, and she wasn't strong enough to fight it off.

What a dilemma. This was a situation Kit hadn't experienced or imagined. The question was how to chase her away without harming her permanently. Kit sucked his lips in as he tried to devise a plan, his mind working furiously for several minutes.

There were a few choices, such as the obvious haunting, the poltergeist, the invisible fear, and so on. Which method could Kit choose that wouldn't harm Stephanie beyond repair? Usually, he didn't give a damn. The intruder had to leave, and he made them one way or another. But he sensed the fragility of Stephanie, and he really couldn't stand abusive males. Stephanie's apparent abuse left Kit in a quandary.

Thoughtfully retreating to his room in the attic, he stalked the floor, torn. The White Witch raised her awareness and poked at him, curious why there was a human living inside her walls.

"I know," Kit muttered. "But she's been harmed, and I don't know what to do."

The White Witch slapped him around his head, and Kit scowled.

"No need for that, you damnable wench. I am a gentleman. I will not harm an innocent lady, especially one who has already been brutalised."

Kit sensed The White Witch pause, and then he received another slap. He rubbed the back of his head ruefully. She was making her stance very plain. The girl had to go.

But how?

He had no interest in destroying someone, just in chasing them away. Kit had a dilemma on his hands, and clearly, The White Witch would not help him.

Stephanie

Stephanie looked around. It had been two days since moving in, and she felt like she was being watched. A constant presence lingered. Only, she spotted nothing or no one. Saying she was puzzled was an understatement. Stephanie had finally reached the point where she was beginning to consider if the inn was haunted. For two days, she'd cleaned the apartment that belonged to her now. Besides her living space, there were ten other bedrooms that could be rented out.

The apartment was generous, with three bedrooms, one large and two medium-sized, a kitchen, and two bathrooms. Although one was more a shower room, there was a small study and a living room. The apartment was the full length of one of the wings and situated in the attics. Which surprised her at how spacious it was. Stephanie had expected it to be cramped, but it wasn't. There was a big window at the front letting sunlight stream into the hallway, and at the back were windows allowing plenty of light in.

Considering it was a listed building, Stephanie was shocked the extra windows had been allowed, but she was thankful for them. The furniture was seriously dated from the 1970s and, while serviceable, it was distasteful. Today she planned to order everything new online.

Unlike some of the others who'd struggled before Maggie won the lottery, Stephanie had some money hidden away. If Justin had found it, he'd have spent it quicker than she could blink. Her grandmother died a while ago and left her a small but decent inheritance. Stephanie would use that to furnish the apartment. She'd sold her previous house with the furniture, wanting to leave everything behind, so she also had money from that sale. Which meant Stephanie had enough to buy the furnishings she wanted.

Yawning widely, she moved into the kitchen and switched on one of the most modern pieces of equipment in there, a kettle that was at least five years old. The kitchen always felt welcome. The walls were brick on the outside wall and whitewashed plaster on the remaining three. It was a nice size and boasted a breakfast bar. Stephanie popped in two slices of bread and made coffee.

Hugging the cup to her, she stared out of the window at the private garden the inn came with. That was directly behind her wing of the inn, and it was at least three-quarters of an acre. The beer garden was behind the other wing.

Movement in her garden made her squint, and her gaze widened as she took in a faint figure gazing up at her.

It was tall, handsome, male... and see-through.

Stephanie's mouth dropped open as he faded, and she rubbed her eyes in disbelief. She stepped back from the window and sat heavily on a chair. Had she just seen a ghost, or had she finally lost her mind? Stephanie took a huge sip of the drink in her hands and blinked. Maybe she'd imagined it because she wasn't awake yet? Stephanie preferred that idea.

She drank the rest of her coffee and headed for the shower. Today was going to be a long one shopping, although it would be much easier than braving the shops physically. Justin had left Stephanie with a genuine fear of being outside. Of being vulnerable.

Stephanie's plan was to spend the day ordering her furniture. Then, tomorrow, she'd start searching for items for the eight bedrooms. They all required a good deep cleaning, but she had no plans to change the décor. The wooden floorboards needed sanding and re-varnishing, and the beams in the ceiling were already black. The outside walls were brick, while the internal walls were plaster and beams. All that needed doing was a fresh coat of white paint. It was minor work, but messy.

Unfortunately, the furnishings were beyond saving.

Someone had smashed through the bedrooms, ruining all the furniture. Tables were broken, chairs had legs ripped off, the beds had been hit with a hammer or something and the slats were shattered. Cushions and curtains have been ripped to pieces, and pillow stuffing torn out. Stephanie believed there was anger and hate to this level of destruction, but she didn't care. What mattered was ensuring the replacement furniture matched the style of the rooms.

Stephanie had no intention of destroying the beautiful old-fashioned inn and making it a modern gastro pub or similar. She adored the features from the horseshoes above the two entrances to the brass medallions nailed to the walls. She was also puzzled why her living quarters were quite habitable, yet the guest bedrooms had been smashed up. But for now, it didn't matter.

“Get your tush moving, Stephanie,” she said to herself just to hear someone's voice.

She snickered before turning around.

Then her eyes widened.

Quietly standing in the kitchen doorway was a man. His hair was loose and fell in soft brown waves around his face. He was tall, over six feet, with broad shoulders, lean hips and long, muscled legs. His face was as handsome as any she'd seen, but his keen green eyes observed her.

What surprised Stephanie was how he was clothed. His clothing was old, at least a couple of centuries old, but he was dressed casually. He wore a white shirt, open at the neck, fawn-coloured tight trousers tucked into black knee-high boots, and a gold embroidered blue waistcoat completed the outfit. There was no cravat or coat to his attire.

“Don't be afraid. My name is Kit,” the ghost said.

Stephanie's mouth opened, her eyes rolled up, and she collapsed into a small heap on the floor.

Kit

“Oh, hell!” Kit exclaimed as he leapt forward to stop Stephanie smashing her head on the floor. That hadn't quite

gone as well as he'd planned.

The White Witch jabbed at him in amusement, and he sent her a wordless admonishment. In response, The White Witch returned a tinkle of laughter.

Kit patted Stephanie's cheeks until her eyelids fluttered, and she opened her eyes. Confusion warred with disbelief as she studied him.

"If I may introduce myself? My name is the Honourable Christopher Norton, the second youngest of my siblings. I am a brother to the Earl of Castleton, Lord Lucian Norton," Kit said gently.

"You're—you're a ghost," Stephanie stuttered.

"This is my inn, my home," he said, nodding. "I have been dead many a year."

"And you haunt my inn?"

"We might disagree, miss. This was my inn long before you bought it and has been ever since. You are the intruder," Kit offered with a charming smile.

The White Witch poked him again with amusement.

Kit sent her an admonishment as he tried to keep a straight face. After several days of contemplating what to do with the woman, Kit decided on a rather unique plan from his usual terror tactics. He was going to charm Stephanie and then reason with her to move on. He hoped this method might work as he sensed how delicate Stephanie's personality was. Kit never believed in harming women or breaking them down, and he didn't intend to start. Of course, should Stephanie prove stubborn, then terror tactics it was.

Whatever it took, The White Witch and the evil they kept the world safe from would remain locked away forever. Kit hadn't given his life to let it escape now.

Stephanie

A ghost! A real live ghost! And he was cradling her. It was one surprise after another. Those keen green eyes regarded her

kindly, and suddenly, it hit her. A ghost was holding her in his arms. Rather nice arms, but even so...

Stephanie shuffled away from him until her back hit the cabinets, and she stared at him as she tried to think of something to say.

“Your inn?” Stephanie latched onto that statement.

“Yes, miss. The White Witch has been mine for three hundred years,” Christopher informed her.

“And your name is Christopher?”

“My friends and family called me Kit. Please, I’d much prefer it if you also consented to call me that. It would bring many fond memories to hear Kit spoken once again,” Kit charmed her.

Stephanie’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t like or trust men,” she blurted, to her shock.

“Oh. Should I keep a safe distance from you?” Kit asked, looking concerned.

Stephanie barely refrained from an un-lady-like snort. “Yes, please. Are you really a ghost? You look quite solid to me,” she said as she gazed at him. In fact, the spirit appeared as real as she did.

Moments later, Kit disappeared from her view, and she shrieked in shock. Seconds passed, and he reappeared as a faint outline.

“Does that answer your question? I can manifest and appear as human as you are or be the spook that people write stories about, a floaty spectral thing,” Kit drawled. He appeared amused at the look on Stephanie’s face.

“Just stay visible,” Stephanie replied weakly, waving a hand.

What on earth was happening? Had she gone mad at last? No doubt if she had, that would cheer Justin up no end... no wait, he was dead too. Stephanie’s eyes narrowed on Kit.

“Did Justin send you to haunt me?” she demanded as anger fired in her belly.

“Justin? I know of no one called this name,” Kit answered.

“Liar! Justin’s just died; I bet he’s not strong enough, so he sent you!” Stephanie accused.

“I beg your pardon; I am a gentleman, and, as such, do not lie to innocent women!” Kit said, outraged.

“Prove it!” Stephanie challenged. She was tired of being messed with and people making a fool of her. And that included ghosts.

“Come,” Kit ordered and vaporised.

“Neat trick,” Stephanie muttered, getting to her feet.

A shriek left her lips again as Kit shoved his head through the door. “I apologise. I forgot you need to open the doors.”

The door opened, and Stephanie felt faint. It really looked like her inn was haunted, which sucked.

“Come,” Kit’s order drifted down the hallway, and Stephanie swallowed a sigh. She marched after him, noting that Kit was taking her towards the door that separated her quarters from the rest of the inn.

The door swung open, and Kit stood outside. He beckoned her to the landing and pointed at a door which was locked.

“I don’t have a key for that,” Stephanie informed Kit.

From his waistcoat pocket, Kit produced a key and smirked at her.

Stephanie raised an eyebrow as Kit manifested and inserted the key. It turned with a squeak, and the door slowly swung open.

Stephanie peered inside as Kit flicked a light switch, and a small gasp left her mouth.

“What’s this?” she inquired, entering the large room and gazing around.

A stone fireplace dominated one wall and appeared recently used. Bookshelves filled the walls, boasting books, ornaments, and other items. A big leather wingback chair that

looked really comfortable was near the fireplace, with an occasional table next to it. A deer horn chandelier hung from the ceiling. There was a small writing desk stood to one side with another chair tucked beside it, and there was a footstool to rest your feet on.

“This is where I hid all of my treasures when I died. The truth is, I have no intention of sharing these precious items. However, that is not the reason I brought you here. This is,” Kit replied and pointed to a portrait on the wall.

Stephanie stepped closer.

“That’s you.”

“Painted six months before my death,” Kit confirmed.

Stephanie studied the painting, looking bemused. She was unsure how she felt when she considered the fact she was actually talking to a ghost. A genuine spirit. Not some floaty mist or a half-formed spectre, but a ghost who seemed to be able to become solid and also see-through. This was beyond anything in her experience, and she was uncertain how to feel or act.

Stephanie gained a few precious moments by staring at the portrait. Kit, as he preferred to be called, stood gazing out over the room. He was turned slightly sideways with a background of a study. He wore fawn-coloured trousers with black shining boots coming to his knees. His hair was loose around his face, giving him a dangerous look, and his green eyes stared out at her. He wore a white shirt with a plum-coloured waistcoat and a coat with silver embroidery. Kit’s hair was dark, but his eyes and face held a hint of mischievousness. The painter had caught him perfectly.

A brass plaque underneath and attached to the gilt frame stated his name, ‘The Honourable Christopher Norton, died 1716’. Stephanie raised her gaze again and compared the portrait to the ghost.

Kit winked at her and grinned as her mouth fell open.

“Is this some elaborate prank?” Stephanie finally asked.

“Not at all. What you see, miss, is what you get,” Kit returned.

She shook her head in thought. “My inn is haunted by a ghost who appears intelligent and able to turn solid and not,” Stephanie whispered.

“Yes.”

“Why are you showing yourself to me? Because this inn, apart from very brief moments, has been empty for three hundred years,” Stephanie challenged.

Kit was after something. None of this made sense. Before buying The White Witch, Stephanie had done her research and that had been rather shocking. The inn was rumoured to be haunted by a poltergeist that chased all previous owners away. None lasted long, although the ghost had permitted contractors to make repairs or improvements to the inn, such as electricity. But it allowed none to stay within The White Witch’s walls for more than a few days.

Stephanie hadn’t discovered why the inn had fallen empty nor why the spirit insisted on nobody living there, and she’d honestly not paid much attention to the rumours. Now faced with Kit, she was wondering what more there was that she hadn’t learned. Or what she’d overlooked. Whatever it was, it would be huge... because that was her luck.

“So why aren’t you chasing me away?”

Kit cocked his head to stare at her, and she felt uneasy. There was something in his gaze she couldn’t distinguish.

“Please explain yourself,” Kit murmured softly.

“All the rumours I heard about The White Witch mention a malevolent spirit, one who refuses to allow people to stay here. If you’re the only ghost here, then they speak of you. So why aren’t you terrorising me to regain sole occupancy of this inn?” Stephanie asked boldly. She held Kit’s gaze but felt fear uncurl in her belly. Was this pleasant-looking and sounding spirit about to become another nightmare she’d had to struggle to overcome? And why was her life so damn difficult?

“Answer me, Kit, why are you treating me differently to all the rumours? Or is there another ghost that you’re protecting me from?” Stephanie pushed.

Kit opened his mouth and then closed it again. A wry smile crossed his lips, and Stephanie found herself mildly fascinated.

“You have some inner strength left,” Kit replied rather bizarrely.

“What’s that meant to mean?” Stephanie asked, straightening.

“I can see the pain and anguish in your soul. You’ve suffered something terrible, brought on by a man, or so I sense. Stephanie, you appear broken, but there’s something inside that still fights.”

Stephanie winced, and her shoulders curved in self-defence. Kit’s words, whether he knew the meaning of them or not, struck home and wriggled into her confidence, undermining her a little.

Stephanie watched as Kit’s face softened as he studied her.

“That, right there, Miss Stephanie, is exactly what I mean. You’ve been wounded down to your very soul,” Kit murmured, even as Stephanie shook her head in denial.

CHAPTER TWO.

Stephanie.

She fled from the room at a run, even as Kit called her name. Stephanie was in no mood to hear whatever he wanted to say. All she knew was that he'd opened raw wounds. Cole's call had poked at them, but Kit had sliced them open. A ghost wasn't meant to be so self-aware. Something was very wrong here. She slammed through the exit with Kit's voice calling after her.

"Miss Stephanie, please, wait, I mean no harm!" he called.

Stephanie ignored him and continued fleeing. The good thing about her inn was it backed onto woods. She raced down the lawn and into the treeline and kept running. There was some sort of dirt path ahead of her and using it, she left the inn behind until she could no longer walk.

When she finally stopped, she was panting for breath as she gazed around. In her hurry to flee, she'd not paid attention to where she was going, so it was pure luck she'd stuck to the path. A glimmer of blue caught her eyes, and she slowly walked in its direction and gazed at a small lake surrounded by trees.

Peace settled into her bones, and she collapsed into a heap on the ground near the waterline. Even as she drew in deep breaths, Stephanie wondered what the hell she'd fled from. Kit hadn't been threatening or scary, so why had she run? There was no denying her flight or fight instinct had kicked in, and Stephanie had most definitely fled, but why? The question lingered, begging to be picked apart.

Something inside her had taken offence or sensed something about Kit, and she'd listened. But as she wracked her brain over their meeting, she couldn't point out anything in particular.

Stephanie leant her head on her drawn-up knees and allowed the peace of the woods to comfort her.

Small animal noises gradually erupted around her, having been silenced by her wild dash towards the lake. But now she was calmer and quiet, they appeared bold enough to return to their song and activities. Her eyes gazed out over the calm lake. The water was clear, almost pure blue, something she'd not seen before. It felt like an oasis in a rioting sea of turbulent emotions, offering tranquillity and stability.

Stephanie knew that Cole's phone call had unnerved her. Justin's demise wasn't something she wanted to contemplate, and she'd tried pushing it from her mind. But maybe that wasn't the answer. Did she need to allow whatever thoughts of Justin that arose to wash over her and then deal with them? Stephanie wouldn't say she mourned Justin, but she mourned the waste and his death. Justin, as a living human, possessed great potential but sadly succumbed to evil and vileness. Hate, envy, and selfishness, plus a sense of entitlement, had stolen the decent qualities he might have once had.

And that was what bothered her, Stephanie realised. Justin could have been like Cole, a good, kind, honest, honourable man. Instead, he'd sucked up everything negative he could and spat it back at those closest to him. Justin had been nothing but disdainful and hateful, and people commented on it. One of Stephanie's worst memories consisted of Justin screaming in her face that he wasn't Cole and wished his cousin would die painfully. Her shock at his words had earned her a beating that had taken days to recover from.

Stephanie glanced in the direction of The White Witch, realising that Kit hadn't followed her. That surprised her as much as it puzzled her. Had his goal been to chase her from the inn? But... he'd seemed so gentle in handling her, almost like she was an injured animal that needed careful soothing. That couldn't be right. Were the invisible scars Justin had deeply etched so obvious even a ghost could see them?

Stephanie shook her head. Everything was such a mess.

Kit

He paced back and forth in the bar, looking out over the rear windows to spot Stephanie. Kit was sure he'd been tender,

but Stephanie had fled as if the hounds of hell were after her. That alone spoke of deep wounds. The White Witch poked at him in concern, and he sent her a reassuring blast.

Two damned awkward females in his life, Kit mused as he gazed at the woods behind the inn. Kit shook his head.

While the goal was to remove Stephanie, he didn't wish to harm her delicate constitution even more. Which was why he'd decided on the path he'd been taking. No woman deserved to be tragically broken. Stephanie's flash of backbone had delighted him. So much so Kit hadn't been able to ignore it. Yet his words, carefully thought out, had caused Stephanie to run, and that irked him. His target would be achieved because he knew her vulnerabilities would certainly release the evil he contained if he failed. But—and it was a huge but—Kit was contrary enough to want to oust her on his own terms.

And that was the damnable conundrum Kit faced.

Stephanie

The sun was dipping low when she finally roused herself from her thoughts. She'd lost an entire day, and nothing she'd planned had been achieved. Tomorrow, she'd do better and ignore Kit as best as she could. For some reason, Kit didn't want to share his home. The fact it had been empty for so long made that obvious. But Stephanie was ready to battle him for The White Witch.

She'd chosen the pub with great care. There'd been several up for sale that had caught her attention, but The White Witch had won out over all of them. Stephanie adored old buildings and wasn't keen on gastro pubs or severely modernised ones. She loved the cosy atmosphere of wooden walls and log fires and locals drinking and gossiping. It was the atmosphere that mattered, and while she probably romanticised it, it was something her soul yearned for.

So whatever Kit's plans were, he could get ready. One man had bossed her around and broken her. Another had helped put her back together. While Stephanie admitted she might seem

fragile, she wasn't, not with her friends and Cole behind her. She would fight Kit, no matter what his aim was.

Stephanie made her way out of the woods at a leisurely pace, grateful for the dirt path. If it hadn't been there, she'd have been truly lost. Scarily, nobody would call her for a few days, as they were all busy.

As she stepped out of the trees, Stephanie's spine tingled. It was a sense of peril. Pausing in her approach to the inn, Stephanie glanced around. Something was off. The grounds didn't seem peaceful anymore. In fact, they felt downright threatening. Stephanie didn't pause and began hurrying across to the front entrance. Unfriendly eyes dug into her back, and Stephanie glanced behind her several times, finding nothing visible.

But danger lurked.

She slammed through the door and locked and bolted it. The inn was dark, with no lights on, and Stephanie aimed towards the stairs that would lead to her apartment. A howl stopped her in the middle of the main room.

What on earth was that?

The noise screamed again, closer than the first time, and Stephanie began to shake. Was this a ploy of Kits?

No. It couldn't have been; the sound was outside, not inside.

Around her, Stephanie sensed something waken and become alert. A presence she'd not felt before.

A shriek left her mouth as Kit appeared in front of her, raised a hand, and scanned his surroundings.

"Evil lurks outside," Kit said.

Stephanie stumbled to a chair to sit down. "What?"

"Darkness is approaching. I can sense its intent. Only it's not aimed at the inn, Stephanie. I think its target is you!"

"Is this a game? To make me so afraid I leave?" Stephanie whispered, even as the howl sounded again and right outside

the windows.

“No.” Kit was grim. “White Witch, defend yourself.”

Stephanie stared at him, puzzled. What on earth was Kit talking about?

The presence Stephanie had sensed grew stronger, and she jumped in fright as the shutters banged closed on the leaded windows. Kit stood in the middle, near her, as he gave directions to... nobody.

Yet, the inn now sported a distinct aura.

Stephanie winced as something threw itself against the shutters of the window nearest her. Loud scrabbling sounds came from the outside as claws tore at the wood.

A burst of power surged from the walls, flinging the monster away.

Stephanie sat with wide eyes as Kit gazed at the shutter near her.

“Sit over there,” he ordered. His face was tight as his head swivelled, as if he was tracking an animal.

Stephanie didn't argue and moved to where he pointed.

Kit spun around to face her as the attacker flung itself at the shutters closest to her once again.

“It is after you!” Kit exclaimed.

“What? Why would you say that?” Stephanie blurted, shocked.

“Because its intent is not to enter the inn but to reach you. Where you move is where it attacks next. Stay here. This is the safest place for you,” Kit said and disappeared.

“Don't leave me!” Stephanie shrieked. Fear encompassed her.

Loud growls and viscous noises came from the outside as whatever it was tried to breach the walls. The powerful entity within The White Witch flung it backwards repeatedly. The presence didn't make Stephanie feel welcome, but she was

protected. Long minutes ticked by as the monster continued its attack.

Kit finally reappeared with a terribly grim look on its face.

“Get ready,” he announced.

“Me?” Stephanie asked.

“No,” Kit clipped.

Stephanie shut up as he appeared to be speaking to her invisible defender. She was certain she didn't want that thing to enter; she could sense the menace seeping through the walls. Whatever it was, it intended to harm and possibly kill her.

Kit stood tall and broad as he held his hands out and closed his eyes. Stephanie watched spellbound as he glowed, and then a surge of bright blue light burst from his hands, expanded throughout the inn and blasted its way outwards.

A gasp left her lips.

The light moved through her own body, making her look down in worry.

Once assured she was intact, Stephanie's gaze flew to the walls just as the light drifted through them. An outraged howl screamed in anger, then everything fell deathly silent.

The sudden drop in noise was disorientating, and Stephanie shook her head as her ears popped.

“What are you?” she whispered to Kit. “What is this place?”

“Later,” Kit said curtly before disappearing.

The presence withdrew with him, leaving Stephanie alone in the dark.

Kit

“Are the defences strong?” Kit asked The White Witch.

She trilled a reply to him.

“Good. That was a human spirit, and it means harm to the woman,” Kit said.

The White Witch sent her thoughts at him, and he laughed darkly.

“Yes, we want her gone. But you and I both know we don’t send innocent and defenceless women out to be slaughtered. That creature wants to rip her from limb to limb, and don’t deny you didn’t feel it, my love,” Kit chided.

The White Witch pouted, making Kit chuckle.

“We’re responsible for her, and we’re going to have to destroy that which haunts her before we can move her on.” Kit gazed around his private room. His eyes landed on something and carefully studied it. The item was placed on a turntable, allowing him to examine it completely without touching it. Slowly spinning the platform, Kit assured himself that the prison remained intact and nothing had penetrated it or caused even a slight crack.

“We need to shore up protection around this,” Kit stated.

The White Witch agreed.

While Kit and she may have had occasional fallouts, they were always in agreement about this. The prisoner inside was the ultimate evil, and should it escape... well, there was no Kit Norton to give his life a second time.

The White Witch began to meticulously build extra layers of protection around the item.

Kit nodded his approval and moved towards the exit.

Whether or not he liked it, he needed to interrogate Stephanie and was surprised when he opened the door and came face to face with the woman in question.

Stephanie.

Okay, what the heck had just happened? Stephanie wondered as she gazed blankly into the darkness. Ghosts were a stretch, but monsters? No way.

