

From Sidhe

Chapter One

Laminate flooring was an exorcist's worst enemy.

'Will this do any damage?'

Max looked up from where he was trying to draw a chalk circle. Even carpet held it better than laminate. The mid-afternoon sun streamed from the patio doors right into his eyes, forcing him to squint. His client, Robert Debie, had a whining nasal voice, a thick Yorkshire accent, and the worst comb-over that Max had ever seen. 'Not if you let me do my job.'

'Of course,' Debie said, 'it's just ... me and the wife, we've just bought the place to rent out, and the previous owner never said that it was haunted.'

'I'd take it up with the estate agent, honestly,' Max said. He left a small gap in the circle and stepped out of it, careful to avoid smudging the lines. His backpack was propped against the wall and he pulled out his kit, running through it one final time. It settled his nerves to have it all laid out clearly. Candles, several skeins of silk embroidery thread, scissors. Holy water decanted into an empty Volvic bottle. He picked them up and set them carefully inside the circle.

'I would but I find it a bit silly,' Debie's eyes widened as he realised who he was talking to, and he held out a hand in a placating gesture. 'No offence mind. But I'm not really a superstitious sort. I don't believe in ghosts. But it'll make the wife sleep easier and the letting agent said that people tend to ask. It's for their peace of mind.'

At least they'd had the sense to call him in before the building work started. Disturbances like this had a habit of making things worse.

Max pulled the cap off the holy water, poured a little into his hand and sprinkled it as he walked a rough circle around the room. Debie, for all his claims to not believe, kept a wide berth, edging into the hallway where Max had lit sticks of incense. He'd discovered early on that people seemed more comfortable with the idea of an exorcism if he made sure to include a good amount of ritual, complete with grave-dirt scattered in front of the door. Made it feel more like an event. Made it feel more real, and that was what mattered.

'Is that mineral water?'

'Holy water,' Max replied. He snapped the cap back onto the bottle.

'I thought all of this stuff was more *secular* these days.' Debie said it with an air of extreme scepticism, the kind people normally reserved for salesmen.

'The ghosts you want rid of were probably Christian, and this has meaning to them,' Max replied. It gave him an edge, which was always good, even for the more seemingly mundane of exorcisms.

'Once I close the circle you must not cross it,' he continued, his voice taking on a more authoritative tone. 'Don't touch anything. Don't say anything, no matter what you see or hear.' He'd prefer it if the man left altogether, but people liked to watch, as though it was some sideshow spectacle and not a mostly straightforward spell.

Once inside, he closed the circle with the stub of chalk and pressed his fingers against the line. He fed power, his own magical energy, into the circle until he could feel it around him, humming against his skin. All sound from outside, the wood pigeon in the back garden, the distant buzz of traffic, were replaced with a weighty silence that pressed upon him, pushing down against his shoulders. It felt like the pressure that built before a thunderstorm, an electric charge to the air.

Max closed his eyes, breathed deeply over a count of five, in and out. He shoved away the physical sensations, the cool laminate beneath him, the worn-soft material of his jeans beneath his fingers, the tickle of hair against the corner of his eye. Felt the rise and fall of his chest, the contractions of his ribs. Let his mind drift away from the feeling of breathing.

The air around him grew cold. Max opened his eyes and could see his breath mist in front of him despite the warmth of the day. The light streaming in through the patio windows was that bit dimmer, like gauze had been

pulled over his vision, leaving everything shrouded in translucent grey.

Max laid out three lengths of white embroidery thread on the ground in front of him. It was thicker and coarser than the cotton that he normally used, but harder wearing, the individual strands less likely to fray. He set a single candle, a creamy-coloured taper like the ones you saw in churches, into a holder, and lit it with an old silver cigarette lighter that he'd found in an antique shop. He preferred it to matches; less smoke to muddy the air and confuse the lines of power. The candle burned with a clear yellow light, barely visible in the sunshine, although Max could feel the heat that it gave off.

He picked up the first thread and drew it between his fingers, wrapping it around and between them like a game of Cat's Cradle, only to pull it loose and start the pattern all over again. Each pass added more power to the thread, like charging a balloon with static to make your hair stand on end. It was easy to lose focus at this point, when it was tiring and tedious and repetitive, easy to just go through the motions of something he'd done a hundred times before, but complacency like that always made the spell weaker for him, like it lacked something vital. He made himself count each pass to stave that off, a careful tally of movement, and catalogued the exact texture of the thread and the way that it tensed against his fingers. He continued, eyes dropping half shut, until the thread crackled against his skin, the energy begging to be set loose, to be used. In his vision, it glowed faintly, the blue tint of his own magic giving it colour.

