

DEVOUR
ME



“One—of Windsor Arraigned and Executed
at Hartford for a Witch.”

—An excerpt from the private journal of John Winthrop,
Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, dated 1647 (earliest
recorded proof of an execution for witchcraft in New England)





1

DÁINN

I'll say this much about Jasper Prescott: He's a clever witch. I like haunting someone when they know they're being haunted. It makes the chase all the more delicious. I'm excited about the prospect of sucking him dry. If his soul is half as hearty as his intellect, he'll be a feast unlike anything I've savored in ages.

Don't mistake me, I have no interest in killing him. But I'm bound by my dark mistress and must do her bidding. Ludmilla has ruined me utterly. She only lets me feed when I'm on a job. Trapped in her thrall, I rid the world of magical filth—shifters deep in debt, sticky-fingered witches, the occasional demon who dares to double-cross her. Worthless magical lives. All wasted. All unmourned once they're gone. My mistress unleashes me to feast on their souls. But it's a feast of bones and gristle, barley fit for a stray dog.

Gods, how I miss the taste of a soul worth savoring. I long to feel the rush of it passing between my lips. Instead, I starve. Always eating, never satisfied. No matter how often I claim a soul, I'm forever left wanting more.

Tonight promises to be different, for Jasper Prescott is no bottom-feeding magical misfit. He's a powerful witch. I feel the heat of his magic in his bones—earth and fire, salt and blood. His family history dates back to Burr Island's founding.

I'm surprised Ludmilla wants me to kill him. His death will surely raise suspicions. The mainland police will investigate. With any luck, his coven will too. The coroner's report will list his cause of death as "sudden cardiac arrest." For the humans, that will be enough. But a coven of witches intent on knowing the truth could reveal the latent traces of my magic with a few simple spells.

If the coven finds me, maybe they'll find Ludmilla too. Is it wrong of me to hope?

Perhaps they'll retaliate . . .

I sigh with longing, picturing her dying a fiery death, burned at the stake by a righteous coven of blood-thirsty witches. If wraiths could dance, I would gladly prance around her pyre. For only with Ludmilla's death can I ever be free.

The Prescott witch moves inside his shop, drawing my attention. None of this makes any sense. Ludmilla never cared about the Burr Island witches before now, at least not as long as I've known her. And that's been almost two hundred years. The coven keeps to themselves, wholly wary of outsiders. In fact, the entire island is warded against magical intrusion. For all her might and power, even Ludmilla is kept at bay. She doesn't bother them, and they ignore her.

So, what changed? Why send me to haunt Jasper Prescott?

As a wraith, I am not so constrained by the paltry magic of mortals. No wards can keep out death. I go where I please . . . or where my mistress pleases. For weeks now she's had me watching him, learning all his habits and secrets, much good may it do her. The witch is as regimented as the hands of a clock. Wake up, exercise, go to work. He lives a small life, and he likes his routines. I've told Ludmilla this and she just keeps sending me back.

You'll not hear me complain. Any moment spent out of my iron cage is a moment I cherish. Besides, I like haunting this witch. He knows he's being watched yet he's changed none of his daily routines. He's overconfident. Magical beings so often are.

Whatever reason my mistress had for making me haunt him, tonight she finally changed her mind. Moments ago, Ludmilla decreed that Jasper Lyons Prescott of Burr Island has breathed his last breath. I have no choice but to devour his soul. I'll be as gentle as I can, but there's no denying that death is death.

Slipping from the shadows of this narrow alley, I inch closer to the painted brick wall of the shop, dusted with creeping ivy. Opening my mouth with a low, rasping rattle, I let the summer night air slip between my lips. The scents of the island fill me—a sea-salted breeze, the lingering sweetness of rising dough from the café next door, stale popcorn from the theater down the block. I close my mouth, processing the complex flavor bouquet. Burr Island is charming, steeped in magic and memory. It tastes sweet on my tongue.

But souls taste so much sweeter.