Stephanie wasn’t keen on horror movies, despite watching them with Cole because he enjoyed the thrill. She certainly didn’t want to live in one. The silence started to get to her. The darkness started to feel terrifyingly alive. And Stephanie

decided she deserved answers, and the only person who could give them to her was Kit.

With a spark of determination, Stephanie rose to her feet and stormed upstairs to the door opposite her apartment. While she was in the act of raising her hand to knock, the door opened, and Kit materialised in front of her.

“Why do that?” she demanded.

“Do what?” Kit asked, startled.

“Open doors and things instead of gliding through them?”

To her rising temper, Kit looked amused. “Maybe because I enjoy being solid. May I be of service?”

“Yes, what the heck happened downstairs? And don’t fob me off! I deserve an explanation!”

“And what makes you think that?” Kit snapped, stepping into her space.

Stephanie instantly moved away in fear.

Kit retreated at the look on her face. “Harming a woman or child is abhorrent. That goes against everything I was taught and believe in. As long as you remain under this roof, you shall always be safe from harm. That is my word given as a gentleman,” he stated.

Stephanie wordlessly nodded. Threatened by his imposing stature and powerful physique, she was momentarily transported to the past. She battled against the memories and forced them aside. Ever resistant to being pulled back there.

“I believe I deserve an explanation,” Stephanie whispered. While afraid, she knew what she wanted.

Kit studied her face as she gazed at him and finally agreed. “Shall we go to the apartment?” he asked. “I rather think you might need a hot drink.”

“A tea *would* be nice.”

“Then let’s retire, and I’ll make you one,” Kit offered.

Stephanie was wary about having him in her home, then she laughed silently. Not even locked doors could keep Kit out when he could glide through them. Mentally ridiculing herself, Stephanie unlocked her door and led the way to the kitchen. To her surprise, Kit motioned for her to sit down as he filled the kettle and put it on. He searched her cupboards for a mug and then tea and added sugar.

“Oh, I only take one,” she said as he added a second teaspoon.

“You’ve had a shock. Two is adequate, although my sister would have four when she had her histrionics,” Kit replied, and a smile crossed his lips.

“You had a sister?” Stephanie asked at the titbit.

“My twin. We were eight and ten years when we died,” Kit answered, and Stephanie’s mouth fell open.

“You were only eighteen?” she gasped.

“I was a man long before that, Stephanie,” Kit said.

Stephanie studied him. To her, Kit looked to be in his early twenties, not a teenager.

“What is it?” Kit asked.

“You’re six years younger than me,” Stephanie mused.

“And that is an issue because...?” Kit inquired.

“No—no reason,” Stephanie stammered.

Kit sent her a smug smirk, and Stephanie could have sworn he flexed. Her eyes narrowed on him as he turned and poured water into the mug.

“Do you have milk?”

“Sorry?” Stephanie asked, realising she’d been imagining Kit with his shirt undone. She blushed as she caught his knowing gaze.

“Milk?”

“A little; I like it strong,” Stephanie replied and blushed again as Kit held her attention with his eyes.

“Most ladies prefer strong.”

A delighted look hit his eyes at her deepening blush.

Visibly gathering herself, Stephanie took the mug of tea and cupped it.

“What happened down there? What was that... thing? And that strange presence? Did you do magic?” Stephanie blurted.

Kit sat down opposite her and stared into her eyes.

“How much of the truth do you want?” he asked.

“All of it. Why are you here? Why haunt The White Witch? What exactly is going on, Kit?” Stephanie demanded.

“Few people can handle the reality,” Kit declared, causing Stephanie to frown.

“Well, I can, and I need it.”

“Then will you tell me your story, Miss Stephanie? About what happened to you?” Kit challenged.

Stephanie paled.

Could she tell this strong but caring ghost what had happened to her? How she'd become broken and scared? Kit didn't seem judgemental, but she couldn't exactly say she knew him.

“I'll give you my truth, but it's ugly,” she finally muttered.

“The truth, Stephanie, is a thing of outstanding beauty or a creature of dire ugliness. But once spoken, you're often free from the burden.”

“But not always,” Stephanie disagreed.

“The only chains truth holds on a person are the bonds people put upon themselves. Should you still be burdened, I'd ask yourself why.”

“So, tell me what that was attacking the inn.” Stephanie wasn't willing to argue further.

“That was an angry spirit. A ghost so full of hate and anger, it has its own name. It's called a Human Killer because the force of the emotions it experiences can kill a person. They are

rare and incredibly dark and evil. Human Killers can be mistaken for shadow people or poltergeists, but they are neither. The problem with Human Killers is their feelings are so strong they can affect the living and often destroy their target.

“Once that happens, there is no outlet for their anger. They turn into something else. And that creature is terrifying. But tonight, that spirit had only one intention. To reach and harm you. Killing you was most definitely on its mind. I could taste the hate as it tracked you. You once knew this spirit,” Kit said calmly, even as Stephanie felt the blood drain from her.

“They can kill?”

“Yes, Miss Stephanie. The question I have to ask is, who the hell hates you that much that they’d turn into such a monster?”

Stephanie guessed her face reflected how uncomfortable she was with that inquiry and how much she wanted to sidestep it, but she couldn’t. Kit and whatever the strange presence had been had saved her life tonight.

“Justin, his name is Justin. He is my ex-boyfriend, and he died a few days ago,” Stephanie offered.

“It was a terrible relationship?” Kit quizzed.

“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “Justin had a cousin, Cole, one of my best friends. Cole is my pseudo-big brother and is a wonderful guy. His parents are wealthy, but Cole always made a stand by making his own living and never gave himself airs and graces. Cole is somebody everyone liked. Justin, on the other hand, was jealous. His parents were once rich, too, but Justin burned through their money.

“From a young age, Justin was spoiled, whereas Cole wasn’t. Cole was an easy-going child, and Justin was difficult, selfish, and prone to temper tantrums. I met Justin for the first time a few years ago, and he snowed me. The persona Justin displayed wasn’t his real self. But he showered me with attention and appeared to dote on me. Cole kept warning me not to believe what I was seeing, that his cousin was all types of bad. Sadly, I shrugged it off as Cole not wanting to share his

best friend. That's the excuse Justin gave, and... and I believed it.

“Justin moved into my small home, and as soon as his foot was through the door, he changed. He became controlling and mean. His adoring words turned into constant criticism, and he made no bones about how he hated Cole. I attempted to throw him out and learned that Justin didn't care about using his fists to get his own way.” Stephanie broke off and gazed into the distance.

“He beat you?” Kit demanded, appalled.

“More than once. Slowly, Justin tried to stop me from seeing my friends. He knew bruises kept me away from them. But Cole saw them once and nearly started a fight with Justin. My friends and I stopped it from escalating. Justin sought any reason to get Cole into trouble.

“He thought he'd won; I was so scared of him that I didn't have the strength to kick him out. But his actions backfired. Once Cole knew I was being beaten, he made sure someone was with me constantly.

“That infuriated Justin even more because my friends wouldn't back down. The girls arrived in pairs, and Cole would just turn up. Justin was furious and began hitting me where nobody would see the marks. I couldn't tell Cole that he was making matters worse. He only wanted to help. As soon as the door closed behind my friends, Justin made his feelings very clear. Until Cole saw the bruises again and beat the daylights out of Justin.” Stephanie paused and sighed. The words were hollow on her tongue.

“And Justin had been waiting for Cole's reaction,” Kit surmised.

“Yes. He was crowing about calling the police and having Cole arrested. That's when Cole's parents stepped in and made it plain what would happen. For one, they would stop giving Justin's parents money, as they were now bankrupt. Cole's parents were paying the mortgage on their home as well, so they'd all be homeless should Cole be arrested. Cole and my friends had also taken pictures of my bruises when I wasn't

aware. They informed Justin's parents that Justin would be arrested, too.

“Justin's parents forced him to drop the charges and behave. Justin was furious and came to my house, where he found all my friends had packed his items up and left them outside. Cole stayed with me for weeks until my nightmares stopped, and Justin quit coming around. Justin wouldn't take no for an answer at first. Not until he realised he couldn't get to me anymore. That Cole and my friends had made me safe again. They escorted me to work and back. We had lunches together. I was never alone for Justin to reach.

“And the truth was, Justin only wanted me so he could hurt Cole. He never cared for me. It was just a way of making Cole suffer. The fact he got to harm me was just another bonus because he really only liked to injure people. He was so far gone in his meanness that he was unrecognisable. Luckily, he still had some feelings for his parents, or things may have been much different.”

Stephanie stared into space as memories threatened to overwhelm her. She shrugged them away. She was a survivor and refused to regress to the terrified state Justin had created for her.

“I am grieved to hear the horrific abuse you were forced to endure,” Kit said. “But it explains much around that vengeful spirit. I believe it is Justin trying to harm you once more. There was such a high level of hate it was almost tangible. He is gone for now, but I do not doubt he will return. Which leaves you in grave danger because, against a Human Killer, there is not much defence.”

“So Justin's going to kill me and win?” Stephanie asked with a mildly hysterical laugh.

“No, not at all! Behind these walls, you are protected to a degree, and Human Killers can't appear during the day. But at night, Justin will be at his strongest, and that's when you're most in danger, Stephanie,” Kit answered.

“But you don't want me here,” Stephanie said shrewdly.

“No. But it’s not a case of want; it’s a necessity,” Kit replied, and Stephanie watched as he steeled himself to tell his story.

CHAPTER THREE.

Kit

“The inn has been kept empty. It is non-negotiable. A great evil attached itself here and was killing villagers. I answered a call for help and rode to assist; in defeating the monster, I died myself,” Kit said simply.

If he had any hope that Stephanie would accept that, he was wrong. Her brows frowned, and he saw the multitude of questions on her lips.

“Why was it your responsibility?” she demanded.

Kit sighed. He’d have to explain to her, and studiously, he recognised that Stephanie’s brain was very detail-orientated.

“The Nortons began around five hundred BC. Our bloodline wasn’t what it is now, back then, but we were leaders in our community. My family home, Wollscombe, is built upon a cave system that can only be accessed by a secret door in our cellar. That heads into a set of caves with our ancestors’ names, dates of birth and death, and their kills. And Stephanie, every Norton from a young age, has a kill count, whether by choice or not.

“In five hundred BC, the world was beyond wild. Supernatural creatures were easily able to fit in and hide, and nobody could stop them. There were no hunters then. My predecessors were leaders of a tiny village which was raided and destroyed by a demon. Rupert Norton and two sons survived the attack while his wife and three daughters were torn apart. His boys were called Silas and Ajax. They hunted down the vampire that devastated their family and town.

“An Angel discovered them after their kill and offered them a bargain. They would become God’s Scourge and rid the world of evil. In return, Rupert, Silas, and Ajax would be given skills to aid their endeavours.

“They accepted. In time, Silas and Ajax married and had children of their own. In those times, women weren’t

considered warriors, but Rupert realised his granddaughters were precisely that. God's gifts did not differentiate between sex. The girls were as fast, strong, and clever as their brothers and were often underestimated because of their stature.

“Nortons continued being blessed by God as we mastered new techniques and unlocked skills. Each Norton, from about three hundred BC, grew an ability to sense when evil was near. In one hundred and fifty BC, we began to see an aura around creatures. Because not all monsters were bad. We learned to understand the aura colours and stopped innocent individuals from being destroyed.”

Kit took a pause to check Stephanie was still with him.

She nodded encouragingly at him to continue.

“In thirteen hundred and ten, a witch, Margery Cross, was born. Thirty years later, she started a war that wiped half of the Norton line out. She was one of the most powerful witches to walk the earth, and she gathered allies of the darkness, like fleas to a dog. Then Margery struck a deal with the devil. In exchange for longevity, she sold her soul.

“In thirteen-forty-seven, the Black Death swept Europe. It wasn't a disease. It was the Dark Army that Margery had built. They were feeding indiscriminately across Europe but avoided England at first.

“Between them, they butchered sixty per cent of the European population. Yes, there was a plague; it was to be expected after supernatural diseases spread amongst humans. But the disease itself only killed ten per cent. The Norton lines that remained rose and fought as hard as possible, but we weren't strong enough in Europe after being hunted.

“Margery sailed to England in the June of thirteen-forty-eight. There, she made inroads into the cities and populations until we met her army. To say we were outnumbered a thousand to one was an understatement. Lord Terence Norton, the commander, had a single goal. To reach Margery and stop her. During the battle, his blade wounded and stopped her, and Margery fled. Without Margery, the Dark Mass fell into

disarray and was slaughtered. His sword was passed from the eldest son to eldest son, a weapon against Margery.”

“Margery continued attacks throughout the decades. The Great Fire of London, and the wars with Nelson and Drake, all fights against evil. They were all battles where Margery tried to overcome the Nortons and get her own way.

“And she consistently failed.” Stephanie murmured but Kit continued with his story.

“I was born in sixteen-ninety-eight, and I passed in seventeen-sixteen. I was eighteen years old at the time of my death and have countless deaths under my belt. Our mother passed in sixteen-ninety-eight, from a vampire attack, when I was a babe alongside my twin Cecilia. Papa died when Lucian was eighteen, and he took over his title and estate. A vampire tried to take Lucian from us, but Papa stopped him and saved Lucian. Lucian raised us younger siblings and ensured our training was beyond adequate.

“Margery’s plans continued. The witch wished to open a portal to hell and free the demon population and the dark souls we’d sent there. To achieve this, Margery needed ley lines, and on those, she required buildings to contain the power. Margery discovered the Cotswolds had exactly what she wanted. The Nortons unknowingly owned inns on the ley lines in the shape of a pentagram. The Jekyll and Hyde, Lucian’s inn was in the centre.

“We received word that the local villages were under attack, and all five of my siblings and I left London to fight it. We parted ways, and... I never saw them again.

“I have no idea if any survived, but I doubt it because they would have come for me. All I can assume is that night, all six of us died but stopped the evil plaguing the villagers. And that is what I keep locked up here, something so dangerous you can’t imagine, Stephanie.”

Stephanie hung onto his every word, and she’d kept quiet during the entire story for the most part. But Kit could see her mind awl with questions even while she looked stunned.

“So my presence might release the creature you imprisoned,” was the first thing she said.

“Yes. I cannot lie. You endanger everything The White Witch and I gave up to save the people,” Kit replied. He wondered if Stephanie was understanding everything he’d told her.

It was a lot to assimilate. The history of the Nortons was rich in lore—but also truth. Their skills as hunters were legendary, and their stance against evil made them famous amongst the dregs of society. Darkness fled before God’s Scourge, as they were known, and for someone like Stephanie to believe in everything he told her... well, it would be a miracle.

“Vampires and demons exist?” Stephanie asked.

“Yes. But not all are malevolent.”

“Werewolves, ghouls, zombies too?”

“Yes, but not all werewolves turn bad. We refer to them as shifters, and they don’t just come in wolves,” Kit replied.

Stephanie’s frown deepened.

“But ghouls and zombies are always evil?”

“Yes.” Kit was trying hard to be patient. Stephanie was discovering that an entire paranormal world existed, and that was a huge idea to comprehend.

“You’re not a ghost, but something extra. And you died fighting and trapping a really big baddie,” Stephanie said.

Kit’s lips twitched at the ‘big baddie’. “Yes.”

“So... what is The White Witch?” Stephanie asked next.

“You remember I said about my home being sentient? The White Witch is the same. She can make decisions and protect herself and me.”

“That’s the power I sensed downstairs?”

“Yes. The White Witch came to your defence and protected you and herself during Justin’s attack. She is a law unto

herself, so please remember that. She deserves to be treated with respect,” Kit said.

“What is she, though?” Stephanie persisted.

“A sentient building. Some buildings are imbued with the essence of a ghost within their very bricks. Some become aware over time. Not every building that is self-aware has a spirit attached. The White Witch is a rare building that, over time, with all the magic performed around and in her, developed consciousness. And she is powerful, make no mistake. That magic infused into her very walls and created a new life. But she has good intentions only. She is not plagued by the negative emotions we humans feel,” Kit explained.

“Okay. I can respect that idea, even though I struggle to understand it. A sentient building isn’t the oddest thing I’ve encountered tonight. And I’m guessing she helps protect the world from this evil, too?”

“Yes, she does. As I laid dying, The White Witch reached out and grabbed my essence to help defend the inn from intruders. She had already grasped that with my death, the inn would be open to those with less than good intentions, and so she sought a remedy. That was to grab my spirit and attach it to her walls. While she stands, I exist; as long as we both live, the evil cannot escape.”

“Does that haunt the inn?” Stephanie asked, craning her neck and looking around.

Kit felt amusement at her actions.

“No. It is trapped in a prison, but should that be broken, it will be hell re-capturing it. For now, I would ask that you stay away from my personal room and respect my commands. They are not issued for the sake of it but to protect everyone in these walls,” Kit explained.

To Stephanie’s credit, Kit noted she didn’t look too intrigued by the evil he captured. She’d not even asked what it was. Kit sensed Stephanie planned to avoid it. Stephanie simply had no interest other than her inn and how to run it. Which was a shame because Kit couldn’t allow her to remain.

“So, for now, I’m allowed to stay, but as soon as Justin’s threat is dealt with, I have to leave. Is that correct?” Stephanie asked.

“Yes.”

“What if I choose not to?” Stephanie challenged.

“Then you and I become enemies, and I will force you to go,” Kit said, even as Stephanie blanched at his words.

“You would hurt me?”

“No!” Kit exclaimed indignantly. “I would terrorise you. But physically harming a woman makes me physically sick. It will never happen.”

“But frightening me to death is okay?” Stephanie challenged.

Kit squirmed a little.

“Can you not take the olive branch being offered, Stephanie? The White Witch and I will protect you until we have dealt with Justin. In return, we ask you to leave when he is gone. I believe that is a fair offer.”

“But this is my home. If I walk away from here, I have nothing. Even worse, Maggie gave me the money for this. Do I disrespect her by deserting her gift? What you require is not so simple,” Stephanie replied.

That was going to be a problem. Kit recognised the stubborn set of Stephanie’s jaw. She meant what she said. Her friend had helped her buy the inn, and Stephanie had no intention of wasting her friends’ money or generosity. But he couldn’t and wouldn’t allow her to stay. Was Stephanie drawing battle lines?

“You understand that every moment spent here puts you and the world in danger? While I mean what I say by protecting you from Justin, once he is dealt with, you have to leave,” Kit ventured.

“And I won’t waste Maggie’s money by walking away. If I sold this and regained her money to buy another inn, that might be possible, but this was on the market for years before I bought it. So we’ve a problem,” Stephanie replied.

“While Justin is out there, you will remain safe. But once he’s gone, the gloves will come off,” Kit warned, his eyes narrowing.

“So be it,” Stephanie muttered and held his gaze.

Kit marvelled at how brave she was with him. Fearless, she confronted him head-on. Maybe Stephanie had guessed he wasn’t a genuine threat to her. After all, she’d seen a man’s darkness once, and Kit was most certainly not evil.

No, Kit realised, she was rather comfortable challenging him, even though they barely knew each other. Stephanie subconsciously recognised Kit’s aversion to harming women or innocents...

Well, blast it. That did not work in his favour when it came to moving her on, and somehow, he knew she’d guessed that!

Stephanie

She observed Kit carefully. He didn’t realise his thoughts could be read clearly on his face. And he was obviously torn between wanting her to leave and keeping her safe. Kit also couldn’t decide on how high a terror level to submit her to. That gave Stephanie a leg up because she sensed that deep down, Kit was lonely, but his sense of duty was overwhelming.

The next day, Stephanie lay in bed, considering what Kit had told her the night before. Kit’s story had been so sad. From his ancestors battling evil and gaining gifts from God to his parent’s death and his brother taking the earldom at too early an age. It certainly gave her a lot to think about. Stephanie watched as Kit sent her a dour look and then disappeared and hid a snicker.

She’d never been one to read paranormal stories, and horror movies and books frightened her. But she’d always believed there was more to the world. This was being proven true, and now Stephanie faced a ghost and a sentient building.

Stephanie was still having trouble wrapping her head around The White Witch. She understood the basic premise that emotions and events can soak into a building, and it might

keep memories in the aspect of residual hauntings. But for a building to be alive and think for itself... that was way beyond her limited understanding.

Still, it was an intriguing prospect. Stephanie enjoyed watching ghost programmes, but what she was experiencing was far more than anything she'd seen on TV. Those programmes never mentioned ghosts that might become solid and fade away. Nor did they mention buildings which thought and acted for themselves. And they certainly didn't mention human spirits that had a penchant for revenge and killing humans. This was a level surpassing insane, and Stephanie wondered if she needed to see a doctor.

Her phone rang, and she picked it up to see Cole's name.

"Hello angel, how's things?" Cole asked cheerfully. However, his tone was insincere. Stephanie sensed the grief in his voice.

"I think Justin's death has sent me crazy. No, forget I said that. How's things at your end?" Stephanie replied, not willing to dump her woes on Cole.

"What do you mean, nuts?" Cole demanded.

"Oh, I'm going bonkers being here alone." She paused. "Memories are creeping in, you know. But I'm keeping busy," Stephanie answered.

"Do you need me?" Cole offered immediately. In the background, Stephanie heard a female huff, and her eyebrows went up. Cole would have used speakerphone if a friend had been present.

"No, honest, I'm okay. I think it was the shock of hearing Justin had died."

"If you're sure..." He didn't sound convinced.

For a few moments, words nearly fell from her lips, explaining what she'd experienced, but Stephanie bit down on them. Cole would think she was crazy! Justin turning into a Human Killer would mean zilch to Cole.

“I will do. Time to move forward and stop looking back,” Stephanie said, forcing positivity into her voice.

Cole’s silence made her believe he hadn’t bought her confidence, and then he laughed. “Exactly honey, move forward and don’t look back. The past is only ever about teaching us painful reminders of mistakes we committed. The future is the hope. As soon as I’ve got some time, I’ll pop over and visit. For now, keep believing in yourself because you’re an amazing person.”

“I love you,” Stephanie whispered, and an icy chill hit her back.

“Love you too,” Cole said.

Stephanie hung up and turned to see a fading image of Kit glaring at her. Before she could speak, he disappeared completely, but there was an air of disapproval that lingered.

Kit

Stephanie loved this ‘Cole’? Kit wondered why it bothered him. The girl meant nothing to him except another responsibility he damn well didn’t want or need. Stephanie was an unwelcome distraction in the calmness of his life. But these things were sent to test him, he thought ruefully. Although Stephanie *was* turning out to be quite the problem. Even with her quiet mannerisms.

Kit found he rather liked Stephanie and her personality. It wasn’t loud or abrasive, rude or callous. Instead, Stephanie was calm, softly spoken, polite, and considerate. In the past, she would have been regarded as a wallflower. Despite that, Stephanie would have been a prized catch in the marriage market.

Kit stopped drumming his fingers on his armchair as he realised his thoughts. His spine straightened, and he shook his head in disbelief. Stephanie? Wife material?

Blast this chit.

She was an unwelcome intrusion in his thoughts. Kit had never obsessed over a woman so much. But then again, Kit had never had to defend someone he was chasing from his inn.

Stephanie had brought a danger to the inn that he'd never encountered before.

Kit knew of Human Killers because his brothers had fought one, and to say it hadn't been an easy win was an understatement. Lucian had spoken of how the vile emotions had weakened them without them even realising it. The strategy was to manifest it and swiftly remove its head. Or so he thought. Kit wasn't as certain now. He had paid little attention to Lucian at the time. But as it could kill in either form, the Human Killer never needed to solidify.

Yes, Stephanie had brought a real humdinger to his inn, and Kit couldn't say he was amused.

His plan was to hit the few books he had with him. Kit rued the day that he so causally denied the need for magic books at The White Witch. The library at his family home provided outstanding coverage of anything paranormal. Sadly, the pitiful few volumes Kit had there were not what he needed in the way of knowledge. Even so, he'd still scour them and hope that there'd be something that might help him.

Kit really needed to remember if beheading the Human Killer was correct. It was likely they'd only get one shot at ending it.

Kit moved to the bookshelves that held the precious few tomes he had when his eyes caught on an old dull red leather one. The faded and cracked gold writing was one he'd never seen before, and Kit frowned as he pulled it from the shelves. Kit couldn't control his reaction as he read the cover title, 'The Fables and Fictions of the Human Killer Master Ghouls'.

Kit grasped it tightly; this was most definitely not one of his works.