'I summon you,' he began quietly, his fingers still working, twisting the thread into a circle and passing it over the candle flame. He imagined the spirit as it had been described to him by Debie: a man with a low, mournful voice, the sound of footsteps in heavy boots, crockery smashing on a stone floor.

'I summon you.' Max pinched the ends of the thread together, holding it tightly as he passed it over the flame again. Something flickered at the corner of his vision, a shadow elongated for a second. A whisper that he was uncertain he had actually heard.

'I summon you.' He passed the thread over the flame a final time, and knotted the ends together to create a circle. The candle flame guttered briefly, though there was no breeze.

Max raised the circle of thread to one eye and looked through it, letting it shift and narrow his vision to see what was normally hidden. A shadow fell over him. The ghost was barely visible, too worn thin by time to leave much of an impression on the world any longer, like an old VHS that had been played too many times. He'd give it another decade at most before it dissolved entirely into nothing. It was thin, stretched out so that the features were distorted; the mouth gaping wide like its jaw had unhinged and the arms hanging almost to the floor. Its fingers were long and thin and spindly as a spider's legs. Its eyes were empty black pits that unsettled Max to his core.

'Your time is past,' Max said, his voice low and firm. His own words; he had never been fond of the scriptures that some used. He had never been able to imbue them with the conviction that they needed. 'You linger long past your allotted time, and trouble the living with what should not be.'

He heard it speak; muttered gibbering in a voice worn to nothing from use. *All gone yes they're all gone and dead and gone Anne with boils on her face black blood and bile.* The voice was filled with the angry buzzing of flies, iridescent bluebottles fat with death. They'd be feeding on her, feasting on her carcass. Anne. Her lips blue, eyes glazed. He started to turn, to look at her and—

His hand passed close to the candle flame, the brief hot sting of it snapping the hold. He held the thread tightly, a grounding influence now. It was stronger than he had assumed it would be from the way it appeared. An amateur mistake and he'd thrown himself into it. His lips pressed into a stubborn line, movements becoming more exact, more precise. It would not happen again. 'The bonds that held you to this plane are crumbled to dust. Your bones are ash and dirt. You have no place here.'

The spirit froze, held by bindings which appeared to Max as threads of spider silk reaching from the loops around the candle to the spirit in front of him. Max picked up the final thread. The pattern of thread and fingers was more complex this time, and for all that he would have loved to get it done quickly, he didn't want to risk it. His fingers trembled a little, making him clumsy and even slower than caution dictated.

Boils had erupted on its body, staining the memory of skin and clothing, until the ragged coat that it wore was dripping liquid that never reached

the ground. It was truly corrupted. Who wouldn't be after centuries of reliving death?

Max gritted his teeth and ignored the stench of rotting meat that reached him. He heard scratching at the door, the desperate noise of people locked in to trap them with the plague, and the skittering of rats. He felt the stinging split of flesh on the side of his face, a boil bursting. He dug his nails hard into his palm. The trickle of warm fluid wasn't real. He had checked in the mirror that morning and seen nothing but unblemished skin and morning stubble. The tickle at the back of his throat was thirst, not illness. He made himself think about how he would go home and shower and wash away the sweat of the day.

'I command you to leave,' he said and his voice was not a hoarse cry of pain or a ragged growl. That gave him strength. 'I command you to leave.' The spirit thrashed against the bonds, its muttering higher and more disjointed, random word fragments becoming increasingly meaningless.

'I command you to leave!'

He tied that last knot and dipped it into the flame itself, the fibres catching alight and starting to smoulder. The spirit went rigid and let out a howled shriek and exploded into a million flies that vanished as soon as they touched the spell circle.

Stillness. Silence. He barely dared breathe in case he broke it. He waited for any whisper, any stirring, for the prickle of breath on his neck or fetid air in his nose. Nothing.

The thread had left a grubby mark on the tips of his fingers, the smell of smoke lingering. He stared at the mark for a moment, scrubbed his hand against his jeans, then pulled his phone from his pocket. It was a solid weight in his hand, and out of habit he checked his email, the motions repetitive and mindless but comforting. He used the camera to look at himself and confirm that there was nothing wrong with his face. Not even a normal spot.

'Mr Debrise?' Max called finally. 'I'm finished.'

There was a sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs and then the man appeared, looking nervously around the doorway before he stepped inside. 'Is it gone?'

'It's gone,' Max agreed. 'Now, about payment. I take cash or card.'