Speaking of souls, my witch is moving again. He stands just on the other side of the door, the frame of his broad shoulders silhouetted through the fogged glass. The universe narrows to the scratch-

ing sound of the door's turning knob. Jasper pulls it open on rusted hinges, spilling a stream of golden light across the cobblestones. I stay concealed within the veil of my shadows while he stands on the stoop.

Eyes narrowed, he searches the dark alley, sniffing the air like a wary fox. He fists the trash bag in his left hand, slowly raising his right. Making the sign for flowing air, his first finger and thumb pinch to form a circle. He waves his hand slowly in a ritual pass, left to right, his pursed lips moving as he whispers a spell meant to cast away lingering evil spirits.

I feel the brush of his magic against my chest. It's cool, spiced with thyme. My dark robes flutter, but I remain unmoved. There is nothing inherently evil about wraiths. We simply *are*. He cannot wish me gone.

Sweet witch, come down those steps.

A soft, misting rain begins to fall as I extend a skeletal hand, the tattered ends of my robes hanging limp in the dark. The rain wets the air, sharpening all the island's summery scents. Our fingers are all but touching now. He must feel this connection burning between us.

Come, dear Jasper.

At the last moment, he drops his hand away, breaking the static pull between our fingertips. If he runs, I will follow. The haunt is over. This is the hunt, and I must have my prey. Now that his name has been given, it's taking everything in me to delay this feast.

"I'm not afraid of you," he calls to the dark. "Do your worst."

Oh, I shall.

I swoop forward as a blast of his magic hits me. The heat of it sets a fire crackling through my shadowy lower half. Witch lightning? Interesting. He's even more powerful than I thought. Smoke fills my mouth as I take the full force of his banishment spell to my chest. But once again, he chooses to banish evil spirits. He must think I'm a ghost. Few other beings could pass through this island's impressive magical wards.

I appear before Jasper in my full wraith form. Shadows pull at me even as they push, willing me to go to my intended. Reaching out with both hands, I grip tight to his shoulders, sealing our magical bond.

"Fuck—" The bag of trash clatters to the ground. He nearly trips over it as he stumbles back. "No—"

"Jasper Lyons Prescott, you are mine." My voice rasps as I invoke the magic of his name.

"A wraith?" He wraps his hands around my wrists, trying to break my grasp. "Let go, you dead piece of shit!"

"I can't."

His head tips back as he gives himself over fully to his magic. "Mother, Virgin, Crone, spare me." His eyes glow with the same light I see flickering in his soul. It's a deep yellow, like a golden delicious apple. Warm and honeyed, crisp to the core. I must taste my forbidden fruit.

"Surrender, sweet witch."

"Never!"

"You are mine."

He lets out a low moan, his shoulders sagging as I part my lips and begin my feast. More lightning flashes at his fingertips. The feeble sparks singe my robes, but I feel no pain. I inhale deep, letting his mortal breath warm the inside of my mouth. Gods, help me. He tastes like raw power—ancient oaken roots and lichen-covered rocks, the dazzling diamonds of sunlight that blind the surface of the ocean on a cloudless summer day. I've never tasted a witch so strong. His blood is old, the magic deep. Such a beautiful waste.

In a last attempt to fight me, he snaps his mouth shut, his hands lifting to circle my neck. Silly witch, I don't need air. But they all try this in the end. "Your name has been called, Jasper Lyons Prescott. Surrender your soul to me."

"Please . . ." His knees hit the cobblestones, his grip on me slackening. "I'll give you—anything—if you—stop—"

"I cannot stop," I whisper against his lips.

His fingertips brush the cool metal of my collar, the physical manifestation of my forced servitude. He blinks up at me, his gaze almost pitying. "You're bound?"

My breath rattles as I suck in more of his essence. I hate the feel of his hands on my collar when his soul tastes so free, so violently wild.

"I'll—free you—"

Would that he could, but he'll be dead in moments. His gaze is already clouding. "Close your eyes, sweet witch. It's almost over."

Before I can finish my feast, a slamming sound from the little apartment above the tea shop draws my gaze. A young human woman

appears on the landing, lit by a halo of light from the streetlamp above. Her auburn hair hangs in a messy braid over her shoulder, her pale eyes wide as she peers down at us. The misting rain lands on her colorfully tattooed arms and shoulders.