Slowly, Kit brought the book to his nose and sniffed deeply. There it was, the hint of sandalwood and smoke, of crisp parchment and ink. The scent that Kit would know anywhere. This book had come from Wollscombe Hall's home library.

How on earth? He was shocked beyond belief as he turned the book in his hands. Kit could almost feel the fire roaring in the library and the smell of old and new books hanging in the air. The glistening lights as the sun shone through the stained-glass windows and made beautiful patterns on the shining wooden floor.

It was a place Kit knew as well as his beloved White Witch. He'd spent hours each day of his childhood in there with his father, learning an entirely different education from what the private tutor taught. There, Kit learned the real meaning of honour, respect, and duty. He was taught to recite the family tree, generation by generation, and the great deeds they'd performed or not.

Kit couldn't deny this book came from his Wollscombe library. But how?

"Lady mine," he murmured and sensed The White Witch hide.

Oh no, she wasn't going to play games.

"Don't even try it!" Kit warned as he sensed The White Witch withdrawing.

She sent him a curious chirp instead, and Kit nearly smiled. His inn was pleading innocence.

"Where did this book come from?" Kit demanded.

A wave of puzzlement and concern hit him as The White Witch looked over his shoulder in curiosity. But he knew better. He and his inn had been joined for three hundred years. Kit wouldn't allow her to use her usual tricks and get away with it.

"This came from Wollscombe, and how convenient that it arrived now. Right when I need a book on Human Killers and their tendency to turn to Master Ghouls. And lady mine, do not think I don't recognise the smell of home on this book; I most obviously do. Have you been in contact with Wollscombe Hall all this time?" Kit demanded, allowing a little of the hurt he experienced to escape.

The White Witch instantly sent reassurances to Kit, which failed to mollify him. He had no intention of letting his inn wriggle out of this one. Oh, she was trying, no doubt, but Kit was just as determined.

“Are you in contact with the family home?” Kit asked sternly.

A rude noise came from the inn, and Kit arched an eyebrow. Blast it to high heaven. His inn was!

“Honestly? You’ve been able to reach Wollscombe and haven’t made me aware?” Kit blasted as he sank into his armchair. The level of betrayal he felt was immense, and he knew The White Witch sensed it.

She shied away from his feelings, all the while sending denials at him, but the book in his hand said differently.

“Enough. You have betrayed my trust! Three hundred years we’ve walked together, and you hid something of this magnitude from me—”

The White Witch blasted him with images. She’d felt a disturbance within her wards, and when she’d investigated, had sensed Kit—but not Kit. Even as The White Witch had moved to strengthen them, the familiar, not familiar presence had blown its way into Kit’s quarters and placed the book. The White Witch had attacked in return but received what was basically a disapproving slap. Then, the entity had withdrawn, leaving the book. The White Witch had been ready to oust the tome and burn it when she saw the title. It had confused her enough that she’d left it alone while she pondered what to do.

This had happened yesterday.

“How did Wollscombe know I needed this? How did she find me?” Kit mused.

He acknowledged there were things he wasn’t aware of. Even the Norton’s have their limit of knowledge. And their sentient home, Wollscombe Hall, well, that was one of the greatest mysteries of the world. Hell, Kit would readily admit he didn’t fully grasp how The White Witch was alive, and

Wollscombe was a far bigger building. He just accepted they were, and that was final.

The White Witch poked at him, seeking reassurance and love that she'd done nothing wrong, and Kit roused himself to give her what she needed. For all her intelligence and power, there was a childlike innocence to his home. She sometimes required boosting in her confidence. And then there were times she was ready to defend her ground. The White Witch was a conundrum, but one he loved.

“Forgive me for jumping to conclusions,” Kit asked, and she blasted him with warmth and merriment.

She wanted to understand if Kit truly thought the family home had contacted her, and if so, should she be afraid? Kit sent a denial. The White Witch should never fear Wollscombe, and as for confirming it was her, Kit could only assume.

The White Witch was excited, but Kit was curious.

How could the great and imposing Wollscombe know he needed such a book, and how had she reached out to connect? It was a puzzle that would keep Kit occupied for ages.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Stephanie

She was picking flowers from the wilderness that made up her garden but produced beautiful blooms when her phone rang. Carefully juggling the basket, she let herself back into the inn and saw Maggie was calling.

“Hi honey, how’s things?” Stephanie’s voice had a delighted smile to it. She loved Maggie to bits and was always happy to hear from her.

“Which is your ghost? Isaac or Kit,” Maggie asked without preamble.

Stephanie went quiet. How on earth could Maggie know The White Witch was haunted?

“Maggie, are you okay? I thought you just mentioned a ghost!” Stephanie giggled to put her off.

Maggie turned silent, and she squirmed.

“Maggie, I don’t have a spirit, honey.”

“Nuh huh, which is he?” Maggie persisted.

“Maggie,” Stephanie said and sighed. Time to try diversionary tactics, Stephanie decided. “Ghosts don’t exist.”

“Stephanie, I want his name, and I need it now!” Maggie demanded.

Stephanie made the little noise she did when she was uncomfortable with being confronted.

Kit appeared frowning as he listened to the phone call, and she made no effort to hide it from him.

“Don’t tell her. Who is she? Why is she being so nosey?” Kit whispered.

“I can hear him, Stephanie. Which one is he?” Maggie said firmly. “Count of five, Stephanie!”

Stephanie's gaze widened in panic as Kit shook his head. Maggie knew exactly how to play her, and she caved even as Kit narrowed his eyes.

"Kit! He's Kit!" Stephanie cried, and a man groaned.

"You told her!" Kit accused.

"I had to. Maggie's my best friend!" Stephanie muttered, guilt in her voice.

"Sheesh, woman!" Kit sounded exasperated.

"It's okay. Listen, family meeting tonight. I'll text you the hotel," Maggie interrupted the argument.

"Are you mad at me?" Stephanie asked, not knowing which person she was really asking.

Kit glowered.

"Nope, I'll explain when we meet." Maggie's tone was all reassurance. "Love you!"

"Love you too!"



"Are you telling me we all bought a damn haunted inn, and they happen to be inhabited by siblings?" Cole demanded in absolute disbelief.

Stephanie sat beside him, not saying anything but trying to appear as concerned as everyone else.

Yet something struck her as false to Cole's claims, almost as if this wasn't a surprise. Out of everybody present, Stephanie knew Cole the best.

"That seems fated," Stephanie murmured.

Cole turned an incredulous stare on her. "Everyone here has been fighting their ghost, but not you. What's going on between you two?" he demanded.

Stephanie blushed but held Cole's gaze. There was nothing happening, albeit she and Kit weren't arguing like the other five were.

“That’s none of your business!” Stephanie retorted, and Cole’s eyes grew wide.

“Woah! Did Stephanie just snap at Cole?” Tilly whispered.

“She’s pretty damn protective of her ghost. I want to kill mine!” Mariah growled. Her gaze narrowed on Stephanie.

Stephanie blushed even deeper and squirmed in her chair. She didn’t wish to be a part of this conversation and avoided Cole’s gaze.

“Good for you. Lucian’s decided he’s going to marry me!” Maggie said and began laughing. “Can you believe the situation we’re all in?”

“Hold on, go back to marrying you,” Callie demanded, swapping shocked gazes with everyone. “Ghosts can’t wed the living!”

“Oh, let me tell you about the Rakehell Six. Ladies and gent, keep your naughty bits locked up because a ghost can impregnate a living woman!” Maggie chortled.

Five wide stares gaped at her.

Stephanie was completely bemused as everybody sat around wondering what their next step was. All six of them told the story. Their spirit was protecting the inn and surrounding villages from a great evil. But only Maggie spoke about what her evilness was. Stephanie had no idea about the danger Kit was defending the world from.

“Do we tell them we know where their siblings are?” Cole finally asked. “It might make Cecilia sweeter if she knew.”

“No, somehow, I feel that’s a bad thing. Suppose they realise their family is trapped, especially Cecilia. In that case, they will be distracted and focus their attention on escaping their prisons,” Maggie said.

“I don’t like that word.” Callie frowned.

Stephanie fully agreed with her.

“But they are imprisoned. What if the evil escapes because they’re worried about their siblings? And then it destroys

innocent lives. What happens if the evil kills one of them properly, and they disappear? No, there's a greater plan at play. Listening to the Rakehell Six, whoever gets free first will find one of their family. We must allow events to take place naturally," Maggie commented.

Stephanie didn't enjoy thinking of that. It was a horrible conundrum; tell Kit she knew where his siblings were and save his worry and not knowing. Or speak, and he's too distracted and his evil escapes. What a damned choice faced her.

"I agree. As much as I wish to throttle Benedict, I don't want whatever he is guarding to escape. I feel that would be terrible indeed," Mariah agreed.

"We should take an oath, together the six of us, we will not tell them until they return to life and vanquish their evil," Maggie suggested.

"Big words," Tilly teased.

"A blood oath," Cole responded. He ensured no one was watching before cutting shallowly into his palm and handing the knife to Maggie.

She winced but cut into it and grasped Cole's hand.

One by one, they all repeated the actions until they all had clasped hands and exchanged blood.

Despite Stephanie's reluctance, she agreed in the end.

"We swear to hold the locations of the siblings a secret until they are brought back to life, and we'll allow fate to lead the way," Maggie said.

They placed their cut hands on top of one another and swore the oath.



It was late when Stephanie returned to The White Witch. She had a two-space parking area at the rear, and she parked there. For a while, she stared at the inn from her car as she watched Kit pace back and forth in front of his window. He was clearly agitated about something and obviously consulting

The White Witch because his mouth was moving at a mile a minute. Guilt hit her as she recalled the oath she'd given less than an hour ago, and Stephanie realised she was already tempted to break it.

Although Kit hadn't mentioned his siblings much, she knew he missed them and that he was still worried about them. Stephanie was beyond shocked that she and all five of her friends had bought inns haunted by one family. What was the significance of that coincidence in the grand scheme of things?

She also found amusement in the battles unfolding at the other pubs as the ghosts tried to oust the intruders.

Kit was treating her differently, and she wondered why. He was insistent on protecting her, despite needing her to leave. Stephanie experienced a twinge, as the need to save her must be warring with the urge to protect the evil he'd trapped.

Kit gestured wildly, and Stephanie contemplated what he was ranting about. Suddenly, Kit stopped pacing and spun to face her.

Several things happened at once.

Kit's mouth formed the word, 'run' while night fell without warning.

From the treeline behind her vehicle, darkness rushed towards her, and she sensed an overwhelming presence of evil. Stephanie fumbled with the door, and with a panicked shove, managed to get it open. She tumbled out of the car onto her knees, grazing them in the gravel, and the breath left her body in a soft huff.

"Stephanie, run! I cannot leave!" Kit bellowed from the nearest entrance.

Stephanie struggled to regain her feet even as the grating screech of claws scratching metal assaulted her ears. That sound, more than anything, propelled Stephanie into action, and she scrambled up and ran in Kit's direction.

"Faster!" Kit yelled as he gazed at something over her shoulder.

Just as she approached the entrance, there was a stinging blow to her back, and Stephanie cried out as she was flung into Kit's arms.

Instantly, he yanked her inside, arms wrapping her in the hardened shield of his body, and slammed the door shut.

Kit

“Now!” he roared to The White Witch, and she reacted by putting up a defensive barrier. The Human Killer launched itself against the door, sensing Stephanie on the other side, mere feet away. A pained howl escaped him as the barrier shot back an aggressive attack in retaliation when he touched it. But it didn't stop him as he threw himself against the magical wall around the inn repeatedly.

Kit paid little attention as he held Stephanie in his embrace. She'd passed out as soon as she fell into his arms, and Kit's hands were sticky. Carefully holding her close, he glanced at one hand and was shocked to see bright red blood covering it.

“Blast!” Kit exclaimed, realising Stephanie was injured. “Can you hold while I check her over?” he asked The White Witch.

She trilled her reply, and Kit got the sense she was enjoying herself.

He rolled his eyes and picked Stephanie up, and, cradling her in his arms, he carried her to the nearest table. Kit summoned blankets and covered the surface before laying Stephanie face down on them. Several curse words left his lips as he stared at the long-jagged gashes on her back that were bleeding freely. Her top had been shredded and was sticking to the nasty injuries, causing Kit to grimace. This is going to hurt badly.

He summoned hot water, cotton wool, antiseptic, and scissors. While The White Witch battled the Human Killer, Kit gently cut Stephanie's t-shirt straight up the middle. The fabric was clinging to the wounds.

Kit winced as he pried them loose, and Stephanie murmured in pain. The injuries were healing faster than he preferred and Kit knew they were infected by the Human Killer claws, which carried a wicked poison.

In all haste, now he realised how serious this was.

Kit ripped the torn clothing from her back, rather relieved to see her bra had also been sliced through. Gently lifting Stephanie's unconscious body, he tore the contaminated clothes away and flung them into the nearest fireplace. A snap of his fingers started a blaze, and even Kit was startled when the fire turned a sickly green. Confirmation of the infection Stephanie was currently fighting. Kit had no idea it would have moved so fast.

He soaked cotton wool in the water and gently dabbed Stephanie's back. The first piece came away a nasty yellow, which grew deeper into the same colour as the flames as he continued cleaning the initial cut. Kit was cursing because he guessed the darker tinge meant more infection.

Once he'd cleansed the first long gash, he began the second.

He noticed green fluid coming from the previously washed scratch as he finished the second and started over with that before moving on to the second again and then the third. Before attending to the new tears, the previous ones had to be cleaned again.

"Hell," he mumbled. The poison was so fast-acting.

Finally, Kit was pulling the initial yellow puss from the wounds, and he ended up pouring two bottles of pure whiskey over the injuries.

Stephanie released a scream, even though she'd been unresponsive the entire time.

Guilt flashed through Kit, but he knew it had to be done.

He generously smeared her back with antiseptic cream and placed thin strips of fabric over it to let the skin breathe but also aid healing. Kit experienced a triumphant blast and knew The White Witch had won her battle as she joyously sent

images of hugs and dancing at him. He congratulated her, and she flinched at the tiredness he was displaying.

Kit sensed her rummage in his mind quickly before withdrawing, and then soothing cool air swept over Stephanie's back, which was burning up. Stephanie's hair ruffled as if someone ran a hand over it, and then she disappeared before his eyes.

Kit leapt to his feet as he opened his senses and relaxed when he discovered The White Witch had placed Stephanie in her bed. A small bottle appeared next to Stephanie as he teleported to her room, and he picked it up.

Antibiotics. Well, they wouldn't hurt.

Sitting Stephanie up, Kit put one in her mouth, trickled some water in and then rubbed her throat until she swallowed automatically. Once she'd done that, Kit laid her back on the bed.

Stephanie was running a temperature, and it worried him. He'd cleaned the worst of the poison out, but he'd treated nothing like this. There was a poultice that CeeCee made that would draw out infection, but he didn't have any here. Kit couldn't leave the inn to collect the ingredients because that would break the spell holding his prisoner captive.

Even as he pondered, Kit and The White Witch felt the intrusion simultaneously and quickly reacted to protect their home. A sharp slap around the back of his head sent Kit reeling as the presence withdrew with a loving kiss on his forehead.

"That was Wollscombe!" Kit exclaimed. "How are you in contact with her?"

The White Witch offered a tired denial, and Kit sensed the truth in her words. Somehow, Wollscombe Hall was well aware of what was happening and able to come and go as she liked.

Kit wondered why once again. His previous pondering had come up short. But he wasn't surprised when, moments later, a jar appeared on the table next to Stephanie's bed.

It was CeeCee's poultice!

Kit sent gratitude and love towards his family home, unsure if Wollscombe would sense him, and opened it to spread the stinky mixture across Stephanie's wounds. He placed the thin strips on her back again and settled in, prepared for a long night.



Kit yawned as he blinked in the bright sunlight streaming through Stephanie's bedroom window. He was rather shocked to realise he'd drifted off to sleep. It was something he'd not needed to do often, only when he was drained to the point of no return.

"How long was I down?" Kit murmured as he glanced across at Stephanie.

The sheets were tangled around her, and she'd displaced some of the strips and angry red skin showed. A foul smell filled the room, and Kit immediately recognised the scent of infection. He'd stayed up most of the night caring for her, changing the bandages, and cleaning the wounds repeatedly. Even so, the poison still bled from her body. At one point, he'd got the book Wollscombe had sent him and was using some blank pages at the back to keep a diary of Stephanie's injuries. It might help future generations.

CeeCee's poultice was doing its job, pulling the poison from her slight frame, but the toxicity was fast and deadly, and Kit felt they were merely hanging on. Stephanie hadn't regained consciousness all night, but her whimpers and cries of pain had stung Kit deeply. It angered him that her ex was such a bitter bastard. It was clear that the fiend lacked honour or morals. And Kit was developing a genuine hatred for him.

The White Witch offered him an image of three, and he guessed she meant he'd slept for three hours. Moments later, she generously sent him a burst of energy, which helped him feel rejuvenated. Kit dropped all the used dressings into the fire as he prepared once again to cleanse the poison from Stephanie. And Kit refused to acknowledge the brief surge of

emotion as he gently cleaned the wounds and reapplied the poultice.

No, there couldn't possibly be anything between them, he reassured himself. He was still tired, that was all!

Stephanie

Stephanie winced and her back cried out in agony as she shifted. She never slept on her stomach, so why was she now? Her mouth felt like something had crawled inside and died, and she sat up to look for water. Spotting a glass, she grabbed it and drained it greedily. It was then she became aware her top half was naked while she wore PJ bottoms. Anxiously grabbing the sheets, a cry left her lips as her body protested, sending sharp pain down her spine. Stephanie's skin felt tight, and she was confused and wondered what the hell was going on.

Kit flashed into the room as she covered her breasts, and a look of relief crossed his face.

"Thank God you're finally awake. I thought the fever broke this morning, but I couldn't be sure," he announced, approaching the bed.

"Stay away!" Stephanie said sharply, and Kit stopped moving. "Why am I naked, and what happened to me? Why does my back hurt so much?"

"Do you remember arriving home?" Kit asked.

Stephanie's heart skipped at the word home.

"Yes. You were pacing in the window, and then something assaulted me... I was running... then a sharp pain..." Stephanie broke off, confused as she frowned and tried to make sense of the images.

"Justin, the Human Killer attacked. He'd been waiting for you to return and was hiding in the trees. He targeted your vehicle, and you got out and ran, but his claws wounded you as you crossed the inn's threshold."

Stephanie's eyes widened at Kit's explanation. She remembered snatches of what he spoke. Falling to her knees,

running panicked, then an agonising pain.

“I should have stayed in the car,” she muttered.

“No, sorry, dove. That’s gone. The Human Killer took its anger out on it,” Kit said.

Stephanie frowned and rose a little in the bed, and a gasp left her mouth at the state of her car. It had large holes in the bodywork, deep scratches that had peeled back metal and there was no glass in any window.

“Oh my God!” Stephanie gasped. “If he did that to my car...”

“Yes, imagine what he would do to you. As it was, the wounds on your back were dire, and I worried we might lose you,” Kit said honestly.

Stephanie’s wide eyes held shock and disbelief as she gazed at Kit. “How long have I been out?” she whispered.

“Five days. It was a hard-fought battle, but we won. The fever brought on by the poison in Justin’s claws broke this morning, as I said.”

“You’ve been caring for me?” Stephanie asked, peering down at her breasts and blushing deeply as she met Kit’s eyes.

“There was no one else, Stephanie,” Kit demurred.

“You saw me naked?” Her voice rose, and Kit winced.

“No. The White Witch bathed and clothed you, but we had to keep your back bare for the poultice to work. The fresh air also helped heal the wounds, which is why we only used light strips of cloth to cover them. But I’m afraid they will leave scars,” Kit said sadly. “I don’t have access to CeeCee’s apothecary. Otherwise, I am certain the scarring would have been less.”

“I don’t care about scars, Kit. Scars mean I survived. It means Justin didn’t win and get his wish. Is he still out there?”

Stephanie sent the window a wary look.

“Oh, he’s been back every night attempting to break in. You’d think he’d get the hint that he can’t, but the man is

stubborn. If I didn't know better, I'd applaud his determination. Instead, I despise the poor creature, for he is doomed to constantly fail," Kit replied.

"Justin won't stop coming, will he?" Stephanie said.

Justin's actions and level of hatred were finally sinking in. She failed to comprehend how Justin could hate so much. It was beyond her understanding. Was this because she'd left him or because he'd been discovered to be a vile woman-beater? They'd been separated a while now, so this obsession with her made no sense apart from one thing. If Justin succeeded in killing her, he'd give Cole a blow he'd never recover from. And deep down, Stephanie realised it was about that.

Justin's hate of his cousin was so ingrained, and Stephanie was the tool to deal Cole a wound that would forever bleed. This wasn't about her. Well, not much anyway. Justin no doubt wanted to punish her for escaping him and revealing his true self. Then again, this was also about him and Cole. Justin wouldn't rest until he'd dealt Cole a death blow. And that also explained why it was centred around her.

If Justin pursued and killed Cole, it would be finished. Cole's suffering would end when he died. But to take one of Cole's adopted sisters away from him would leave a hole in Cole's heart, and he'd never forget. Worse, if it was Stephanie who passed, Cole would forever blame himself. Because Stephanie met Justin through Cole.

Oh, Justin's plan was wicked indeed, and he clearly had planned it out. Stephanie suddenly wondered about Justin's cause of death. Had it been an accident or suicide? She'd never inquired, but she hadn't thought how he died was important. He was just dead.

"How do we beat him? I can't stay locked up here forever," she asked.

"Stephanie, I discovered a book. I was beginning to read it on the night of the attack. However, I didn't get far with it, but it is a comprehensive work put together by my ancestors. It details their dealings with Human Killers and how they turn

into Master Ghouls. The fact there aren't many Human Killers running around meant they'd found a way to destroy them. I'm certain we have to behead them," Kit said. He was still standing in the place Stephanie had frozen him in.

"Sorry, take a seat," Stephanie offered, realising her rudeness.

"Thank you!" Kit replied, sinking into the armchair.

"So you think you have a method of beating Justin? You've just not discovered it yet?"

"Yes. Now you're alert, and the fever is gone, your care will be much easier. I shall have time to study."

"I'm sorry to have been a nuisance," Stephanie teased and watched as Kit straightened in his seat.

"You were not a burden. It is my responsibility as a Norton to safeguard the innocent, and you are pure, Stephanie. I can see your soul. It's gentle and full of goodness." Kit softly added, "You are the reason God's Scourge exists, to protect people like you."

Stephanie wriggled on the bed, uncomfortable at Kit's words, even as well-meant as they were. "Thank you," she mumbled.

"You're welcome. Now, if I turn my back, would you please lie down on your front so I can check the wounds? They will sting when I clean them, as they haven't begun healing yet. The absence of fever makes me believe they will. The poultice effectively removed most of the poison," Kit said. "And the last two times I changed it, there was hardly anything left."

"Turn around!" Stephanie demanded, and Kit chuckled.

She watched as he did so and then lay down as Kit had ordered.

"You can look now."

"Thank you," Kit replied dryly.

Stephanie lay tense as Kit examined her back and then began to clean it. Despite him informing her it would hurt, the

level of pain took her by surprise, and there were tears in her eyes when he'd finished.

“After this batch of poultices, you can finally start healing. There are faint traces of poison left in your system. The poultice will draw them out, and you'll heal,” Kit explained as he moved away.

Stephanie noted how he dropped everything into the fire to burn it.

“Where did that come from? Not being rude, but it's smelly!”

“From my sister, it is a compound of her making. And somehow, we had some here, which was lucky,” Kit said, avoiding her eyes.

Stephanie's own narrowed. For the first time since meeting him, Stephanie knew he'd just lied to her. And now she wanted to know why!

CHAPTER FIVE.

Stephanie

It had been three further full days of constant attacks by Justin. Each night, as soon as the sun set and darkness fell, he was there, attacking the inn. Luckily for Stephanie, The White Witch seemed to be enjoying herself. Stephanie dreaded to think what would happen when The White Witch got bored and turned on her to blame. But for now, the inn was having fun. And that meant she was safe.

Kit had locked himself away, appearing to tend to her injuries and check their progress before locking himself back inside his room with the book he'd mentioned. Each morning, he came and helped her into the bathroom. The wounds had begun to heal, but her movement was limited. And nearly a week in bed had weakened her body. Stephanie was rather grateful Kit was there because she understood she wouldn't have coped alone.

After Kit ran her bath, heavy on the bubble bath, he left her with The White Witch watching over her while he made them both breakfast. If Stephanie tried to do something for herself, The White Witch had no compunction about tittle tattling on her. It was rather annoying, but Stephanie kept her mouth shut. Especially after the one time she chastised The White Witch and ended up covered in bubbles from head to toe.

Kit had looked amused when he'd investigated her indignant yells.

Even so, her wounds were healing slowly, slower than Kit and she might have liked, but Kit explained that was due to the nature of the poison. So, Stephanie was relegated to be helped and waited upon. Once she was dressed in jogging bottoms, a tank (no bra), and a cardigan for her modesty, Kit would carefully carry her to the kitchen, where they ate before Kit placed her either back in bed or on the sofa with books and her laptop.

Now, after three days, Stephanie was feeling a little antsy.

Cole made her lunch and dinner each day denying her the activity. He sat and spoke to her in the evening about various topics but made no mention of the Human Killer. Although, at night, as she lay quietly, trying to drown out the sounds of Justin's attacks, Stephanie sensed Kit in her room. They never mentioned it, but he provided a reassuring presence that lulled her to sleep.

Despite Kit's attentiveness to her, they'd barely seen anything of each other, and Stephanie was a little lonely. Which surprised her because she usually enjoyed her own company. She wasn't someone who needed to be entertained all the time. Kit was most certainly studying the book that he was cagey about, and Stephanie had her suspicion something had happened that he wasn't talking about.

Her guilt was also weighing on her over the fact she knew where his siblings were. She could ease some of his pain if she told him, but the oath she'd taken stopped her. She was determined to find a solution. They'd promised not to tell, but Stephanie wondered... if she wrote it down, would that be telling? In her mind, it was not as if she wasn't using her voice to inform him. It was a sticky situation.

It bothered her all day. Especially as they'd sworn a blood oath. They'd never broken one of them, to her knowledge. Stephanie silently railed at the position she found herself in. How would Kit react when he discovered her silence and deception? Because keeping his siblings' whereabouts was a betrayal. Particularly when he'd been so caring and diligent in taking care of her.

"Kit!" she cried before she could change her mind, then bit her lip.

Kit appeared in the afternoon sun and blinked at her as she gazed worriedly at him.

"What is wrong?" he asked as he approached. "Are you ill again?"

Stephanie wriggled as he tried to peer at her back and check her wounds.

“I know where your siblings are!” she blurted.

Kit stilled. His hand rested on her shoulder where he’d been trying to turn her around, and his eyes bored into hers. “I beg your pardon?” he inquired quietly.

“That day when I met my friends and returned late, the night of the attack,” Stephanie began, and Kit nodded.

“That is hardly a forgettable evening, Stephanie,” Kit chided. He released her shoulder and sat down in the chair opposite her.

Stephanie looked at him and winced. He was casual again today, dark breeches tucked into his riding boots. A cream-coloured shirt hung open at the front with a tantalising touch of chest on display, and his hair was messy.

“Yes, well. I’d met the other five at a hotel, and Maggie confronted us all about our inns being haunted. Cole has The Green Man and Cecilia, Maggie has Jekyll and Hyde and Lucian, Mariah owns The Black Cat and has Benedict.” Stephanie paused as she frowned, trying to remember the others.

“Someone has The Rose and my brother Issac, and one has The Crown and Elias,” Kit said, looking stunned.

“Callie has The Crown, and Tilly, The Rose. We all swore a blood oath not to tell you because we thought it would distract all of you from your tasks. But I can’t keep a secret, not after how you’ve cared for me. It would be wrong when I could alleviate your worry,” Stephanie almost begged.

“You’ve been battling this since you woke?” Kit inquired.

Stephanie nodded miserably and waited for him to shout at her.

“A blood oath? Who in your circle is magical?” Kit asked.

Stephanie looked up, surprised.

“None of us.”

“Someone is for a blood oath to hold true,” Kit pushed.

“It was something we started as children. I can’t remember who began it,” Stephanie replied as she drew on her memories.

“What were the consequences of breaking the oath?” Kit demanded, looking worried.

“Oh, we never included one. Just swore we wouldn’t tell you,” Stephanie blurted.

“Without a spoken consequence, a blood oath won’t hurt anyone when broken,” Kit explained with relief.

“I didn’t know there would be harm attached to breaking one,” Stephanie whispered, paling.

“Oh yes, often severe and nasty repercussions, which means I thank you from the depth of my soul for disclosing this. Even if you were ignorant of the potential punishments,” Kit soothed.

“Do you forgive me for hiding a secret like this?” Stephanie asked. She desperately needed to hear Kit say yes. Because she had turned against her friends to tell him his siblings were safe.

“Of course. One can understand how an oath to family comes before telling a stranger,” Kit said.

Stephanie winced at his words.

“But you’re not. You’re the guy who saved my life and, even more, protected me despite the danger to your duty. That means the world to me. Kit, you actually put me before everything else. I don’t think any man has done that before,” Stephanie whispered.

She sensed Kit flinch inwardly at her words and knew she’d struck deep, so hurried to soothe whatever hurt she had caused.

“You’re my hero. Brave and strong and so dedicated. I meant nothing derogatory. Honestly, Kit, I was praising you!” Stephanie blurted.

Kit snorted in amusement. “Stephanie, I understood you perfectly. I winced at how you were treated. No woman...

should endure such treatment. Ever. I hate the fact that this happened to you. It tears me apart inside,” he replied honestly.

Stephanie blinked at his words. They were heartfelt and truthful. “Wow,” she said, rather stunned.

Kit seemed to squirm and looked away, and Stephanie felt he revealed more than he planned. Unsure of what that was, Stephanie didn’t push for answers.

“Tell me of my siblings,” Kit begged.

An immense wave of relief swept over Stephanie as he gave her an escape from the awkwardness that had sprung up between them.

With a grin, she started regaling Kit with the antics the others had told her about. And they sat there laughing as she spoke about the tricks they were playing on each other.



Stephanie recoiled as the sun began to set. No doubt, as soon as it did, Justin would once again resume his attacks.

“Are you okay?” Kit asked from where he stood in the kitchen. He was cooking their dinner with Stephanie instructing him. She was rather amused that he was willing to learn to cook, but Kit seemed to take to it like a duck to water. Tonight, he was making sausage and mash. They’d been laughing over his mashing efforts, as Kit had seen it as a chance to flex his muscles. After he’d wiped down the walls and worktop twice, he learned not to be so eager in his attempts. He was now frying the sausages and jumping as hot fat spat at him.

“Just wearying of Justin. Why won’t he bugger off?”

“Bugger off?” Kit chuckled, and Stephanie grinned.

“Yes, bugger off. Honestly, he can take a long walk off a short pier for all I care,” Stephanie elaborated.

Kit laughed again. “Why don’t you say how you feel?”

Stephanie chewed that over and took Kit at his very words.

“I’ve never hated anyone until Justin. I’ve disliked people and often avoided them, but hate was an emotion I never felt. If Justin would stay dead, he’d do the world a huge service, but he refuses to twaddle off into the night. The level of loathing he spews towards Cole, I’ll never understand or condone. I think at one point, Justin was hoping I’d hate Cole because of the beatings I took. Instead, it just reaffirmed what a good man Cole was and what an utter scumbag Justin was.”

“Keep going,” Kit encouraged.

“I despise what Justin did to me. It’s unacceptable for anyone, regardless of gender or age, to endure such suffering. I’d like to take a huge fly swatter and swat Justin all over the place with it. Or I want to shrink him down to a finger-sized person and flick him constantly to make him splat against the walls. For once, I want Justin to suffer how he made the rest of us feel instead of being this stupid monster he’s turned into. And I wish, I really wish, I’d never met him!”

Stephanie held Kit’s eyes as he chuckled.

“Finger splat him?” Kit inquired and laughed.

Stephanie bit the inside of her cheek and then laughed with him. “Maybe a little extreme?” she asked.

“Not at all. You were rather polite, actually. My thoughts include torture, blood, and guts. Men like Justin existed in my time. The women had no hope of escaping their unhappy marriages. The terrible fact about my era was females were property. They had no rights, and leaving an abusive husband was certainly not one of them. Hell, Stephanie, they didn’t even have the right to the children they birthed.

“This age is so much more enlightened. It used to worry all of us about whom CeeCee would marry. Because we’d tear anyone apart who’d harm her, but finding a good, genuine man in our time was difficult. They existed, of course, but were hard to find. Loyalty was expected in a marriage only until the heir and spare were born. Then, as long as they were discrete, affairs were permitted. Because their relationships were unhappy.

“Lucian used to wonder what would happen if we made our own marriages instead of arranged ones. Would society be a happier place? By observing the present, I notice the abundance of divorces. However, people can freely choose happiness. None of this legal wife beating or abuse because women have rights,” Kit mused as he turned the sausages.

“Your family was rather ahead of your time,” Stephanie replied.

“Yes. Lucian forbade all of us to marry for duty. He told us to wed only for love. And he was ready to throttle anyone who attempted to trap CeeCee. Several tried only to meet his and Benedict’s fists.” Kit chuckled.

“Your brothers fought to defend her honour?” Stephanie asked.

“Oh, we all did. Once she turned sixteen, the men came sniffing around her like she was honey to a bee. And they would encounter five very protective brothers as well. CeeCee was a rare prize, rich, beautiful, intelligent, and of noble blood to an old name. Many tried trapping her, and all failed. Most learned that CeeCee would not be coaxed or bullied into taking lonely walks at night with them. And she had no qualms about making that loudly plain either.”

“She was your twin?”

“Yes, I was born first. Cecilia was the youngest and sometimes the fiercest of us all. Even Lucian said he’d shake when she lost her temper. In battle, she was a thing of grace and deadly beauty. Like us boys, CeeCee grew up with a knife in hand before she could walk,” Kit mused.

Stephanie realised he was engulfed in his memories. And she allowed him that time. Kit clearly needed to remember his siblings, especially his twin. Losing CeeCee must have been akin to losing a vital piece of himself. But now he knew she existed and was making Cole’s life a living hell. Stephanie smiled at that image. She guessed Cole would have been besotted by a ghost living with him at first. Until she began her pranks.

“What makes you smile?” Kit asked as he removed the pan from the heat.

“CeeCee torturing Cole. If I know Cole, and I do, he would have bought lots of expensive ghost-hunting equipment, and I bet she’s played havoc with him. Having a real spook would have thrilled Cole. And I wager CeeCee blew his expectations out of the water. I imagine he’s sulking now.” Stephanie grinned.

“Would he harm her?” Kit asked as he made gravy.

“Didn’t you hear what I said about Cole? He’s gentle around women and, like you, would rather defend than hurt them. He’s very respectful of boundaries and suchlike, so if CeeCee had to be stuck with anyone, it should be Cole,” Stephanie said.

“Why do you think your friends win over us?”

“Who said I did?” Stephanie challenged.

“It’s clear the way you’re talking,” Kit retorted.

“Answer me this. What are the odds of six friends buying six inns that are haunted by six siblings?”

Kit’s mouth opened and then closed as he stirred the gravy. “Astronomical,” he finally replied.

“Exactly. What if we’re meant to be here, right now, at this precise moment, for a reason?”

“What purpose?” Kit shot back.

“You tell me. I don’t believe in coincidence, and this is overwhelming for me.”

“Do you think there is a plan we can’t see, Stephanie?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“I honestly don’t know, Kit. But looking at what I just stated, I can’t imagine the odds of something like this happening naturally. I feel we’re all in the right place for a significant event to occur. Still, I’m uncertain, same as you,” Stephanie answered, experiencing a sense of righteousness. Somehow, she knew what she was saying was true.

A howl from outside made her jump, and Kit cursed as their conversation was interrupted.

“Here we go again,” Stephanie whined, resigned.

“Yes. But at least the food is ready. Come to my room. The protection spells there will dull his tedious roar,” Kit said as he served their dinner.

Stephanie grabbed two glasses, cutlery, and a carton of apple juice and followed Kit out.

Kit balanced their dinners, opened his door, and he let them in. He motioned Stephanie towards the armchair and placed the plates down as he hauled the occasional table in front of her and then gave her a plate. After pouring drinks and settling down, they ate as the flames from the fireplace lulled them into a comfortable silence.

“You didn’t do bad,” Stephanie said before taking her last bite of mash.

“It was bloody wonderful!” Kit exclaimed in denial, and Stephanie laughed. He looked so indignant.

“It wasn’t terrible for your first try,” she teased, and Kit pouted. Stephanie’s gaze went to his bottom lip as it jutted out, and then she quickly avoided his eyes.

Kit proudly declared, “No chef from my time could have cooked that better!”

She knew he’d caught her glance and was relieved he’d not said a word.

“I bet Wollscombe’s cook did!” Stephanie retorted.

“Ah, Mrs Finch. She was wonderful. Her pastries were to die for. I’ve never tasted pie making like hers since leaving home. A buxom woman, well rounded by her own baking and cooking, that spoke more for her skills than word of mouth.” He looked wistful. “I miss her,” Kit drawled, smiling as he remembered her.

“Was she your chief cook?”

“Yes. She was a very versatile lady. She could arrange and prepare banquets when needed and then simple suppers on a cold winter night. Papa loved her meals. He often bantered that she was trying to make him fat in his dotage.” Kit’s face fell. “Of course, he never reached that point.”

“You loved him? I hear stories from your time, and there’s respect and duty mentioned, but never much of love.”

“Love existed in our household. Papa adored all of us and made sure we understood that. He knew we’d all have a hard life, so he ensured that love flowed easily. Lucian claimed Papa and Mama were a love match. I wouldn’t know, but Lucian spoke of his memories frequently. I remember Papa being sad and looking at the hills in the distance. Lucian recalled Mama used to ride there, and he said Papa was waiting for her to come home. But she obviously never did. Still, it didn’t stop Papa’s yearning for her,” Kit said sadly.

“That’s so tragic,” Stephanie whispered. In her imagination, an older man resembling Kit appeared, radiating perpetual sadness.

“Yes, it was. He consistently prioritised our fun and playtime and provided answers to our endless questions. Even when busy. Papa may have overindulged us, but he didn’t allow money to ruin us. We all had a trust fund we’d inherit at one and twenty, and it had plenty to last us a lifetime. Of course, Lucian inherited most of the estate, as he was the eldest and heir, but Lucian added to our funds. He was so generous.”

“You miss them all,” Stephanie whispered.

“Even Issac and Elias, who I used to fight against. Benedict and Lucian were more approachable, while Issac and Elias were hot-tempered like I once was. After my death, I discovered that a temper didn’t help either way, so I gained patience instead. That was always a hard lesson for me to learn,” Kit said ruefully.

“Three hundred years trapped in one place would have taught that, if nothing else!” Stephanie agreed.

“What about your family?” Kit inclined his head.

“Disinterested is the best word to describe them. They had their own tasks, often leaving me behind because of my quiet nature. When the stuff with Justin hit, they rallied around for a while before returning to their life. It’s how they are. We’re not close, which is why my five friends mean so much. They are the family I picked, if that makes sense,” Stephanie replied.

“It does. I was lucky in my relations, but I am well aware of those who weren’t. In my day, image meant everything. A scandal or even the hint of one could ruin a name, and many a daughter was forced into an unwelcome marriage. Some daughters compromised themselves in order to escape disinterested parents. I can’t say they had it better within a coerced marriage. Meanwhile, a son could be a complete scoundrel and still inherit. It was such an unfair system,” Kit agreed.

“Though we’re more enlightened, and I use that word cautiously, the system remains stacked towards sons who misbehave rather than the girls. Although admittedly, some of the behaviours today frighten me,” Stephanie acknowledged.

“Today’s women terrify me,” Kit admitted, laughing. “They little resemble the delicate creatures I once knew. In gaining their freedom and rights, they seem to have lost something. But what do I know? I am a dinosaur out of time.”

“Kit, you’re more of a man than someone who’s thirty years old, even though you’re eighteen. If you could return, would you? Or would you choose a different path from the one your life took?”

“I would always stick to my duty. At first, I was full of regrets and anger. I’d barely lived. But stopping evil is in my blood, so no, I don’t regret that. However, I wish I’d had more time to live and learn things. To make additional memories with my family and let them know how much I loved them. I’d have enjoyed seeing the man to tame CeeCee and watch Lucian fumble his way through a marriage. But those are dreams, not reality.

“The truth is, I prevented hundreds of men, women, and children over three centuries from being tortured and murdered. My one sacrifice saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. What does my single life mean to that figure? To have created a world where children sleep soundly and are untouched by evil. That is comfort indeed. And well worth the life of one minor noble. I can rest easy in my death knowing that those people all got the chances I didn’t,” Kit explained.

“That’s a really honourable thought,” Stephanie mused. “And not one you’d find popular today. Now, it’s all about self-entitlement and a me-me nature. Narcissism is on the rise, and self-sacrifice is down. Everyone is selfish today.”

“They were in my time. That is no different, no matter which era we live in. Humans are by nature selfish, but they are also brave, steady, and intelligent. Mankind has the scope to grow, and that is my hope,” Kit replied.

“That eventually man’s growth will outgrow his greed?”

“Yes, the potential is there.”

“That makes me feel good,” Stephanie admitted before jumping.

Kit had been right. The protection around his room had dulled Justin’s howls, but that one had been particularly loud.

“I wonder why the police haven’t been out. After all, we’re at the end of the village. There are houses close by. Why haven’t people called about Justin’s screaming?”

“Because the grounds are protected from noises leaking out. It was a ward CeeCee placed the last time she was here. I’d fought a werewolf, and it had alarmed the villagers, so CeeCee set a spell and made sure any noise on the grounds of the inn wouldn’t escape,” Kit explained.

Stephanie sat forward. “A spell? CeeCee was a witch?” she gasped.

“Yes. My twin had magical powers, which she only used for good. I must stress that,” Kit answered.

“As in a real live witch?” Stephanie inquired, delighted by the idea.

Kit smiled indulgently. “Yes, CeeCee cast spells. She was powerful for our side. Had she reached her full strength, well, the rest of us wouldn’t have been needed. One click of her fingers, and she could have brought the world to its knees.”

“Wow, I can’t imagine having that much power,” Stephanie mused.

“It was something Cecilia struggled mightily with. Having so much magic but not abusing it or turning to dark magic was a struggle. Magic itself can be addictive, which is why dark witches are created. They crave more and more power and so turn to the dark to gain it. They never seem to grasp that the actual power comes from being good and strong. It bemuses me,” Kit said.

“I can understand why.” She paused. “Can I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“Kit, what is the evil creature you imprisoned here?”

CHAPTER SIX.

Kit

He froze as Stephanie's earnest eyes held him captive.

"I don't wish to set it free; I just want to understand what it is," Stephanie said carefully.

Kit could hear the truth in her words, but admitting what he had here was something he'd not done in three hundred years.

"Forget it. I've made things awkward. I'm sorry," Stephanie mumbled as his silence continued. She rose to her feet. "Thank you for dinner."

Her hand touched the door handle—

"Demon," Kit blurted.

"A demon? That's not so scary, is it?" Stephanie was confused and turned to him.

"Not a demon you see on TV. This is a real one from hell. Some demons are created on earth, which are weaker than their hell spawn cousins. This creature came straight from the devil's side, having slipped through a portal opened by a foolish witch. The idiot lost her head before she realised she'd summoned something more powerful than her.

"Because of Margery's deal with the devil, it joined her and became her general. This monster is beyond evil. Killing a babe or children meant nothing to it, and in fact, he thought of them as a mere snack."

"And you captured it," Stephanie said awed.

"After giving my life to trap it, yes. Should this creature escape, Stephanie, it will rampage through today's world. This current generation and society is extremely well suited for it to fade into and become a part of. And with crimes being as they are, this demon could easily hide within any population in any country," Kit explained.

“I know little about demons, only what I’ve seen in paranormal programmes. My understanding is they either possess someone or float around as a black blob,” Stephanie said.

“Black blob,” Kit repeated and chuckled. “This monster is truly from hell. It has the power to control an individual and completely dominate them. By doing so, it would feed on the victim’s soul and inhabit their body as if their own. That’s what makes this one so dangerous. It would have access to all the individual’s memories and could easily pass as them. Worse, a true demon carries a contagion.

“This infection will worm its way into people’s hearts, then make them act out against their true nature, unless they are already in possession of a dark soul. However, a good person can be corrupted and transformed beyond recognition. This power belongs only to a genuine demon seated at the devil’s right hand. Not even being aware of the demon’s identity could gain total control over it. Using its real name would stun it for a few moments, and then it would recover,” Kit explained.

“So, how did you capture it?” Stephanie asked curiously.

“CeeCee had crafted several prisons, and we all carried one. While I engaged in combat with the demon, enduring as many injuries as I inflicted, I refrained from utilising its name until it was in proximity to the trap. Once close enough, I yelled its name, stunning it, ran my sword through its heart and then threw the prison at it. The snare acted immediately, but its last move was to break my neck as it was pulled down. My overconfidence led to my own downfall. A lesson harshly learned,” Kit said.

Stephanie

Stephanie shook her head at how casually Kit mentioned his own death. She sensed there were deeper feelings than the casualness he displayed.

“You don’t have another trap?” she asked. That was her primary concern.

“No. Which is why I’m so frightened that this one might fail because of your presence. You don’t understand, Stephanie; a demon feasts upon pure souls like yours. Already, you being here calls to it, and it is fighting to free itself. A soul such as yours is ambrosia to a true Hell demon. To eat you would cause it raptures,” Kit said seriously.

“Okay, I don’t want to be eaten,” Stephanie replied instantly.

“Nobody would, dove.”

“And you say all your siblings carried one?”

“Yes. It was the single piece of equipment we didn’t go anywhere without. Even to a ball!”

“Logically, there should be a trap at every inn,” Stephanie mused.

She saw awareness dawn in Kit’s eyes.

“If they died at the inns, the traps would be present somewhere,” Kit agreed.

“All I have to do is visit one of them and then grab it and bring it back.”

“That is true. But they would be zealously guarded. None of my siblings would hand it over, not even if you explained I was still here. They wouldn’t believe you. You’d have to steal it,” Kit said, tongue in cheek.

“Well, the way everyone is fighting, I should be able to slip in and grab it. What does it look like?” she asked.

This was the crunch point; did Kit trust her enough to show her?

“I’ll reveal it, but not until you’re prepared to fetch it,” Kit promised.

“Yes, that leads me to a different predicament. I have to contact the police. To receive my insurance coverage, I must report the damage, but how in the world will I explain it? Stephanie wondered.

“Can you not buy another car?” Kit asked.

Stephanie laughed.

“No. They are incredibly expensive, so I need to go through the insurance. But I know for a fact that the insurer will want a crime reference number, and how on earth do I explain what happened?”

“Can’t say ghosts,” Kit agreed.

“No, could you imagine it? Also, it’s been a few days since Justin smashed it to pieces. Again, I’d have to clarify that. Luckily or unluckily, the security system would have recorded it. Maybe we should check the footage?”

“It is rather late. You should rest. You’re still recuperating. We can look in the morning,” Kit suggested as Stephanie hid a yawn.

“That’s fine by me,” she said, rising to her feet.

Kit was at her side instantly, an arm wrapped around her waist to support her. Stephanie sent him a shy smile and allowed him to walk her back to her bedroom. Once there, he squeezed her gently and left her alone.

Stephanie gazed after him as he walked away. She’d rather thought he was considering kissing her for a moment and decided she wasn’t averse to that.

Kit

Blast and damnation. Stephanie had looked so sweet in the dim light, and her lips had been so inviting. Kit had nearly kissed her as she had stared up at him. The age difference between them meant little to him. In fact, he was three hundred years older than her if someone wanted to nitpick.

“What on earth is happening?” Kit asked no one in particular.

He entered his room again. Stephanie’s perfume lingered in the air, and Kit sniffed it before catching himself. His heart skipped a beat before he realised what he was doing.

“Oh no. I’m having feelings for her. That can’t be. My duty has to come first,” Kit said, appalled.

The White Witch paused in taunting Justin and listened in. She trilled a question, and Kit answered.