Holy Hera . . .

All living souls have an aura about them. As a wraith, I taste the colors of each aura like a sommelier sampling wine. Some souls taste sour, like a rotten grape. Jasper's soul is my sweet, golden apple. This human is a revelation. Never in all my years have I seen a more beautiful array of colors. I feel like I'm floating within a crystal prism. In her gaze, the sunlight hits me, and I'm cast into a rainbow of light—"Hey," the human shouts. "Stop!"

That one word slashes through the air like a blade of holy fire. I feel the magic in it, the raw power. It coils around my throat tighter than Ludmilla's collar, choking me. For the first time in the endless centuries of my undying death . . . I stop.

But wraiths can't stop. Not once a name has been given—

"Let him go!"

I stifle a startled gasp. Like a porcelain vase hit with the blunt end of a hammer, my chest shatters to pieces. Pain mingles with panic as I retch once, twice.

What magic is this?

What's happening to me?

Mouth open wide, I groan, watching in horror as Jasper's soul drains out of me. It pours from my lips, twisting and curling in creeping tendrils of black smoke, disappearing back inside him, willing to take any route—his mouth, his nostrils, his eyes.

"I said get off him!"

My hands lift away from the witch as if his touch burns me. It severs the connection of my magical draining power. Hands trembling, throat burning, I heave an airless breath. The rush of life that came from claiming Jasper's soul is gone. To share in his light and lose it is a physical calamity, a tearing of my very being.

I don't understand. He's claimed. His soul is mine. I was devouring him, and I stopped?

No. I was *ordered* to stop . . . by a human. My face remains hidden by my cowl as I gaze up at her again, taking in the dazzling brilliance of her aura. What secret magic does she wield?

Wait—can she *see* me?

Oh, Sweet Circe, she's looking right at me!

But humans can't see wraiths—

"Get the hell out of here, you creep!" She points a finger at me. "Before I call the cops!" This command feels somehow easier to ignore.

Beneath me, Jasper stirs. Pushing away from him, I let the shadows draw me in. My magic conceals me as I watch the human dash barefoot down the steps. Her aura pulses with worry, glowing in shades of softest pink and blue. She rushes to the witch's side, dropping to her knees on the cobblestones.

"Jasper? Oh god, *please* don't be dead." She taps his cheek. "Come on, wake up."

His soul flickers, glowing just a little brighter at her touch. He's drawn by her voice, lured back to life. After a moment, he lifts a hand, wrapping it around her wrist. I almost sigh with relief, even as I fight my confusion. How did the human stop me?

She looks around for me, hands splayed protectively over the witch. She's fierce and fearless, guarding him like a lioness. "Come on," she whispers. "We gotta get you inside."

No, she can't leave. I haven't tasted her yet. I don't even know her name.

Before I can do something completely reckless, like tell her *my* name, a new threat enters the alley. The small, black cat form it wears does nothing to conceal its true nature. At first sight of me, the not-a-cat curls its back high, spitting and snarling in warning.

I smirk, noting the collar around its neck. It seems I'm not the only thing bound on this island. In its present form, the creature is of no danger to me. But I'm not sure I'm still safe here. A powerful witch marked for death still lives. And a curious human wields the magic to stop me—

"Pickles, no!" The human beckons the creature closer with a frantic wave of her hand. "Come back!"

The not-a-cat ignores her plea.

Sighing, I let it chase me down the alley. Apparently, this feast must wait. My shadows swirl around me, welcoming me to the void, ready to take me back to my mistress. She'll be so angry I failed. Maybe she'll let me out to try again . . .

The thought fills me with a hope I haven't felt in nearly two hundred years.

I'll come back, I whisper without words.

The wary look in my human's eyes tells me she hears my silent

call. She knows I'll return. I don't need to know her name to know her soul is marked for only me. I *will* have her. Gods, help me, I want them both. Honeyed golden apples and cotton candy rainbows. A wraith could get drunk on their sweetness.

As I float away on the dark summer night, two questions coil deep in my chest. Who are they to each other? And how soon can I return to devour them?