“I’ve never experienced this before. So why Stephanie, and why now?”

The White Witch sent him a mental shrug and then the image of the imprisoned demon.

“I know my duty! Better than you do!” Kit snapped.

A sense of being wounded floated at Kit, and The White Witch turned her back on him and continued playing with Justin.

Kit sighed. He’d upset his staunchest supporter. He was definitely off balance tonight.

In response to a vindictive slap aimed at the Human Killer outside, Kit winced. Oh yes, indeed, he’d most certainly alienated The White Witch.

He sank into his chair and searched his feelings. Ever since Stephanie had been attacked, they’d been developing and growing. Intent on healing her and then making sure she did nothing too strenuous, Kit hadn’t noticed them changing. But now, if he was brutally honest, he didn’t want to lose her.

Kit had always been attracted to the social butterflies. The women who were both beautiful and adept at conversation and dancing. Stephanie embodied two of those qualities but lacked the confident and engaging nature of a butterfly. She was quiet and wouldn’t enjoy being the centre of attention, and Kit found that highly attractive. He realised she calmed him when she was around. Her mere presence soothed his worries and stresses, and he could relax.

Plus, Stephanie was more than pretty. With her expressive eyes, she was a beauty. She embodied the type of unique woman any man would be proud to call wife. And that gave him pause. Because he was no longer alive, he was a spirit. And how would she react to a ghost falling in love with her? Kit knew himself better than anyone. He was developing those

feelings for her, love and adoration. Even if Stephanie was ready to move on with a relationship, why on earth would she choose a ghost?

She had no reason to do so and wouldn't have trouble finding a man to call husband. One who could offer her what Kit couldn't, and Kit already hated him. He wanted to be the one who offered his name and protection and gave her a home to be proud of. But he couldn't. All Kit could provide was a half-existence, with a ghost who couldn't establish his personal identity or his home because he'd been dead three hundred years.

And he'd no doubt Stephanie would see past all that. She legally possessed the inn and thus owned her apartment. His mind flashed to the vault he had in the cellar. One-tenth of what was in there would allow Stephanie the means to buy a new place. So why hadn't he offered her it?

The answer stemmed from his reluctance to let her go. Not now or ever.

Kit could only give Stephanie a limited existence, but she wasn't one to accept such compromises. He couldn't give her marriage or children, or a husband devoted to her. He had his love to offer and his devotion, but that's all he'd ever be able to provide. And Stephanie deserved it all... what was she saying? The white picket fence and happy family? Something like that.

Kit was dead.

His body long turned to dust.

All that was left was this reality, and Kit would never offer that to anyone.

Stephanie

"No, officer, I honestly don't know what happened. I have CCTV, and we can look at that. Still, it's incredibly weird," Stephanie said to the policeman, who was gazing at her vehicle in horror.

"It looks like it's been torn up by an animal," his partner muttered.

It was midday the next day, and Stephanie was dealing with PC Owens and PC Dancroft. She had reported the incident involving her car, and the local station had sent the two officers out.

“What type of beastie would do damage like that?” PC Owens asked in disbelief as he gazed at his partner.

“Be a freaking big one,” PC Dancroft replied.

“Yeah, the Cotswolds are famous for its lions and elephants roaming,” PC Owens jeered.

Stephanie hid a smile. She couldn't fault him.

“You called this in late. Why?” PC Dancroft inquired.

“Because I couldn't understand what the recordings were showing me. It took a couple of days to get my head around it,” Stephanie replied honestly.

“Let's look at this weird footage you have,” PC Owens said, turning to her.

Stephanie led them into the small security office where all the cameras were linked to and brought up the video.

It was dimly lit, and the recording was of poor quality, but you could see the car rocking and then gashes and windows being smashed. Both officers stood with their mouths open as invisible forces tore the car apart. Once it finished, both individuals gazed at the monitor briefly before locking eyes.

“Could you replay that, miss?” PC Dancroft asked, scratching his chin.

Stephanie nodded and hit the button. Both men crowded the screen this time, and PC Dancroft clicked the button to slow the replay down.

“There, I see a shadow of someone,” he murmured.

Stephanie peered and frowned. Not a single dark shape hinted at the presence of a person.

“Yeah, I spot it. Seems to know where to hide,” PC Owens replied.

They continued watching, pausing when they believed they saw a figure, although Stephanie knew there was nothing there. She allowed the officers to continue their train of thought, finally printed them a copy, and took the crime reference number they gave her.

“Unfortunately, miss, it seems there were two of them. All our trained eyes could see were their shadows. With no close-ups or a glimpse of their faces, we’ll do what we can, but don’t hold out much hope,” PC Owens said.

Stephanie noticed the discomfort in his gaze. He was spouting platitudes. The three of them realised the camera didn’t capture the culprit.

Stephanie reached out and took the piece of paper he offered her and nodded. “Thank you. This is so distressing,” she murmured.

“Not a warm welcome to the village, is it, Ma’am? Yet, we have itinerant vandals. It’s more than likely they were driving past and saw a chance for mischief. It’s unlikely to be a local. But we’ll do our best, and should you get any other disturbances, call nine-nine-nine, and we’ll send a car out immediately,” PC Dancroft announced, all officiously.

Stephanie nodded as she showed them out and shut the door behind them.

“What a pair of buffoons,” Kit said, appearing instantly.

“I can’t believe they were trying to convince me there were individuals on that footage!”

“What the mind can’t understand, it creates explanations for. The idea of an invisible monster doing that damage isn’t a scenario their minds can comprehend. So they sought shadows to explain it away. Even so, did they give you what you needed for the insurance people?” Kit asked.

“Yes, I’ll be able to have my poor car towed now and at least get a cover one until my insurer replaces it or pays out,” Stephanie replied.

“Will that take long?” Kit inquired.

Stephanie knew why he asked. Kit wanted her to travel to one of his sibling's inns and find an additional trap. He still hadn't shown her what one looked like, but nor had he mentioned her leaving again. It was obvious her idea had taken root with Kit. She believed he felt he'd have a substitute should she secure a back-up trap, and she fully intended to. Her dream was something she refused to let go of.

While it was just her and Kit, the second trap should be fine. But they needed to return this creature back to hell. Otherwise, she could live here as much as she wanted, but she'd never be able to open the inn to the public. If her presence was a danger, a pub full of people was catastrophic.

"Stephanie?" Kit asked, and she jumped. She'd drifted off in her thoughts.

"For them to send a car, no. To replace mine or give me the payment, yes. They don't rush."

"What if I gave you the money to get a new one?" Kit offered, and Stephanie looked at him, amused.

"That means a lot, Kit, but your funds aren't the same as currency today," she said.

"But if I sold a couple of items?" Kit asked and held out his hand.

Stephanie's brows nearly shot into her hairline. What was in front of her was a heavy gold brooch, studded with precious jewels. It would be worth a fortune in today's market.

"Wow," Stephanie gasped. "It would probably sell for more than my car's value, Kit, but there are a few factors. I would need papers saying it belongs to me, and then it would have to be appraised at an auction. Once it's been examined, they would determine a price before selling. It could take a month to run through the entire process."

"Everything is so much more complicated today," Kit groused.

"Where did you get that?" Stephanie inquired.

“It was left behind by someone who never returned for it. I have rather an extensive collection hidden away. Some belonged to my family, which Lucian shared amongst us when Papa died. I also have bags of five, two, one and half guineas. Would they be worth anything?”

“Yes. How much, I don’t know, but you could be sitting on a fortune, Kit,” Stephanie said. She pulled out her phone and typed into the search engine. Moments later, her face paled.

“How many five guineas do you have?”

“A bag full,” Kit mused, shrugging.

“Depending on their quality, they range from twenty thousand and one in mint condition sold for one hundred and twenty thousand pounds!” Stephanie whispered, feeling faint.

“That’s a lot of money!” Kit exclaimed.

“Kit, it would mean you’re rich beyond belief. Why do you have them?”

“Oh, we all kept funds at the inns hidden away. It was in case we ever needed it. I also have some stacks of banknotes in a pristine condition,” Kit elaborated.

“I have no idea, but I think you’re sitting on millions, Kit.”

“And would that purchase a new car?”

Stephanie laughed. “Kit, it’s a good job I’m honest. Two coins at twenty thousand each would purchase me a new vehicle. A million dollars would buy me... say each car was forty thousand, it would buy twenty-five cars.”

“And you only need one!” Kit teased.

“Indeed. But keep your money where it is for now. Therefore, we have coverage.”

Kit frowned. “You pay insurance so marauding ghosts can damage your car?”

Stephanie thought he looked undeniably cute.

“No, we pay, so if our car is damaged, we get it repaired. Should it be beyond repair, they will replace it or offer the

value of the car to the owner. My vehicle was five years old, so while I won't get as much, I shall still receive a good sum to replace it. I'll call now and start the ball rolling," Stephanie said.

"I'll begin lunch. You need to eat," Kit declared with a frown.

"Okay." Stephanie patted his hand.

Kit

An hour later, Kit was glaring at the phone in Stephanie's hand. She hadn't been lying when she had claimed insurance companies were damned awkward. They wanted to know the ins and outs of a duck's arse, Kit thought mulishly. He'd have told them to go hang themselves by now, but Stephanie was remarkably patient.

She answered their questions, sent them pictures, and gave them the crime reference number. Stephanie sent them the footage and then had to reassure them three times that it was the correct video. She explained the delay three times, and that was when Kit lost control of his temper and left her talking in the kitchen.

Agitated, he paced back and forth in his room until she knocked on the door an hour later.

"That took some doing, but as I have a crime reference number and the police have taken my statement, they are sending out a cover car when they pick mine up. The video has totally baffled them, but I told them what the police told me, and they said they'll contact them," she said when he opened the door.

"When does the new car arrive?" Kit asked.

"Tomorrow. And I think I'll park it away from the inn in the overspill car park. That way, Justin might not get his hands on it," Stephanie said. She turned around and began walking back to her apartment.

"I hate bureaucracy," Kit whined as he followed her.

"Oh, Kit, don't we all." Stephanie sighed and moved slowly.

Kit noticed how stiff she was acting.

“Does your back hurt?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Truthfully, yes. The skin feels tight, and it feels like I’m pulling it when I move around. I know that’s part of the healing process, but it’s very uncomfortable, and sometimes I get pain there,” Stephanie replied.

Kit cursed himself. He should have realised this.

“Do you have any moisturising lotion?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“If you want to fetch it, I can put that on. CeeCee made a lavender-scented cream that would have been perfect. But we can make do. And anyway, I need to check your wounds today. I haven’t done so yet,” Kit said, ignoring Stephanie’s blush.

He knew Stephanie was uncomfortable undressing in front of him. Kit had suggested that she put her bedtime robe on the back to front so she was covered. Even so, she still got embarrassed. Stephanie sent him a sharp nod and disappeared into her bedroom. He pottered around, making her a cup of tea, when he heard her gasp.

Nearly dropping the cup, he rushed into the bedroom and found her ready but holding a small pot in her hands.

“This appeared out of nowhere,” Stephanie said, holding it up.

Kit’s eyes narrowed on the purple glass pot and its jewelled surface. He recognised it immediately.

“It smells of lavender?” Kit asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes.”

“Wollscombe,” Kit muttered.

Stephanie stared at him for a few moments, waiting for him to elaborate. “Well?” she finally demanded.

“It’s the family home. Remember, I told you it was sentient too, and more so than The White Witch?”

“Yes?” Stephanie wasn’t following him.

“The night the book turned up...”

“What do you mean, ‘turned up’?” Stephanie interrupted him.

“When I got to my room later that night, I noticed a book that wasn’t mine. But it belonged in Wollscombe Hall’s library. I recognised the smell that lingered on the leather cover. The book had never been here before, and yet the night I needed it, somehow Wollscombe sent it to me.”

“I knew you were hiding something!” Stephanie blurted.

“Yes, well. Since then, Wollscombe has interacted twice more with The White Witch and me. The first time was to send me CeeCee’s healing poultice, and now she’s sent you this healing cream to help your scars.”

“Did you know she could do that?”

“No. Three hundred years have gone by since I sensed or felt her. And now, since you arrived, Wollscombe seems to be very active and aware of what’s happening. The coincidence is strange,” Kit explained.

“Strange is not the word I would use,” Stephanie muttered as she undid the lid and sniffed. “This smells freshly made. Now either your sister is alive and making this, or Wollscombe has hidden depths.”

“More like hidden depths. I don’t know what’s changed that is making Wollscombe step up. I can’t believe she’s been dormant all these years, and the fact she’s interacting with me makes me wonder if she is with the others,” Kit said.

Stephanie inquired, “But is it a positive thing?”

“Yes. But I have to wonder, why now?”

CHAPTER SEVEN.

Stephanie

The next day, she took charge of her replacement vehicle and watched as her old one was towed away. The two men picking it up had been horror-struck at its condition. Her lips had twitched in amusement as they wondered what type of accident she'd been in. Her explanation that someone had done this to her car had thrown them off balance.

"Lady, whoever you peed off, I hope they get caught!" the older guy had said.

Stephanie had smiled sweetly, her eyes on Kit as he lurked at his window while the men were present.

As soon as they dropped the new car and took hers away, he was waiting downstairs in the bar.

"Stephanie, are you certain you want to visit The Crown? Elias was the most hot-tempered and difficult of all of us. Should he think you're trying to steal his trap, well, I can only imagine the trouble he'd bring down on you," Kit said, looking unsure at their plan.

"It would make you feel better. Plus, I can always look for some books on banishing a demon from hell. You mentioned it's not so easy as the others."

"No, it isn't. If you get one word wrong during the ritual, it becomes void. Expelling demons born on earth or brought from another plane is easier. But true hell demons are little... buggers to banish," Kit replied with a red tinge to his cheeks.

Stephanie giggled. He'd clearly been going to swear and changed mid-sentence.

"Tell me some things I can tell Elias if he confronts me. Information that only you both knew that would convince him to believe me. Callie has gone to visit her mum today as she's sick, so The Crown will be empty all day. Elias may have relaxed his guard; we never know," Stephanie said.

With a long stare, Kit started discussing private matters known only to him and his brother. Stephanie listened carefully and absorbed the details. After repeating everything back to him, Stephanie cheerfully waved as she got into the car and drove away.

Elias

He stared out of the windows of The Crown. That damnable wench had left in the early hours, but she'd not taken her belongings with her. Something had badly upset her last night. He'd heard the contraption she called a phone ring, and then her voice rose in distress. When Callie had said she'd arrive in the morning, he'd hoped his tricks had chased her away.

But no, everything remained.

A dark scowl crossed his face as he thought about the irritating woman. There was a grudging respect he felt for her. Callie certainly gave as good as she got.

He sat patiently waiting for her return because he had a doozy of a trick to play on her this time.

Stephanie

Stephanie parked opposite The Crown in a small lay-by. It was a pretty inn, with its black wood and window frames and newly painted white walls. It wasn't as tall as The White Witch, and Stephanie noted there had been additions added to it. The main building had two levels, with a wing to the left, which was clearly a later addition. It was possibly a converted stable, considering there was a door in the roof leading to nowhere.

From her vantage point, she could see another section coming off the back, making The Crown a three sided square shaped building. Callie hadn't mentioned having work done, but it was clear the inn was in good repair and had been worked upon recently. There were parking spots in front and a car park sign on the side of the converted stable. But Stephanie hadn't wanted to alert Elias she was present. From what Callie

had said, he was a cantankerous, nasty ghost, and she didn't want to pre-warn him.

In fact, Stephanie hoped he'd be sulking somewhere or planning revenge on Callie for Callie's pranks on him. Stephanie had decided they were all as bad as one another. It appeared only she and Kit didn't fight. Something she was incredibly grateful for.

She slipped out of her car and headed towards the far side where the second wing was. Callie had mentioned that she'd left a spare key hidden in case one of her friends ever popped around.

Callie had added that because of the racket she and Elias caused, she may not hear them knocking. Forewarned was forearmed, Stephanie thought. Although Stephanie doubted very much that Callie expected anyone to come and steal from her. Stephanie walked around the wing and opened the gate that led to the beer garden. Quietly slipping through, she approached the door that allowed entrance to the bar. Guilt slid into Stephanie's stomach, and she paused, wondering if she was doing right.

Then, her shoulders squared.

Kit required this trap.

Should his break, then he'd have a backup plan. So stuff this Elias, Kit needed her help. Stephanie bent down and found the loose brick Callie had told her about. She then pulled it out, grabbed the key, and left the brick loose because she'd have to replace the key later on. Stephanie checked around before inserting it and pushing open the door.

The rear wing she entered appeared to be a dining area with toilets at the far end. As she walked forward, Stephanie rounded the corner into the bar.

And nearly cried out in disbelief.

Kit had shown her what the trap looked like; an egg-shaped item made of amber-coloured glass. On the shelves around the bar and dotted on beams haphazardly were hundreds of bottles, jars, and vases.

Oh boy, this was not going to be the quick in and out she'd hoped for. Quietly moving forward, she stuck her head into the converted stable and saw much the same.

“Kit! You never told me Elias was a hoarder!”

Even worse, when she went back to the main section, she spotted glass ornaments in the window and tucked into nooks and crannies there.

“Kit, this is a nightmare!” Stephanie muttered, returned to the stable area, and got to work.

Elias

Intruder! Another blasted one! Elias had been alerted the moment the girl stepped foot onto the property. The Crown had watched as the stranger pulled out the key Callie had hidden and let herself in.

The sheer cheek of it.

Elias's fury built as the woman walked around the inn and looked horrified. Then she spoke and caught his attention.

Kit? What would this mere chit know of his brother? At first, he thought he might have misheard, but then she mentioned Kit again. He watched as she began searching the old stables for something. Puzzlement descended as she searched quietly and diligently. Who on earth was she?

Elias deliberately pushed a chair, and she froze, peering around her. Her eyes explored the room as she stayed as quiet as a mouse. Long minutes ticked by as Elias studied her, and finally, she began her search again. Elias moved closer when he saw her lips moving.

“Egg-shaped, amber-coloured glass. It has to be here,” she whispered to herself. There was desperation in her voice.

Elias stiffened at the words as he put them together. The demon trap! And Kit! This wicked wench in front of him intended to trap his younger brother. That would not happen.

With a wave of his hand, Elias slammed four chairs together in the corner.

The girl shrieked and leaped into the air.

“Not good! Not good!” she exclaimed.

His temper rising, Elias created a series of loud booms to echo around the room. She covered her ears and cringed.

Then Elias made them last several minutes, but she refused to flee.

“I’m a friend of Callie’s!” she cried when silence fell.

That didn’t make any difference, Elias decided. Callie clearly had treacherous friends who wanted to entrap his siblings. Elias wasn’t about to allow that to happen. Every single door and window in the inn flew open and then slammed shut with a loud bang. The girl screeched again but still refused to flee.

“I’m not leaving Elias! I need the demon trap. Kit needs it, and I don’t care how scared you make me. I’m not going until I have it!”

To his disbelief, she began searching once more.

Fine! He shoved chairs in her way, tripping her twice and moved tables to block her efforts. Loud wails erupted around the inn, and misty figures flew at her. Elias caught a look at her face, and she was terrified, but she wasn’t stopping in her endeavours.

“Leave!” Elias finally bellowed.

“No! Kit needs this!” she screamed back as tears ran down her cheeks.

Elias took in her shaking hands and pallor but spotted the sheer stubbornness in her expression.

“I’ll not allow you to imprison my brother!” Elias roared.

“I’m not! Kit has a demon trapped at The White Witch. And there is a Human Killer loose. We need your trap in case his fails,” the girl yelled back. Her arms wrapped around her body defensively.

“Liar! You intend to trap his soul!” Elias bellowed, and she ducked as a box flew over his head.

“I’m not. The Human Killer is my ex-boyfriend. Whatever you try to do to me, Justin has already beaten you. Kit needs yours to have a backup in case Kit’s fails,” the girl babbled. “My name is Stephanie. Please show yourself, Elias.”

Elias heard the begging in her voice, and his temper decreased as he looked at the petrified figure in front of him. Something strong was making her stay here and take this torture. Could she be telling the truth?

Elias appeared, and Stephanie gasped.

He was slightly taller and broader than Kit, but they had the same eyes. Whereas Kit’s hair was straight, Elias’s was tight with brown curls.

“You have Kit’s eyes,” Stephanie whispered.

“Tell me of Kit, and know, if you lie, I shall drive you insane before you depart here,” Elias warned.

A chair came out of nowhere and knocked into her knees.

Stephanie sat heavily on it.

“I bought The White Witch. Soon after, my ex-boyfriend, Justin, died. That night, the inn was attacked, and both The White Witch and Kit protected me. Kit told me I had to leave as he was protecting the world from a great evil. But he claimed I couldn’t leave while the Human Killer was outside. He explained Justin would hunt me down until he killed me, and Kit wouldn’t have that on his conscience,” Stephanie said.

“A demon trap won’t contain a Human Killer. They aren’t made for that,” Elias snorted. He still wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth.

“No, but if you remember, a week ago, Callie had a meeting with friends? That same night, when I returned to The White Witch, Justin attacked me. He wounded me badly. Kit and The White Witch saved my life. They applied a poultice made by CeeCee to the wounds to draw out the poison. Look, I still have scars,” Stephanie said, and she turned around and lifted her top.

Elias winced as he saw the five slash marks on her back. They were clearly fresh and in the process of healing.

She lowered her top and sat down.

“Kit and I discussed the impact of Justin’s attacks on the demon trap. He is terrified it might crack, but if we had yours, then he’d be able to imprison it again before it fled,” Stephanie explained.

“That would make sense. If he used his trap, he has a hell demon?” Elias asked.

“Yes. Kit says he can’t remember the correct wording of the banishing spell, so he has kept it trapped all this time. He said he can’t risk making a mistake because the demon would go free,” Stephanie elaborated.

“So you came to steal mine,” Elias snapped.

“It was my idea. The Crown is the closest to The White Witch. We need your help, Elias,” Stephanie begged.

“Then it is a shame I no longer have it,” Elias said. He was testing her.

Stephanie paled, and her hands shook. “You don’t?”

“No, it was lost many a year ago.”

“Oh, no,” Stephanie moaned.

Elias could see her thoughts racing across her face. His news had distressed her deeply.

“Then I apologise for intruding on you, but I must go to the next inn. Another of your other siblings might have one intact,” Stephanie murmured.

“What do you know of my siblings and our inns?” Elias demanded instantly.

Stephanie flushed a deep red, and Elias sensed she’d let slip something she shouldn’t have.

“Kit spoke of you,” Stephanie whispered.

But Elias knew that wasn’t the full truth.

“Do not lie to me!” he thundered.

“All my friends bought the inns owned by your siblings!” Stephanie cried.

“What?” Elias gasped.

“The inns your siblings owned are all now owned by my friends!” Stephanie repeated.

Elias noticed how badly she was shaking and ran a hand through his hair. “Calm, Miss. I’ll not harm you, not even in temper. I think you missed something out of your story, didn’t you?” he pried in a gentler tone.

It was clear she was extremely frightened by men. Elias sensed what his brother probably already knew. She’d been harmed by a man. Elias grabbed a chair to sit in instead of towering over her.

“Why not tell me everything?”

“Because then I’d betray Callie,” Stephanie whispered.

“Callie knows where my family is?” Elias asked as his temper rose again. That deceitful, treacherous wench!

“We swore a blood oath not to inform you. We acknowledged that each of you was defending a great evil. If we told you all your siblings were trapped, then one of you might try to help, and your prisoner could escape.”

“A blood oath? Which of you is the witch?” Elias inquired. Things were getting more complicated.

“None of us, Kit asked the same. It was something we started as children.”

“That makes little sense. Who began this ritual?” Elias pried.

“I honestly don’t know. We just began doing it when we didn’t want to spill a secret,” Stephanie replied.

“One of you is a witch. A blood oath is only powerful when magic is involved,” Elias elaborated.

“I didn’t know that. But I have to leave. Thank you for your time,” Stephanie said politely.

“If what you are telling me is the truth. Kit would have given you something to tell me that only I would know,” Elias inquired.

“He did, but it’s irrelevant. You don’t have the demon... wait. Kit explained how rare and how difficult the traps are to make. You wouldn’t have lost yours!” Stephanie said, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

Elias chuckled. “Clever girl. Now, what proof did my brother offer you?”

Stephanie released a huff and sent him a dark look.

“I don’t see why I should tell you after your tricks and behaviour, but you won’t give it to me otherwise, will you?” she asked.

Elias laughed again. Why couldn’t this girl have bought his inn instead of the harpy he had to manage? Stephanie was delightful, and he could understand why Kit wanted to keep her around.

“No, I won’t,” Elias replied agreeably.

“You’re very mean. You could have sent me away and put Kit in danger. I don’t think I like you much,” Stephanie said bluntly.

Well, that told him! Elias thought, delighted at Stephanie. He would wager a year’s earnings that this delicate creature kept Kit on his toes. And brought out every protective quality Kit owned.

“Tell me what my brother told you, Stephanie, and the trap will be yours,” Elias offered.

“Kit told me three instances. The first encounter involved both of you vying for the same woman’s affection. Her name was Amanda Smitherton, and she was the daughter of the Earl of Cambridge. Kit claimed she was a pretty thing. But he explained the only reason he was courting her was because you were. He claimed she gave him a pink handkerchief, which he passed on to you as a sign of her fondness. Kit believed you were quite serious about her and so pulled away and let you court her,” Stephanie said.

“That is true. But Kit knew something else. What was it?” Elias asked.

“When you realised Kit had stood down, you were in a quandary because you didn’t really like Lady Amanda and had only been courting her because of Kit. Lady Amanda called you a cad and a scoundrel and refused to acknowledge your presence again,” Stephanie finished.

Elias let out a bellow of laughter. “Believe me, Stephanie, that wench was no lady. She had a mouth worse than a fisherman’s wife. All sweet and demure in public, but when I informed her I wasn’t really interested, well, a fisherman would have been proud. An earl, not so much!”

“He also told me about Miss Flora Winch. A vicar’s daughter, whose aunt was a duchess, and introduced her to society. Her uncle was quite happy to settle a large dowry on her, which made her a target. Kit explained how he and you discovered Miss Flora being pinned to a wall against her will by Lord Delamere, who was hiding his loss of riches. Lord Delamere automatically assumed you’d spread her ruin. Instead, you called him out in a duel.

“Lord Delamere was appalled and tried to destroy Miss Flora so she’d have to marry him. Except CeeCee also got involved and declared that Miss Flora had been with her at the time Lord Delamere was claiming. He had no choice but to fight the duel you had called him on, and Kit said you beat him rather soundly with a rapier. You and Kit told everyone the duel had been fought because he’d called CeeCee a liar.”

“There was a place I wounded Delamere. Kit laughed about it for months,” Elias recalled.

“Kit informed me that you slipped, and your aim went low. You, Kit, Lord Delamere, and his second agreed never to tell anyone. Apparently, Elias, you slammed the hilt of your rapier into his groin,” Stephanie announced with a bright smile.

“You clearly agree with the injury?”

“Most definitely. Kit never told me what happened to Lord Delamere.”

“He left England at a run six months later, hounded by debtors. I believe he married some rich French heiress in the end. Good luck to her,” Elias answered.

“And Kit gave me one word. Captain. He claimed you’d explain that story,” Stephanie said curiously.

Elias threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“I bet he did. If Lucian ever found out, he’d have tanned both our arses despite our ages. Kit, Thomas Etherton, who was Lord Roland, my best friend, and I were out drinking. Thomas was so drunk we were carrying him everywhere. He’d just had his tender heart broken. So we were helping him recover. We left him sitting outside an inn while we fetched a carriage. When we came back, he was gone.

“Some determined questions and a few punches later, we found out a captain had come by and taken him for a drunk and press-ganged him. Kit and I hurried after the captain. We couldn’t let the Duke of Etherington be press-ganged. By the time we caught up, the ship was setting sail. Kit charged down the pier, leapt on board, and informed the captain he was under arrest for kidnapping a peer of the realm.

“Now, I was fit, but I couldn’t have made that jump. So there’s Kit, unarmed, bellowing on the ship, me on the pier shouting about nobility being kidnapped and a real palaver going on. Thomas had roused and was bewailing his broken heart, and in the end, the captain had enough and dumped the pair of them over the side into the Thames. The river was always dirty, even during the best times.

“We paid a carriage everything we had, which was ten times the usual price of a ride and took Thomas back to his town house. His butler was appalled, but we all cleaned up. If Lucian had found out, he would have beaten me black and blue for allowing Kit to make that jump. My only thought had been to bring Thomas home safely. I wonder what happened to that bounder. I miss him,” Elias said softly.

“He married a young lady called Miss Flora Winch, and from all accounts, they had eight children and were very happy. Their eldest son was called Elias, and their next was

Christopher. "His lineage exists even today," a voice interrupted, "and is thriving."

"By the black hounds of hell, which stone did you crawl out of, Blackwood?" Elias exclaimed and jumped to his feet with a dark glower.

"Hello Stephanie, I'm Daniel Harrington, the Marquess Blackwood," the charming man said with a bow.

"Hell just arrived on earth." Elias groaned.

Stephanie

She took in the stranger and how he was dressed, similar to Elias and Kit, and moved away from him. She had no idea who he was, but if he was here to stop her from getting the demon trap, he had another thing coming. Stephanie had no intention of losing it. She'd been making inroads with Elias, and this Daniel, whatever his name was, would not ruin it for her.

"Go haunt somewhere else," Elias spat, moving in front of Stephanie. That was all she needed to warn her. The stranger was dangerous to her and Kit.

"Afraid not, old boy. Just had this same conversation with Lucian. I'm alive, not dead. I was dead, and then I got brought back to life. All the Rakehell Six, Henrietta and Harcourt have returned. Still, knowing your temper, they decided I was the most even-tempered one to deal with you," Daniel said.

"You the most... I never!" Elias exclaimed.

"No, you never," Daniel agreed with a grin. "But I stand here before you, alive and kicking and not thrilled to be facing you, either."

"I think I need to go. If you can give me that object," Stephanie interrupted their argument.

"I'm informed about God's Scourge. Lucian explained everything. Elias, I am sorry I did not know back then, or we'd have helped."

Elias snorted in disbelief.

“But things are in motion that you cannot stop. You must help this young lady and then wait for your signal. It will come. But I am here to tell you, God’s Scourge, do not stand alone. All the Rakehell Six, Henrietta and Harcourt, are behind you. A final battle approaches, and it’s one we must withstand together, or we’ll lose God’s Scourge forever,” Daniel said earnestly.

“I hate you,” Elias moaned.

“The feeling is mutual, but we are men out of time. And nobody knows duty or honour like we do. When it is your turn, grasp tightly and hang on. We shall all come, the Rakehell Six, Henrietta and Harcourt, when we are needed. Until then, you must stay in your inn and stop your evil from escaping. The players are still moving around the chessboard, and one mistake might not only check your king but release evil this world hasn’t seen for three hundred years,” Daniel said.

Stephanie was perplexed by Daniel’s cryptic speech and the strange events unfolding. But Elias seemed to understand him.

He offered a slow nod, put his hand in his pocket and then held it out to Stephanie. “Take this straight to Kit. Did you really think I’d have it on display somewhere? Something this valuable?” Elias teased.

Stephanie blushed. “No better way to hide than place it in the open,” she defended herself.

“Go, Stephanie. Kit needs you,” Daniel said. “There is a storm coming, which means you’ll not be safe.”

Stephanie glanced out of the window and paled.

“Take this too. Kit will need it,” Elias murmured and pressed something else into her hand.

Looking down, her eyes widened.

“I’ll return soon,” she promised Elias, then fled for her car.

“Start talking, Blackwood,” Elias demanded, piercing Daniel with a gimlet eye.

Daniel threw back his coattails and sat down. “Grab me a drink, my dear fellow. It’s time we had a chat!”

CHAPTER EIGHT.

Stephanie

As she skidded into the parking space away from The White Witch, Stephanie knew she was in trouble. The sky had darkened beyond belief. With heavy rain pouring, she'd have to run to the door.

She could already sense Justin skulking around, too. His aura was like poison in the air. Stephanie could either drive off, but he'd be able to follow, or make a run for it.

As she sat there, a bright light spilled from The White Witch.

Stephanie didn't hesitate but dashed out of the car and ran for the front of the inn.

The door was thrown open, and Kit waited, lit by the inner lights.

"Faster!" he roared. Stephanie felt Justin behind her, and the memory of his claws made her speed up. She fell through the entrance and into Kit's arms.

Kit held her tightly as they tumbled backwards, and he absorbed the impact of their fall. The air left their lungs in a huff, and Kit kept his arms wrapped around her.

"I didn't know this storm was coming, or I'd never have let you out," Kit gasped as he remained holding her.

"Sorry, I didn't pay attention to the radio either. That came out of nowhere," Stephanie rasped when she got her breath back. "Were you aware Justin could come out during bad weather?"

"I had an idea but wasn't sure," Kit replied.

Stephanie lay her head on his chest. The fear she'd felt when Justin had been on her heels was fading with Kit's arms around her.

“Your brother is a bully and a jerk,” she murmured, and Kit’s chest heaved with laughter.

“You met Elias?”

“Did I!” Stephanie exclaimed and proceeded to tell Kit all about his antics.

At some point, they got up and moved to the fireplace, where the fire roared cheerfully. Kit couldn’t settle until he had his arms back around her and her head leaning against his chest. Stephanie was only too happy to oblige.

“Elias gave you it?” Kit asked as she reached the end of her tale.

Stephanie saw he was rather agitated on her behalf, and she patted his muscled thigh to soothe him. She pulled the trap out of her bag, and Kit let out a cry of delight. Then she yanked the second item out, and Kit’s mouth dropped open.

“That’s Elias’s diary of kills,” he whispered as his fingers touched the leather cover reverently.

“Is that what it is?” Stephanie appeared rather bemused.

“Yes,” Kit replied, unable to take his eyes off the book. “We all had one. The book detailed the kill and how we managed it. Elias was a member of the team that defeated the Human Killer in the past. The details will all be here. I read the other book, and while helpful, it didn’t detail the killing method.”

“Wonderful!” Stephanie exclaimed.

“For Elias to give you this, he must have trusted you. None of us would part with this. On our deaths, these were meant to go to Wollscombe’s library. I suppose the fact that there was nobody left to collect them means everyone still has theirs. I know I have mine.”

Stephanie watched as Kit’s lean fingers opened the book, and a message fell out.

“What?” he asked in surprise before reading the note.

“Brother, how typical of your memory to fail you, and I would imagine it is only on one word you can’t remember. The chant below is the banishment for a hell’s spawn demon. Use it and

free yourself from your imprisonment. And she's rather delightful, unlike my pest, who is a complete harpy!"

"I didn't see him write that!" Stephanie gasped.

"Lucian said Elias was always the sneaky one. And Lucian never lied," Kit muttered with a chuckle.

"Who is Daniel Harrington?" Stephanie asked.

Kit paused in his review of Elias's diary and looked at her, confused.

"Where did you hear that name? That is a blast from the past. Harrington was a snot who was the Marquess Blackwood. He and five friends were known as the Rakehell Six. Viscount Ravenell, Harrington's best friend. The Earl Mortimer was the thinker of the group and their trusted confidant.

"The next member was a chap called the Black Duke. His moods were dark and terrible, and he didn't suffer fools easily. That was the Duke of Monmouth. There was the Duchess Windmere, the only one who was married, and finally Lady De'Lacy. The six of them were bright and beautiful and filled with finding their own pleasure.

"They'd ride steeple races one day, and the next be at a duel or in a back street fight house. Normally, society would have shunned the women. Still, they were rich and prosperous, and Her Grace's husband, Henry Harcourt, was a powerful duke. Nobody wanted to cross Windmere. From my recollection, the Rakehell Six gave him hell for over a year while he waited to marry Emile. I will say it must have been love because anyone else would have left the country to flee them. Harcourt held on tightly.

"The Rakehell Six were society's indulged, naughty children, highly sought after catches, and many attempted to trap one of them into marriage and failed. I recall a tale of Mortimer hanging over the walls of a castle to escape some woman who had tried to proposition him." Kit laughed. "They were decent people, I would say, although empty-headed and aimless."

“Daniel Harrington is alive,” Stephanie said, and Kit blinked. She waited for his response.

“Sorry, dove. But I thought you said he’s alive. Blackwood passed away three centuries ago.”

“That was a better reaction than Elias. This Daniel, he announced all the Rakehell Six, Henrietta and Harcourt, were returned to life,” Stephanie elaborated.

Kit’s sudden movement sent him to his feet as he leapt up and began pacing back and forth.

“The Rakehell Six are alive? Is this some terrible joke the universe is playing on us? And Blackwood definitely stated Henrietta and Windmere were too?”

“Henrietta, yes, and someone called Harcourt.”

“Well, who’d have seen that one coming? Talk about a kick in the teeth. We sacrifice our lives to stop the spread of evil. Still, the Rakehell Six, a blight on society, are given a second chance,” Kit announced with bitterness.

“Daniel made it appear as if something bigger was in motion,” Stephanie said.

“Oh, Blackwood would. He was a pompous little arse at times. Not as bad as Monmouth or Mortimer, but he had his moments. We were somewhat adversaries. Nortons were taught to play hard in our quiet times, so we had balance. And the Rakehell Six were our rivals and certainly not above cheating!” Kit exclaimed.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Never fear confiding to me,” Kit ordered, pulling her into his arms.

Stephanie rested her head on his chest. “Okay,” she whispered.

They stood like that for several moments, content in one another’s company.

A sudden bang boomed through the inn, followed by a piercing female shriek.

“The White Witch!” Kit yelled, leaping free and running for the stairs.

Stephanie smelled burning, grabbed a fire extinguisher, and raced after him. As she reached the top, black smoke came from his room. She ran in and gasped as she saw the broken window and flames coming from his desk. She immediately turned the extinguisher on and aimed it at the fire.

Kit was grabbing the other book and the demon trap. Once he had those items, he darted backwards and allowed Stephanie to put the fire out.

“No!” Kit exclaimed, horrified.

Stephanie looked at the item in his hands and blanched at the thick black line running down the middle of it.

“What happened?”

“The White Witch is showing me a forked bolt of lightning hit the window and blew through her protection barriers. She’s shored them up for now, but she’s weak. Between the storm, Justin, and this creature, The White Witch can’t last much longer. We have hours before she fails. I need to read Elias’s diary and memorise the banishment. And I can’t get you out of here either. The moment you cross the threshold, Justin will be on you,” Kit snarled.

Stephanie watched as he raked his fingers through his hair.

“Must you be the person reading the spell?” Stephanie asked.

“No,” Kit replied after several moments of thought.

“So if we prepare, then I can read the banishment. And you can take care of Justin,” Stephanie suggested.

“I can leave you in here and up the protection till the morning. That might give you a chance to escape,” Kit offered, but he looked uncertain.

“We’re in this together, Kit. I’m not leaving you to fight alone.” Stephanie’s tone was firm.

“My warrior queen,” Kit stated proudly.

“Let’s kick some tush!” Stephanie said.

Kit

Kit found chalk and began drawing the banishing circle on the wooden floor near the far fireplace, away from any doors. Kit wasn't willing to risk Justin coming through a door at Stephanie while she was in the middle of the banishment.

Stephanie watched as he drew the symbols and explained what each one meant. Kit also showed her where to stand so the demon couldn't consume her. As soon as the circle was prepared, he began going over the chant with her. Stephanie found it pretty easy to pick up, which eased his worry a lot. Once he was sure she had it, he started flicking through the diary Elias had sent.

He finally discovered the entry and read carefully. Kit had been correct. The only way to kill a Human Killer was to behead them. But as they rarely manifested, it left Kit with a serious issue. Elias explained in his diary that Lucian had insulted the heck out of the one they'd encountered before it materialised.

How could Kit get Justin to manifest physically? That was a problem. Justin could easily kill Stephanie in his spectral form. Kit was still working on the dilemma when a sense of dread crept over him. The White Witch sounded a warning, and a loud crack echoed through the inn. At the same time, Kit felt the protection barriers drop in their intensity.

"Stephanie!" Kit called.

She looked up, and with a beautiful smile, she walked to the centre of the circle. Kit marvelled at her bravery as she showed no fear of facing a real demon from hell.

A dark laughter rang throughout The White Witch. It sent chills down their backs, but Kit noted Stephanie square her shoulders. Inside the circle, she had some protection. The trick was to leave it as the demon stepped into it. Until he did, Stephanie couldn't begin the chant.

"Christopher," his name whispered echoing within the walls.

Kit ignored it as he sent what he could spare of his energy towards the flagging wards. They had one to keep inside and

one to keep out and the barrier was on the verge of collapse.

Stephanie stood determined and sweet in the lights they'd left on.

"I smell innocence," the call drawled, and Kit winced as he heard claws scratching on the walls.

"Stay strong. If it looks like you're going to fail, run. I'll hold Justin off as long as I can. Go to Elias," Kit whispered.

"We're in this together," Stephanie said, and he saw her stubbornness flare.

"Christopher..." It played with his name like a cat with a mouse. "Did you bring me dinner?"

A figure appeared at the bottom of the stairs, and Kit stared. He'd forgotten to warn Stephanie what the demon looked like, and he witnessed her hesitation before she stiffened her shoulders.

Stephanie faced a replica of himself. The only difference was the scaly skin. But his features... the demon shared them. Kit saw recognition flare in Stephanie's eyes.

"It stole your body," she gasped out but luckily didn't move.

"Mine," the demon hissed.

"I doubt that very much," Stephanie challenged.

The inn shook from a loud thud, causing the demon to glance at the door.

"A Human Killer? How interesting."

"For you, it's not an issue," Kit snapped. He was carrying a sword, one Lucian had gifted him, and was prepared to fight.

"You'll not stop me, boy. And she's a tasty morsel. I've starved for centuries, wretched human," the demon hissed.

"You should have stayed in hell," Kit replied.

"Where's the fun in that?" the demon demanded.

"Zorathal, I command you to leave," Kit roared.

The demon flinched and then chuckled.

As he laughed, Kit felt Justin hit the walls, and this time, they failed. The door flew open, and Kit's worst nightmare happened.

Stephanie was now in danger from two entities, both intent on tearing her apart to destroy her beautiful soul. He darted in front of the shadow that was Justin and slashed through his misty body, the pure silver in the sword causing Justin to roar in pain and move away.

"Stephanie is mine," Justin howled, the words sounding mangled.

Zorathal turned and faced Justin. "Mine!" he hissed as his teeth elongated and his talons lengthened.

Kit found himself ignored as the two dark entities faced each other.

"Mine to kill!" Justin cried and launched forward.

Zorathal shifted, caught the misty figure, and flung him backwards.

Kit was taken aback by the unexpected turn of events.

Zorathal could touch Justin.

Kit moved aside, slowly working his way to stand in front of Stephanie. Meanwhile, Justin slashed at Zorathal and cut his torso. The demon turned enraged and puffed up. Kit winced as his body grew to over eight feet tall. But it didn't faze Justin, who was so obsessed with Stephanie that all it could think of was getting to her.

They clashed again, their speed so fast, it seemed like lightning. When they broke apart, Kit could see both were bleeding. Justin licked his claws, sucking the demon's blood off them. Justin's increasing strength didn't seem like a positive development to him. He rushed Zorathal and flung him across the bar. Chairs and tables splintered under the demon's fall.

Justin's head snapped towards Stephanie, and he began stalking forward.

Kit readied himself. His sword came up, and he was ready to fight.

Before he could swing, Zorathal's hand clutched Justin's neck, and he picked him up and threw him against the wall. The inn shuddered, and Kit worried that they might tear The White Witch apart in their battle for Stephanie.

"You need to leave," he whispered.

"I don't think so. Either of them could catch me." Stephanie shook her head, eyes wide with fear. Kit noted her lips kept moving, and he realised she was repeating the chant under her breath. He ducked as a table flew towards him, and he reached out with his powers and directed it away from Stephanie, who had crouched on the floor.

Kit wished he could save her from this. Stephanie was as white as a ghost and clearly terrified. But she wasn't ready to leave, and he couldn't force her.

"My soul, my meal! My reward!" Zorathal bellowed as he swung a mighty claw at Justin. It was a decapitating move if Kit had ever seen one. Still, Justin hadn't materialised, and it went through his body, although it left damage.

Justin roared, and his talons shredded Zorathal's chest.

Kit kept a sharp watch on the combatants. Whenever they came close to Stephanie, he erected a barrier to protect the circle. He wasn't strong enough to keep it up, and The White Witch wasn't making her presence known. But she hadn't disappeared. He could feel her faintly, but she was in no condition to fight.

The battle persisted, stretching from minutes to an hour and then two. Both sides stood firm, unwilling to surrender or retreat. They both thirsted for Stephanie for different reasons. Justin to rip her apart and win over Cole. Zorathal because he'd been imprisoned, and Stephanie was the ultimate prize. A soul as pure as snow.

Kit stayed alert, not knowing which blow might turn the tide. The bar of The White Witch was mere kindling now, and there were several large dents in the walls.

His once pristine and beloved home certainly resembled a battle scene. Kit rather perversely realised what a compliment it was to Stephanie to have two creatures ready to fight to the death over her soul. Although it was one he wished that didn't exist.

Anytime someone came near Stephanie, Kit lashed out with his sword, dealing a stinging blow.

Stephanie remained alert, but she was now sitting on the floor. Her body was prepared to leap up and escape the circle when she needed to. Kit longed to tell her how proud he was of her. But he dared not distract her. His heart swelled with an emotion he recognised as love. This woman who owed him nothing, who'd been beaten and terrified, was standing up for him and his inn. To help him protect the world from an evil that she understood couldn't be allowed to walk free.

Stephanie was remaining steadfast beside him for no other reason than she knew he needed her help.

Kit swallowed hard. She truly was a walking miracle. And no matter what, he'd ensure Stephanie got the life she deserved. The husband, children, and white picket fence. The things he yearned to give her remained out of reach. Kit ignored the pang in his heart because he loved her enough to let her find genuine happiness. Even without—

A roar caught his attention, and his eyes widened as he spotted Zorathal shove his fists through Justin's form and tear it apart. He swapped glances with Stephanie as she got slowly to her feet. Kit turned as Zorathal threw what was left of Justin into a corner and spun, licking his lips as he gazed at Stephanie.

He caught a glance of a flicker, and then Justin roared, materialised, and slung himself at Zorathal's back.

Kit saw his chance, leapt forward, and swung his sword.

It sliced cleanly through the air, and Justin's eyes widened as the blade cut through his neck like a knife through butter. Kit longed to give Stephanie a warning, but there was no time as Justin's head rolled free of his body.

It immediately began to crumple and turn to dust.

“Standing in that circle doesn’t protect you,” Zorathal said, grinning. “It traps you inside with me.”

Kit swung around to face Zorathal, but with a speed he’d not expected, Zorathal appeared in the demon circle. As Kit’s mouth opened to scream in denial, Zorathal reached for Stephanie. The White Witch suddenly materialised and flung Stephanie outside it with the last of her strength. From her position on the floor, Stephanie began shouting the chant in a loud, clear voice.

Zorathal spun as he sought a weakness within the chalk lines.

“Keep repeating it. It will take several tries,” Kit yelled as he sank to his knees.

For his lack of participation in the battle, Kit was strangely tired. He kept one eye on Justin’s rapidly decomposing form. Kit was watchful in case that scoundrel returned from the dead—again.

Stephanie’s voice rose above Zorathal’s as she kept up the chant perfectly.

Zorathal made threats and demands and flung himself against the circle’s magical barriers. Still, he was trapped and at Stephanie’s mercy. And it appeared she had little to give as she climbed to her knees and then stood in front of him. A wind swept through the inn, lifting her hair and floating it around her face, and still she continued. With a final triumphant shout, she clapped her hands together and started the chant again.

Stephanie’s voice rang pure as strength flowed through her, and Zorathal began to smoke. He screamed obscenities aimed to make Stephanie falter, but it was as if she couldn’t hear them. Stephanie didn’t pause, hesitate, or stop until Zorathal burst into flames.

She moved away from him, the words pouring from her lips as fire consumed more and more of him.

Zorathal finally disappeared in a huge explosion of fire, which knocked them both off their feet.

They sat up together and gazed at the circle. There was nothing there apart from the chalk and some burned wood.

“Did we win?” Stephanie asked hoarsely.

“Yes,” Kit replied, scrambling across to her. He gathered her into his arms and kissed the top of her head as he rocked her back and forth. Stephanie clung to him with just as much emotion.

“I was terrified he’d get free,” Kit said after several minutes.

“Nope.” Stephanie held up the demon trap Elias had given her. With everything that had gone on, Kit had clean forgotten about that.

“You had that the whole time?” Kit inquired.

“Yes, he was going down one way or another!” Stephanie announced.

“You’re a miracle.” Kit kissing her head again.

“The White Witch, she saved me.”

Kit felt grief wash over him.

The White Witch had sacrificed herself to save Stephanie and the villagers, just like he had three centuries ago.

“She’s dying. I can barely feel her. She’s a mere flicker,” Kit murmured.

Stephanie stiffened in his arms.

“What? No!” Stephanie cried, sitting up. “There must be something we can do.”

“I’m not strong enough to hold her to life,” Kit replied as his eyes filled with tears.

“I will not let her go. We have to do something, Kit!”

Kit sought The White Witch.

Her weak consciousness reached for him, reassuring him everything was okay with her. She regretted nothing. As Kit struggled to hold her faint life force, another presence swept into play.

Strong and proud, Wollscombe made herself known. She slapped Kit around his head as she settled, and her strength surpassed them all. Kit felt a fourth join them and knew Stephanie was with them. Wollscombe reached for The White Witch and gathered her into her embrace.

Kit was stunned as Wollscombe breathed life into the faint presence of The White Witch. Wollscombe pulled on Kit and Stephanie, binding them both to the fluttering force, and Kit sensed The White Witch respond. Gently and belying her strength, Wollscombe fed her own power into The White Witch. Slowly, The White Witch grew stronger, Wollscombe coaxing her and sending little sparks of power into her until The White Witch glowed as brightly as ever.

Joy burst from The White Witch as she revelled in their presence. Her trills hit the high notes, not in shrieks but in musical notes so pure they could have made angels weep. Wollscombe slowly withdrew, her job done. The White Witch flew at her and embraced her, and they all heard Wollscombe chuckle before she slapped Kit one more time and disappeared.

Kit opened his eyes and met Stephanie's tear-filled gaze. He knew that she'd felt everything he had and was awed by it.

"That was Wollscombe?" Stephanie whispered.

"Yes."

"She's a power to be reckoned with."

"Oh, indeed," Kit agreed.

"And she likes to slap you around the head!" Stephanie laughed.

"That's her way of telling me to get over myself." Kit gathered Stephanie in his arms. "I love you, dove."

"I love you too. Why on earth do you think I went through all this?" Stephanie giggled, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I was going to set you free. Let you find a husband and have children and the white picket fence," Kit admitted.

Stephanie snorted. “That isn’t what I desire. I want an inn with her own mind, a ghost who’s a hero, and our life. It’s not so bad, is it?” she asked.

“No. And now I’m not trapped. I can leave the inn. Be seen with you. But I can’t give you my name,” Kit said mournfully.

“There are ways around everything, Kit. For now, let’s just be happy we won.”

Kit decided that wiser words were never spoken. He held Stephanie close as The White Witch filled the inn with happiness and joy.

CHAPTER NINE.

Kit

Stephanie was excited as she drove along the lanes. She'd mentioned a surprise for him, but he had no idea what. Ever since they'd banished Zorathal, beheaded Justin, and saved The White Witch, which was two weeks ago, things had been perfect. The entire bar had been destroyed, and they'd hired skips and cleaned out the broken furniture. Stephanie had contacted a builder called Mr Evans to come and replicate the ruins.

Mr Evans had gazed curiously at them both but hadn't said anything unless it was along the lines of the building. But Kit felt the man's eyes on him and sometimes saw awareness and approval in them. Kit sensed he had hidden knowledge but didn't press for answers. Once they'd been given a date, it was like Stephanie went into overtime.

As Kit hadn't been outside for three hundred years, it appeared Stephanie was determined to make up for it. The day after the battle, she'd prepared a picnic, and they'd eaten it in the gardens at the rear of The White Witch. Initially terrified, Kit crossed the threshold only after a forceful boot up the backside from The White Witch. Kit had admitted ruefully that it was rather an effective way of kicking him out.

Kit had been petrified he might disappear when he left the safe walls of the inn. Sitting in the sun for the first time in three centuries was a miracle. Especially with Stephanie sitting beside him on a blanket and looking picture-perfect in a pretty sundress. Kit had ended up lying on his back with Stephanie curled into him and her leg hooked over his. And he couldn't remember anything as wonderful as that afternoon.

But if he thought that was amazing, Stephanie had upped her efforts each day since.

The next day, they'd walked to the small lake, where they'd swam and laughed. Then there'd been other picnics in further out places and pub lunches. She cheekily called it

research to gain information on their rivals. Kit just went along with her. They'd visited a museum, and Kit was rather saddened when he recognised items from his own era.

What was now considered antiques were once new ideas for his generation. But Kit shrugged it off and thanked his blessings that he had this time with her. A week after the banishment, he'd asked to see his siblings' inns. Stephanie had said nothing, but she'd driven him to Jekyll and Hyde first. There he stared, stunned, as the Rakehell Six and their spouses came and went freely. He saw his brother Lucian standing strong with his arms wrapped around a woman who Stephanie identified as Maggie.

There'd been something different about Lucian, and he realised what it was when Lucian stumbled and stubbed his foot. The fact it had hurt Lucian stunned Kit. Ghosts didn't feel physical pain usually, and definitely not from stubbing a toe.

"He's alive," Kit had whispered, recognising the truth.

Confused, he'd asked Stephanie to drive them away. She took them to The Crown next. Although they didn't get too close, they could hear a roaring argument between Callie and Elias. Kit smiled as Callie gave as good as she got, and he heard an indignant yell from Elias.

"Shall we go in?" Stephanie had inquired.

"No, it's not time. Something is telling me to wait," Kit had answered.

From there, they visited The Rose and caught Issac being drenched in a bucket of ice-cold water. His annoyed yells echoed, and both Stephanie and Kit chuckled. Especially when Tilly came racing out, her hair a dreadful orange.

"Dear God," Stephanie had muttered, horrified. "She loved her hair colour. She'll kill him!"

At The Black Cat, they found Benedict and Mariah. They sat in a love swing in front of the inn, rocking back and forth, completely in their own world. Kit noted the pub was also open and serving customers. In a top window, he caught a

glance of Lady Catherine, who gazed out at them. She tilted her head in acknowledgement and faded away. Kit guessed that Benedict had miraculously returned to life too.

The Green Man, he'd left till last. It would pain Kit deeply to see his twin. And see her, he most certainly did. He stared, horrified, as CeeCee covered Cole in honey, butter, feathers, and something Stephanie identified as glitter. Then he watched carefully as Cole rather good-naturedly dealt with her.

In the midst of the fight, Lucian and Benedict arrived and entered the inn, prompting Kit to ask Stephanie to leave.

He'd been quiet that night, churning everything over in his head. A miracle was at play. The Rakehell Six and their spouses had returned. Lucian and Benedict were alive. Kit wondered why he wasn't and assumed the answer was there was something else he had to do. He wasn't jealous of his siblings but overjoyed for them. Even if he didn't return from death like Lucian and Benedict, he had Stephanie.

Some days they spent cooking and planning a future. No matter how the day started, it began with them together and ended the same way. Stephanie had ordered him some modern clothing so he could go out and about in public. And he had to admit he wasn't a great fan of the current fashion. But he sucked it up for Stephanie.

Today, she'd insisted on him wearing jeans and a jumper. The warm weather made Kit feel a bit uncomfortable. He had boots on his feet, having shunned what Stephanie called trainers.

Kit didn't like them at all. As they'd got in the car, he'd seen his riding boots hidden under a blanket and wondered what Stephanie was up to now.

She chatted merrily away as she drove to their destination. That was something else he was trying to comprehend. The speeds a car could reach. It was frightening. But Stephanie recognised it and broke him in gently. The first time she'd hit seventy miles per hour, Kit had nearly needed scrapping off the roof. After realising that Stephanie had stuck to back lanes, slowly building up his trust.

Now, she was bouncing in her seat, and Kit adored watching it. Since the banishing, Stephanie's confidence had grown. Kit loved seeing her bloom. And he couldn't love her more if he tried. Stephanie owned him heart and soul, and he knew she felt the same way. The White Witch had got into the habit of slapping him when he had doubts about their relationship. Something Kit believed she'd inherited from her encounter with Wollscombe.

Stephanie drove down a narrow lane and passed through a gate. She ordered him to close his eyes as he saw a sign, and he obeyed with a sigh. Kit wouldn't ruin her surprise.

He sensed the car stop, and Stephanie told him to open his eyes.

When he did, a gasp of delight escaped him.

They were at a stable.

"You mentioned you loved to ride, and I rode up until a few years ago. I thought we could take some horses out," Stephanie explained.

"This is amazing," Kit said, almost as excited as Stephanie. They got out of the car, and Stephanie sheepishly handed over his riding boots.

"I stole them from your room," she admitted.

Kit chuckled.

"I noticed them and wondered why you'd hidden them. The blanket shifted a little," Kit replied as she pouted.

"Oh, it ruined my surprise!"

"Not at all, I honestly didn't know we were coming here," Kit denied. He couldn't help but feel excited about riding again. It had been a sport he'd loved, and he had spent every day on horseback, even if only a short jaunt around the park.

A man met them and introduced himself. After signing some forms and then having a trial run, he let them take two horses out on their own. Kit could well understand why. Many claimed riding skills and didn't possess them. He was heartened by the owner's care towards his animals.

They rode for several miles, just at a canter, until they found a nice spot, and then Kit discovered the second part of his surprise.

Stephanie had asked the stables to also provide a picnic.

As he relaxed on the blanket with Stephanie lying with her head on his lap, Kit honestly thought this was the most perfect of all their dates.

Nothing could ever beat this day, and he'd remember it until his final passing. It was a beautiful sunny day, the sky blue with fluffy white clouds. The horses grazed near the tree they were tied to, and the smell of wildflowers floated through the air.

No, nothing could surpass this feeling of being at peace with your loved one in your arms...

"Are you certain of that, young Norton?" a voice asked.

Kit moved so suddenly that Stephanie rolled off his lap and banged her head.

In front of him was a hazy shape.

"What the damnation?" Kit exclaimed as he hastily checked Stephanie over. She slapped his hands away and stared at the figure.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"A friend." The stranger sat. It reached for a sandwich and bit into it. "Rather tasty for human food."

Kit was moving Stephanie behind him while monitoring the stranger. It appeared to be made of mist, but he knew somehow it was as solid as he was. It seemed as if the figure was deliberately hiding its features as the mist swirled around.

"What type of friend?" Stephanie demanded.

Kit sighed. She refused to be excluded or hide in his shadow. Stephanie resisted moving from his side.

"You may call me Haniel," she said.

Kit wracked his brains. He knew that name, and suddenly, he stared at the intruder, dumbstruck.

“Haniel, the Archangel of Joy?”

“That is me, and what happiness you both bring me! Such a pure love between the two of you. And your heart, Kit. Not a jealous tinge that your siblings live and you yet don’t.”

“Yet?” Stephanie pounced on the word.

“Yet. I am not alone. May I introduce my brothers, Lucifer and Metatron?” Haniel asked as two more figures appeared beside her.

They sank to the ground.

“An angel?” Stephanie whispered, stunned.

“An archangel, my dear,” Metatron corrected.

“Oh, sorry. My apologies,” Stephanie murmured as Kit drew her into his side.

“Is this an intervention?” Kit inquired, trying to absorb the fact there were archangels in front of him. Kit knew Lucifer wasn’t the devil everyone made him out to be. He wondered what on earth was happening?

“I am the Archangel of Life, or I’m also known as God’s voice,” Metatron informed Stephanie, who appeared bemused.

“And I am not the damn devil, but his jailer,” Lucifer stated.

Stephanie turned to him. Kit noted how her eyes seemed to see something he couldn’t.

“That hurts you, to be thought the same as him. But I see your true intentions and heart. It’s as pure as these. You’re no demon or devil,” she replied softly.

Kit sensed rather than saw Lucifer soften towards her.

“And young Master Norton is indeed lucky to have you,” Lucifer responded.

Stephanie blushed at the compliment.

“May we ask why you’re here?” Kit asked politely. It wouldn’t do to upset archangels.

“This tragic world is not as it should be, Christopher. It is wrong. We’re working on repairing what’s broken. But God’s Scourge is needed. A battle nears, and it won’t be the conclusion of the war, but it will spell the resolution of this problem. The war is being fought on multiple fronts. The archangels are now taking action before humanity destroys itself and old Boney wins,” Lucifer said.

“Old Boney?” Stephanie asked.

“The Devil. He exists, and he is pure evil. I have held him imprisoned in Hell for so long, but he continues to try to escape and influence this plane of existence,” Lucifer answered.

“I don’t understand,” Stephanie murmured.

“Earth, Heaven, and Hell are one planet but different planes. When our deaths occur, our souls still exist, but how we live our lives depend on which plane we go to. The wicked journey to Hell, while the good discover Heaven. It’s not as black and white as the Bible makes out. A person who commits a crime may spend the rest of their life making up for it and achieve Heaven. Or a nice person could commit an offence so heinous it cancels out their good deeds. All I know is when we pass, we cross over to something called Judgement, and from there, it is decided where our souls will go,” Kit explained.

“Okay,” Stephanie said after a few minutes. “So, the Devil is bad, bad.”

“Yes. His disruption of this world has been ongoing for many centuries. Now, the archangels are fighting back. And God’s Scourge is needed. You, Christopher, have two vital battles ahead of you. One tonight and one soon. Our goal is to support you in both. The world requires God’s Scourge,” Metatron said.

“Two more?” Stephanie asked, looking worried.

“We’re here to give Christopher some gifts which will aid him, Stephanie. Do not fear,” Haniel stated gently.

“Am I going to lose him after just finding him?” Stephanie whispered to Lucifer.

Lucifer reached out his hand and stroked her cheek.

“No, sweet girl. No pain shall further bruise you. But you must trust in Christopher and listen to him. Your heart will play a crucial role in healing the world. You will lead the way,” Lucifer declared.

“Lead the way?” Kit asked, picking up on the phrase. “The Rakehell Six. That’s why they came back first. They’re all strong peers and were well respected in my time. Despite being rivals, they were good-minded individuals.”

“With pure hearts. Even the grumpy Viscount Ravenell. The Rakehell Six are making waves in society with their old fashioned ideals. God’s Scourge didn’t have the power they did within society. Oh, you’re more powerful than them, but only in hunting evil. Between the Rakehell Six and God’s Scourge, we shall right the wrongs. With their support, you’ll be able to help direct humankind to its real future,” Metatron said.

“I still don’t like them,” Kit muttered, making the three archangels laugh.

“They don’t like you much either. But in time, bonds will tighten, and finally, you’ll find you’re all good friends,” Lucifer added.

Kit inclined his head, but distaste was written across his face.

“If I have to put up with Blackwood and Ravenell, I shall, but I don’t see a great friendship,” he demurred.

“And that, Christopher, is why we’re the archangels,” Haniel replied.

“Very true,” Kit agreed.

“Now, your first gift is life,” Lucifer interrupted. “This may hurt a little.”

Kit rather thought Lucifer had no idea of what hurt a little meant.

A burning swept through his body, something akin to pins and needles but with heat. Kit let out a low moan as Stephanie

grasped his hand. Her eyes held his as tears filled them, and Kit blinked them away. Nobody but Stephanie would ever see him weep, and certainly not three archangels.

A cry left his lips as the burning intensified, and just when he thought he'd pass out from the pain, it began to cool.

Slowly, the agony in his body receded, and his breathing regulated even though he'd not been aware of panting.

"You need to work on your idea of a little," Kit panted towards Lucifer.

"Be grateful, young Norton," Lucifer chided.

"Oh, I am, but blazes, that hurt."

"My gift to you is to sharpen your skills. It's been three centuries since you last battled Christopher. With your body being new, it will be slow to respond to your moves. And you are needed to fight tonight. Make no mistake, the creature you encounter this evening will be one of the worst ever. Not as bad as Zorathal, but close. You need to be fully equipped to engage in combat," Metatron said.

Kit nodded as warmth swept through his new body.

"My gift is a skill which will pass to your brothers and sister and their children. Even with restored balance, evil will persist in the world. I give the Nortons the ability to heal from most wounds. And quicker than usual. You already have somewhat of a healing power, but moving forward, it is not sufficient. This new skill will aid all of your blood. God's Scourge needs to stand strong as God's Army on this plane," Haniel said.

"Thank you," Kit replied, bowing his head. He was slightly overwhelmed by their gifts.

Lucifer turned to Stephanie.

"As long as I hold archangel status, you will only ever know joy from this day forth. You might worry and stress, but happiness shall always be your presiding emotion. For one whose heart is as pure as yours, it deserves nothing less," Lucifer announced, reaching out to touch Stephanie's hand.

Her eyes widened.

“I see your heart as you see mine,” Lucifer added in a whisper.

“Your story needs to be re-written,” Stephanie said.

“Perhaps you will be the one to do it. Look after him, Stephanie, and when it is your time, I’ll be there to meet you. You’ll never walk alone again,” Lucifer promised and faded away.

“Thank you for my gifts!” Stephanie cried out.

“Yes, thank you!” Kit exclaimed as Haniel and Metatron both dissipated.

“Remember, tonight. Cecilia needs you,” Metatron’s voice floated back on the wind before they disappeared completely.

Kit stared into Stephanie’s eyes in disbelief.

“Did that really happen?” Kit asked.

“I think so. We just saw three archangels who gave us gifts,” Stephanie said. She peered at the thermos which had held their coffee. “Do you think that was drugged?”

“I hope not because I swear I feel alive,” Kit replied with a laugh.

“Try to disappear,” Stephanie demanded.

Kit instantly attempted to dematerialise and failed. He blinked in surprise, tried again, and was unsuccessful a second time.

“It’s not working,” Kit muttered. He grabbed a knife from a plate and stabbed it gently into his thumb. Blood welled, and Kit stared at it mutely.

“Kit! You’re bleeding,” Stephanie cried, grabbing his hand and wrapping a napkin around it. Kit pulled his hand free, and they both watched in disbelief as the wound closed itself.

“Damn, I haven’t bled in three hundred years, Stephanie, and never healed like this. They were telling the truth. I’m alive again,” Kit murmured.

“Well, archangels wouldn’t lie,” Stephanie said.

“No, but I’m alive.” Kit was truly stunned.

“Yes!” Stephanie squealed.

“Stephanie, I can give you my name, my body, my children.”

“I already had you, Kit, but this is a bonus!”

“I want four children,” Kit said excitedly.

“Can we get married first?” Stephanie laughed.

“We can do anything you wish, dove. Because we’ve got forever together,” Kit enthused.

“You have a fight tonight, though. And then this final battle. I wonder why they didn’t elaborate on that,” Stephanie wondered, her face darkening a little.

“Whatever comes our way, nothing will ever stop me from coming home to you. Not even death. We’ve eternity, Stephanie,” Kit promised.

“I like the sound of that.”

“Almost as much as me, I bet. And to think, I was trying to drive you away, and all this time, you’ve been my miracle.”

“I’m nobody’s miracle, Kit!”

Kit shook his head in disagreement.

“You’re mine, my angel, and my dove. You’re everything I wished for and didn’t know it. Life was colourless until you came along. There was my duty and my honour, and I loved life, but it was all grey and wishy-washy. Stephanie, you brought the colour to my world, and it’s because of you I’m alive today. That’s special, a miracle whether or not you admit it,” Kit disagreed.

Stephanie leaned forward as Kit kissed her.

“Tonight, I shall battle for CeeCee. Then you’ll meet my siblings, and we’ll discuss where to go from there. But be warned, they better understand we want our privacy!” Kit growled.

“I’ll tell my friends, too, and Cole will undoubtedly want to interrogate you!”

“Good, because I wish to question Cole about what he means to do with my sister!”

“Cole would never hurt her,” Stephanie insisted.

“Dove, I know that. Do you know how I do? Because you’d never trust another villain or allow a monster to infiltrate your friends’ lives. You are too protective of them, and they you.”

“Kit, have you realised that my friends seem to be your siblings’ soul mates? Elias, Callie, Tilly, and Issac are the only ones oblivious.”

“And we won’t tell them. They need to discover that themselves. If we interfere, we could damage the path they’re taking. But come dove, we must return home. I have a battle to win,” Kit said, beginning to pack the remains of the picnic.

Stephanie watched with worry in her eyes that, although Kit tried to alleviate, he couldn’t. Even as he helped Stephanie back onto her horse, he sensed the trepidation within her. Stephanie had never seen him fight properly; she only knew he’d died the last time he confronted a monster.

Unsure how to reassure her, Kit kept up a string of endless babble as they rode back. Stephanie was ill at ease, but it was something she’d have to get used to, as harsh as it sounded. Being a part of God’s Scourge meant he’d witness other battles. Stephanie had to learn that he would always return to her.

Because not even death could stop them.

They’d been promised forever. They planned to use that opportunity to live a wonderful life.

CHAPTER TEN.

Stephanie

Stephanie pulled up outside The Green Man, and her mouth dropped open at the amount of people gathered there. Maggie and Mariah were recognisable, but the others standing around weren't. Apart from the one called Daniel Harrington. Two large dogs stood howling, being held back by two men.

Kit growled at the sight of the strangers as strange lights came from The Green Man.

"The Rakehell Six," he sneered and exited the car.

Maggie and Mariah turned to them, surprised to see them.

"Stephanie, what on earth are you doing here?" Maggie exclaimed.

"It's not a good time for a visit," Mariah added hastily.

"Kit and I know. What do they battle in there?" Stephanie asked.

"Kit?" a guy said, shocked.

"Another damn Norton," a second man complained with a sigh.

"What does CeeCee face?" Kit demanded. "I have little time for games, Ravenell."

"A golem. Cole, Lucian, and Benedict stayed behind to kill it. But they couldn't find its shem and without that... defeating it, Kit, may be impossible," a girl spoke.

"Henrietta, my dear friend, nothing is beyond God's Scourge," Kit replied confidently.

"Cole is inside? He doesn't know how to fight these things!" Stephanie gasped, turning to The Green Man.

"And you do?" Maggie demanded. She was chewing her nails, her attention split between the inn and Stephanie.

“Oh yeah, let’s just say we had a demon from hell to put to bed. And a Human Killer,” Stephanie retorted. She saw Kit readying himself and stepped closer to him.

“You promised me forever. Come back to me, Kit,” she whispered.

Kit’s hand shot out, and he drew her in close. He kissed her thoroughly, ignoring the startled comments that rose around them.

“I will always return to you,” he murmured in her ear.

He lifted his head as he held her tightly.

“Monmouth and Mortimer, you will keep the women out. Whatever happens in there, do not enter until I say so,” he ordered.

Two men who looked older than Kit appeared insulted he was giving them orders, but they bowed their heads.

“Our word,” one said as the other nodded.

“I love you,” Kit whispered and turned away to stride towards the inn.

Kit

“I love you too,” Stephanie cried after him.

Kit felt her words bolster him and peered through a window.

Chaos greeted him, and he took it in within seconds. Lucian lay stunned, and he saw CeeCee go flying into Benedict and knock them both down. The last man standing, who Kit assumed was Cole, stabbed at the golem bravely with a spear, only to take a thunderous blow. Cole slid into Lucian and then covered his brother’s body with his own. CeeCee flew towards the golem as it approached the two men and was slapped back.

Kit kicked in the door and launched himself in the air, feet first at the golem. His feet connected with its head and knocked it backwards. Kit was unsure whether it was the

surprise of his entrance or the kick, but the creature was stunned for a few seconds.

“CeeCee, go high!” Kit yelled.

Cecilia didn't hesitate but leapt up and ran towards Kit. In a well-practised move, he bent low as CeeCee reached him, and he threw her upwards. As she flew from his hands, Kit lurched forward and slashed the golem from one hip to another.

CeeCee landed on the golem's back with a war cry, and her blade dug deep into the golem's cheek. It tore open like butter, and Kit saw a piece of paper.

He engaged the golem to distract it as CeeCee reached forward and dragged it out. The golem swung a heavy fist at Kit and backhanded CeeCee. She flew backwards towards Kit, but he grabbed and spun her around. Her feet touched on the wounded cheek, and the golem roared.

Benedict came from nowhere, and his sword slashed through both kneecaps.

As it topped forward, trying to regain its stance, Kit stabbed his sword into the golem's head. Benedict slung Kit clear as the golem's heavy fist smashed where Kit had been standing.

“Now!” Benedict bellowed.

As the golem fought to free itself from the sword and put its legs back together, Cecilia screamed the spell with the golem's shem at the end.

Immense power bolstered her words, enhanced by The Green Man, surged. Such was the strength of it, Lucian was jolted awake and gazed in disbelief at Kit. Both he and Benedict concentrated on keeping the golem away from CeeCee, but her work had been done.

A breeze picked up in the bar, and those on their feet staggered. Ancient phrases drifted on the wind. Vaguely, they could make out voices but not the actual language.

The golem remained frozen as the spell unravelled its very being.

Kit watched as it slowly hardened, but it still strove to reach Cecilia, determined to take her with it. To touch her one last time.

Benedict kicked its arm away as Kit chopped at the other. The first flakes of clay moved into the wind. An unholy screech left the golem's lips as it fought with everything it had. More flakes broke away as the magic holding the golem together failed, with little golden sparks coming from it.

Kit reached out and dragged Benedict back.

Mixed amongst them were tiny black specks, representing the dark magic that had operated the golem. As they watched, the disintegration continued, and finally, there was nothing left of the Golem of Prague. It was completely gone.

Kit sighed in relief even as he caught Benedict's stunned gaze. Benedict's mouth opened and closed as he sought something to say.

"Will the damn thing return?" Cole was the first to speak.

"No," Cecilia said from the safety of his arms.

Kit glowered at Cole, holding his sister, and Cole held his stare steadily and made no move to release her.

"Kit!" the word escaped Cecilia's lips in a strangled cry. She wrenched free, launching into him. "You're alive!"

"Barely!" Kit replied as he swung her high and back to the ground. He grasped CeeCee tightly, sinking his face into her hair. This was the other half of his soul, his twin. The final piece snapped into place, and Kit found his heart whole once again.

Love flowed between them, and the bond they'd always had blew into existence. They revelled in their twin joining, standing quietly and just happy to be in each other's presence. Lucian climbed to his feet in complete disbelief as Benedict hit Kit from the side and encircled him and CeeCee.

Without a word, Lucian approached and enfolded the three of them in his embrace. Kit ducked his head under his elder brothers, like he did when he was a child. Lucian clung tightly to him.

“You’re alive,” Lucian said finally, his voice choked.

“Yes,” Kit replied.

There was a disturbance, and Kit turned and spotted three familiar figures. He saw Lucifer hold a finger to his lips, and Kit didn’t say anything. Happily, he watched the scene play out as CeeCee was given her life back.

Lucian kept a hand on Kit’s neck the entire time, while Benedict gripped his shoulder.

Kit was quite happy... until CeeCee threw herself into Cole’s arms.

“Something you want to tell me?” the youngest Norton male demanded.

Cecilia and Cole exchanged glances and giggled.

Kit wasn’t amused. But he put it aside as Benedict opened the door to the inn and let everyone outside in.

Stephanie flew through the door and into his embrace, claiming a kiss and making Cole give him a severe look.

“Anything you want to tell me?” Cole demanded, repeating Kit’s words.

Kit smirked at him, and Cole’s eyes narrowed.

“Cole!” Stephanie shrieked and attacked him, smacking his chest hard with her little fists. “What were you thinking of? You’re not a fighter!”

CeeCee stepped back, looking bemused as Stephanie continued to berate him.

“Would you have left him?” Cole asked pointedly, tilting his head towards Kit.

“No,” Stephanie replied.

“Then you know why I wouldn’t leave Cecilia,” Cole retorted.

“Oh, she did much worse!” Kit interrupted, ready to stir the pot.

“Worse than a golem?” CeeCee said doubtfully, eyeing Stephanie the same way Cole was eyeing Kit.

“Stephanie took on a Hell-spawned demon and Human Killer at the same time!” Kit announced with a proud expression on his face.

“She did what!” Lucian exclaimed.

“Simultaneously!” Kit repeated.

“You had two to fight?” Benedict asked, confused, his arms around Mariah.

Stephanie glanced at Cole and shuffled her feet uncomfortably.

“Justin came back from the dead. He was a spirit called a Human Killer,” she whispered.

“He attacked here at The Green Man, but I drove him away. I’d no idea he’d hunt you down,” CeeCee said guiltily.

“It’s not your fault. Kit killed him while I fought the demon,” Stephanie said.

“You held a demon off?” Lucian said, flabbergasted.

“Not just held him off, but kicked his scaly arse, too. She sent him to Hell and made sure he stayed there,” Kit explained.

“Maybe we should sit down and get their stories,” Daniel spoke, interrupting.

The Nortons all scowled, and he grinned.

“Hello again, Stephanie,” Daniel said.

Kit snatched her close and glowered.

Daniel only grinned. “Kit, I’d like you to meet my wife. This is Sabine and the mother of my heirs.”

A pretty woman stepped forward and greeted them. Kit grasped it was Daniel's way of saying he wasn't interested in Stephanie. But even so, Kit planned to keep her nearby.

"Well, this is something I never expected to see," Kit finally said, as an awkward silence fell.

"The Rakehell Six and the Nortons together without fighting and squabbling? No, I would have placed a huge wager on that not happening," Henrietta interrupted.

"Funny, me too," CeeCee declared. "But here we all are."

"And with a shared mission," Kit added.

Heads twisted towards him.

"What shared mission?" Tristian demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"Oh boy, it looks like you get to give them all the good news," Stephanie said, laughing at the disgusted look on Kit's face.

"Wonderful," Kit drawled.

Stephanie

Early hours of the morning had arrived when they returned to The White Witch. She greeted them with a joyous blast and then turned all the lights off.

"I think she's telling us it's bedtime." Stephanie laughed.

"Yes, she appears quite adamant about that," Kit agreed.

"Is she suddenly more assertive?"

"Oh yes. I'm wondering if she sucked up a little of Wollscombe's personality. The White Witch's stubbornness has reached a new level. She certainly is growing her character lately."

"Are we going to live here, Kit?"

"Of course. Or were you thinking of somewhere different?" Kit sounded uncertain to Stephanie.

"Well, with CeeCee being sent to find Wollscombe, I didn't know if you wanted us to live there."

“No, Wollscombe has always been Lucian’s. It was never intended to be my family home. There had been talk of us all buying manors or something, but I’m happy here,” Kit said.

“If you’d lived here in your time, you’d have been looked down upon,” Stephanie mused as they climbed the stairs.

“Yes, even shunned by society. While nobility can avoid consequences for many actions, being a full-time innkeeper was frowned upon. It was fine to own inns as they were businesses, but to run them? That was a no.”

“Do we have to be nobility?” Stephanie asked.

“It doesn’t matter either way to me, but the point is, I am. My father was an earl, and my brother is an earl. I may hold the title Honourable, but I am still a peer of the realm.”

Stephanie opened the door and stopped.

On her bed was a package.

“Did you place that there?” she asked, filled with confusion.

“No.”

Kit moved her to one side and approached carefully. When he saw no danger, he unwrapped it and found a letter. He opened it up and began reading. At the end, he was laughing as he handed it to her.

“What is it?” Stephanie inquired.

“Lucifer,” was all Kit said.

Stephanie took the letter and read it. Her lips curved into a smile as she shook her head.

“Dear Christopher and Stephanie,

I have one last gift to award you, although Stephanie may not appreciate it. In order for the plan to succeed, you must be visible and not as a mere Honourable. There are many titles that are dormant. It is rather easy for me to arrange things to suit myself and the needs of the world.

Forgive me, but you are now Lord Christopher Norton, Viscount Oldham. The title was once linked to your lineage

and was separated. It has now been restored. The title comes with a manor house not far from The White Witch, and the fortune that the crown took has also been returned. I think the king has enough money, don't you?

Use your influence well, Viscount Oldham, and enjoy your life. Who knows what surprises lie ahead?

Stephanie turned puce and then pale.

“Lucifer!” she howled. “He made us peers? Lords and ladies? I take back everything nice I said about him! Why would he do this?”

“Because of what’s coming,” Kit stated.

“What do you mean?”

“I believe the archangels are attempting to rescue the world from itself. To accomplish this, they require notable people to make the changes. And they are handpicking them and bringing them back from the dead. Those who died before their time. Influential people that could have made a difference if they’d lived. I think, dove, that those returning died before they fulfilled their destinies. That implies that more will soon join us in walking around. Heaven is making its play, and it’s huge. And dicey. Return the wrong person, and you could blow everything up.”

“But what are we meant to do?”

“Be ourselves and help people. That is all.”

“Oh hell, now I have to learn airs and graces,” Stephanie grumbled.

Kit chuckled, wishing that was all he had to worry about. He sat back and hoped it would be as simple as that. But deep down, despite his reassurance to Stephanie, he knew it wouldn’t be. Heaven was gearing up for a war and they were the soldiers and the archangels, the generals.

The Angels

“Are you ready to explain yet, Lucifer?” Haniel asked as she sat next to him. Lucifer stared at something only visible to him.

“No. It is not time. We have to trust in the Rakehell Six and God’s Scourge.”

“Can I say something?”

“Sister mine, you can say anything you wish. That does not mean that I agree with you or that you’re correct in your opinion,” Lucifer replied.

Haniel smiled. For all his gruffness, she heard the fondness in his voice.

“I think you know of a bigger plan, one we’re not yet allowed to see. I believe it’s connected to Old Boney and the changing world. It’s out of balance. There are more cruel acts than good ones.”

“There are plenty of good acts, Haniel,” Lucifer challenged.

“The bad outweighs the good, Luc, and the balance is off.”

“Haniel, out of all my sisters, you are my favourite. But even if you guessed right, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Metatron wonders if Old Boney has influenced you somehow. I told him he was wrong, but as firstborn, you know what an arrogant ass he can be,” Haniel said, tucking under Lucifer’s shoulder.

“Our brother will never change. But Metatron doesn’t know everything, and that infuriates him. Out of all of us, he has father’s ear the most. I’m aware father confides in him. But there are situations Metatron, for all his power, cannot influence, and this is one of those. It falls to me. And I am tired, Haniel. So very bone weary.

“My name is constantly cursed and taken in vain. I do not know when the Devil and I became one, but in human eyes, we are now. I feel dirty and unwelcome. Amongst my brothers and sisters, you all know the truth, but so many misdeeds are being laid at my feet. It becomes unbearable. Perhaps it is time that once this mission ends, I ask Father for peace,” Lucifer admitted.

“You cannot!” Haniel sounded appalled.

“Oh, sister, I very much can. Even as an archangel, one can become tired.”

“I won’t let you go!” Haniel said fiercely.

Lucifer chuckled. His little sister was completely unaware of the challenge ahead.

He settled in, happy just to be around her, when he heard a howl of ‘Lucifer!’ come from Stephanie. A grin crossed his lips, and he chuckled. He could only imagine how well his last gift had been received!

EPILOGUE.

Wollscombe ignored the little ignorant busybodies trying to get her to communicate as she focused outwards, searching. There, the glimmer of evil was strengthening. With little effort, Wollscombe slapped it back and stamped on it. The evil curled back into itself, but its spiteful thoughts reached Wollscombe. She sent it a warning and then left it alone in its misery.

Wollscombe expanded her search outwards. Long ago, she'd been made a promise, and it was time to collect. Finally, she saw the flicker of brightness and sent waves of love towards it. The light turned its attention towards her, and Wollscombe accepted they'd soon be reunited.

Pulling back within her walls, Wollscombe studied the sleeping man in her most secret chamber. What would her children make of him? He was but one tie to the end, his presence necessary. For now, he slept peacefully, as he had since he'd left life. But even then, Wollscombe had seen his need.

Another man out of time, a faint tie to her bloodline, but not anyone her children knew. His place in the grand plan would soon be known. He'd unlock another puzzle. One her children and the Rakehell Six would help solve. Wollscombe lovingly soothed the man even as she sent a tendril towards her precious daughter. It was time to come home. And free Wollscombe from these infernal nitwits living in her.

The Keeper

“Wollscombe is at it again. I felt her stir earlier, but she refuses to engage,” she said, frustrated.

“We've never conversed with Wollscombe even though we're aware she's there,” The Peacemaker answered.

“Something big is coming; it worries me,” The Keeper replied.

“We all learned the stories. We’re just going to have to trust that Wollcombe hasn’t been corrupted and will answer the call when needed,” The Peacemaker replied.

The Keeper turned her head towards a mirror. Somehow, she knew Wollcombe had a few tricks waiting for them in the background. And none of them were ready.

CHARACTERS.

The Nortons.

Lord Lucian ‘Lucifer’ Norton. Earl of Castleton. He was born in 1690 and died in 1716. His family estate is Wollscombe Hall. When Lucian was eight, he was attacked by a Master Vampire. His father saved him, but they lost his mother to another vampire. Lucian raced to The Jekyll and Hyde to stop Margery from killing another child and casting a wicked spell. He and Margery were never seen again after that night.

He is described as having blond hair that was almost silver, a straight roman nose with dark brown eyes with a tint of green around the edges. Lucian has thin lips and a hint of mischief, but his eyes hold a warning of danger. Maggie describes Lucian’s body as tall and leanly muscled. He is the leader of God’s Scourge, a band of hunters who hunt down evil. His entire bloodline has been committed to this for centuries.

Lord Richard Norton. He was the father of Lucian and his siblings. It is unknown how he died or when he died. He lost his wife when he saved Lucian from a Master Vampire.

Lord Elias Norton. Viscount Forthingay. He was twenty-five when he died. He is a ‘Lord’ while his brothers are ‘Honourable’ because he is Lucian’s heir. When Lucian has a son, Elias will become ‘The Hon Elias Norton.’

The Hon. Isaac Norton. The third child of Richard Norton and twin of Elias. He was twenty-five when he died.

The Hon. Benedict Norton. He was the fourth son of Richard Norton and was twenty-three when he died. He is hot tempered and fully prepared to defend The Black Cat against all intruders.

The Hon. Kit Norton. He was the fifth son of Richard Norton and was eighteen when he died. He refuses to play his usual

tricks on Stephanie as he can see she's been hurt. But he also insists she has to leave. He falls for the gentle woman as she grows in strength and character to stand by his side.

Lady Cecilia Norton. She was the sixth child of Richard Norton and the only girl. She was eighteen when she died and was fondly called CeeCee. She is called the Blue Lady as she wears blue dresses to haunt in, she's also called the Blue Witch by those who know of her powers and finally the Norton Witch. She was in love with James Eddington but he died an old man without children. She is the most powerful witch of her lineage.

The Owners of the Inns.

Maggie Winn. Maggie was adopted after being left in a skip as a baby. Katherine forced an adoption through and doted on Maggie. Maggie is poor. All her family money, her mother's insurance and the sale of the family home went on paying Katherine's bills when Katherine died. Her friends worry about her as they know how broke she is. She wins twenty-five million on the lottery, and her immediate thought is to share it with her friends.

Maggie makes them go on a cruise, and then they each buy an old inn as it was their dream. Maggie is described as beautiful, with golden curls and big brown eyes. Lucian says she has a heart-shaped face, bow-shaped lips and a swanlike neck. He thinks she has excellent hips and a plump behind. Maggie has old-fashioned morals and ethics.

Mariah. Mariah bought the Black Cat Inn and is the first to tell Maggie it's haunted by Benedict. She is the one that frees Benedict from the vampire. Mariah and Benedict clash with one another.

Cole. He is an only child like Maggie and is very close to his friends. He bought The Green Man Inn, and it is haunted by CeeCee. He enjoys Riding. He stubbornly refuses to leave The Green Man and tries to investigate Cecilia at first. He buys a horse called Rebel Warrior.

Stephanie. She bought the Crown Inn and is haunted by Kit. Stephanie was in a relationship with Justin, Cole's cousin who

abused her. Cole beat him up and freed her from the abuse. When she takes over The White Witch she is still recovering from her past and is vulnerable.

Tilly. Tilly bought the Rose Inn and is at war with Isaac. When Maggie calls her, they are arguing violently.

Callie. She bought the White Witch Inn and is haunted by Elias. They are constantly fighting.

Rakehell Six and their spouses.

Lord Daniel Augustus Harrington. Marquess Blackwood. Daniel died when he was twenty-seven. He has brown hair and ice-blue eyes. He's six foot three and lean-hipped and broad-shouldered and wide-chested. Daniel forgives his murderers and, in doing so, saves Sabine and sacrifices himself to achieve that goal. He's stubborn and fierce and loves Sabine with everything he has. Daniel is sent back to finish his destiny, which was ripped from him. He is a member of the Rakehell Six.

Lady Sabine Harrington. Sabine was down on her luck and broke when she was given a chance to inherit Oakwood Manor. She's as stubborn as Daniel and refuses to leave. After Daniel sacrifices himself, Sabine learns she is pregnant and swears that her child will be raised in Oakwood. Sabine is shocked to learn that she holds the feudal rights to Blackwood Village. Her first child is Henry and is Daniel's heir. Sabine marries Daniel when he returns.

St John Courtenay, Viscount Ravenell. He was part of the Rakehell Six. St John was Daniel's best friend. He married Henrietta a year after her mourning period ended. He was murdered. St John was reincarnated but remembers nothing, and his current persona owns Courtenay House and is estranged from his father. He is the current 23rd Viscount Ravenell, but when first born, he was the 17th Viscount Ravenell. St John is arrogant and autocratic but a good-hearted man. He is loyal to the Rakehell Six and wants to unravel the plot around them.

Henrietta Josephine Courtenay nee Harrington. Henrietta was the youngest of the siblings and Daniel's favourite sister.

She fled Oakwood Manor on the night of Daniel's murder after Isabelle attacked her, too. Henrietta stayed at the Manor before being forced to run away with St John Courtenay, who married her at Gretna Green. Henrietta's memories were wiped, and she can't remember her death or St John's. She has brown hair and ice-blue eyes, and a curvy figure. She's five foot five. Henrietta was murdered in 1716; she was pushed down the stairs.

Nicholas Pembroke, Earl Mortimer. Nicholas is the third member of the Rakehell Six. He was three years older than Daniel and St John. Nicholas has dark brown eyes and is six foot three. He was the next one to die after Daniel. Nicholas was trapped in a prison, and Henrietta freed him. Nicholas in Waverley Hall has to use the title Viscount Weybridge.

Nicholas is appalled to realise that Lucian is haunting The Jekyll and Hyde as they were rivals. Still, he understands Lucian's role in keeping the world safe.

Melisandre Pembroke, Countess Mortimer. She has long waist-length silver blond hair and grey eyes and is twenty-four years old. She has a degree in interior design. Melisandre was orphaned at an early age and raised by her aunt Bea. She also looks upon Mr Evans as her uncle. Melisandre has a green and gold macaw, Captain Jack, who's ten years old and a white cockatoo, Blackbeard, the same age. She's had them since she was thirteen.

When Melisandre sets eyes on Maggie, she knows instantly that she's found the next set of ghosts they are meant to help. Nicholas is resistant to the idea, but she forces him to aid Maggie and Lucian.

Lady Emile Harcourt, Dowager Duchess of Windmere. Emile was the first woman of the Rakehell Six. She grew up next to Nicholas's family. Emile was also the first to marry. She married Duke Henry Harcourt in a love match. She was widowed nine months later. Emile was chased from her home by Henry's cousin Cecil who wanted to marry her as she inherited all the money.

Henry Harcourt, Duke of Windmere. Henry died of a broken neck when his horse threw him. Emile insisted he'd been murdered. He left Emile her own house and all his money. Henry returned to Corelle Abbey of his own accord and hoped to find Emile there. Instead, she was gone, and he was trapped in Corelle Abbey.

Lady Lavinia De'Lacy, Countess Torrington Lavinia, was the second woman of the Rakehell Six. She was Tristian's cousin. Lavinia has had all her memories concerning the Rakehell Six wiped out. She has haunted DeLacy Park since her death, and her brother, and his future descendants, all promised to defend her. Lavinia was prophesied to save the Rakehell Six and gives her life force to save Jeremy and Daniel. She is favoured by the archangel Barachiel.

Jeremy describes Lavinia as a tiny porcelain doll with delicate skin, a hint of blush on her cheeks, and lips as red as roses. Lavinia had long, curling black hair and grey eyes with green tints. She was outrageously beautiful but had the temper of a harpy.

Jeremy DeLacy, Earl Torrington. Jeremy has been in love with Lavinia for a long time. He is protective of Lavinia and lies to Rakehell Six to protect her. He becomes infected by ghouls and is dying. Jeremy is heartbroken when Lavinia gives her life force to save him and Daniel.

Tristian Russell, Duke Monmouth. Tristian was the last member of the Rakehell Six. He was a year younger than Daniel and St John. Tristian was known as the Black Duke because he was so dour. He died in 1718. Tristian was the fifth of the Rakehell Six to die. He came back immediately and knew who his murderer was.

He kept the staff on at Eléonore Castle, who grew with him as the years went past. Tristian can roam his estate but not leave its borders. He has kept his village going and interacts with them. He refuses all entry to Eléonore Castle, and she is hidden from people who weren't born in the village. Only villagers can see her.

Abigail Russell, Duchess of Monmouth. Abigail is naïve and innocent and marries Christian, believing him to love her. Instead, he doesn't and beats her down and cheats on her constantly. When she finds Tristian, she thinks it's Christian, and he's playing games with her. Abigail regains her confidence, and Tristian helps her hide her money from Christian.

She falls in love with Tristian and loves Eléonore Castle and the village. Abigail takes an active role in the village life and starts planning a divorce when Christian finds her. She refuses to believe that Tristian is inside Christian's body until the archangels give him his proper body back. Abigail has blue eyes and a heart-shaped face. She has long chestnut hair.

Other Characters.

Margery Cross. Margery was born in 1310 and made a deal with dark forces to become immortal. She tried to destroy the world twice and was on her third attempt when Lucian stopped her. Margery had murdered 12 children, tore their hearts out, and was about to kill the 13th when Lucian freed the child and killed her. She wasn't born to wealth but was an incredibly powerful witch.

Margery has cold amber eyes, plump lips, high cheekbones and a regal, petite nose. She was incredibly beautiful with long, dark, curly hair. She has an aura of evilness about her. Margery is killed by Maggie wielding Lucian's sword, and the opal in which she stored the children's souls is destroyed.

Mr Ben Evans. A specialist builder with experience restoring old homes. He takes charge of restoring Oakwood Manor. Mr Evans is a kind man and protective of women. He has greying hair and a twinkle in his eyes. He's described as a well-built man. Maggie is astounded at how well he handles Lucian's haunting and even takes delight in it.

Jane Allison. She wrote a horrible newspaper article about Maggie making up lies and vicious claims. She was proved vindictive and was the descendant of Margery's illegitimate daughter. Jane had wanted to buy the inn cheap for herself and free Margery for her power. She is now completely insane and

is locked up in a hospital for her own good. She seems to be displaying powers, but Cecilia can't sense magic on her. Her real name is Jayne Cross.

Justin. He was Cole's cousin and very jealous of him. He starts a relationship with Stephanie with the intent of harming her because he knows it would hurt Cole. He died in the book and becomes a Human Killer.

The Angels.

Metatron. He is the eldest angel, known as the archangel of life, ascension, or God's Voice. No one knows quite for sure which role he takes. He is impatient and quick to confront his siblings.

Haniel. She is the archangel of Joy. She is sweet and curious.

Lucifer. He prefers to go by Luc but is feeling very depressed. Humans have forgotten that he and the devil are two separate entities and that he is the archangel in charge of keeping the devil imprisoned. Luc hates that it's his name taken in vain against the devil and that he feels it's time to quit being an angel, as he is so depressed. He feels even his brothers and sisters sometimes forget about who he really is.

Thank you for reading *The White Witch*. Do check out the other titles in this series, and also take a gander at the Love Beyond Death series, book one of which, [Oakwood Manor](#), is out now! If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review at, [Goodreads](#) and [Amazon](#)

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Thank you!

Elizabeth.