



Evil Never Dies

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CHAPTER ONE

Emma found me in the conservatory nursing a glass of good malt and contemplating the intricacies of life. Looking out over the brightly coloured and sweet-smelling flower beds, watching the birds and other wildlife scampering across the freshly mown lawns revitalised my soul. It was a haven of peace and calm and, given half the chance, this bright and airy room would be where I'd spend the majority of my time. For one thing it was a place where the dead appeared to keep their distance.

'Ah, there you are,' she said, stooping to press a soft kiss against my cheek. She smelt so damn good; I could breathe in her scent all day long and then some. She looked pretty fantastic too. She had let her blonde hair grow a little longer than she used to wear it; still cut in soft layers it now curled down below the collar of her cream jacket.

'How was the committee meeting?'

She pulled a face. ‘Tedious, as usual.’ I gave a non-committal grunt; she knew what I thought about her committee meetings. ‘I was going to ask if you wanted a drink, but I see you already have one.’

I folded the letter I’d been pondering and stuffed it back inside its envelope.

‘Bad news?’ she asked.

‘Hmm. Couldn’t get much worse, I suppose.’

I ignored her expectant look and took a gulp of whisky as she sank down into the chair opposite me. When I wasn’t forthcoming she raised an eyebrow.

‘Are you going to elaborate?’

‘It’s from an old friend. He wants us to go and visit him.’

Seeing my no doubt glum expression she laid her hand on mine. I wrapped my fingers around hers, instantly feeling a lot better than I had a right to.

‘We should go. It would do you good to meet up with one of your old friends.’

‘I’m not so sure it would; not at the moment.’

She leant forward. ‘Why?’

My hand went to my beard, a nervous habit of mine, then, realising what I was doing, I let it drop back into my lap. ‘His brother has just died.’ I kept my eyes on my drink.

‘That’s sad. Had he been ill?’

I grasped the glass a little tighter. ‘No, not as far as I’m aware.’

‘Oh dear. It was sudden?’

I took a quick peek at her face and knew I couldn’t put off telling her without being subjected to the third degree. ‘Yes – he was murdered.’

She blinked and stared at me for a moment, as if making her mind up whether I was joking or not. ‘Really?’

I shrugged and went back to my drink.

‘Jed Cummings, you can’t drop something like that into a conversation and not explain it,’ she said, pulling her hand from mine.

‘I can’t tell you something I don’t know,’ I said, I thought quite reasonably.

She made a huffing sound. ‘Then tell me what you do know.’ With a sigh of defeat, I pushed the letter my old friend Simon had sent me across the table. She turned the ivory envelope over in her fingers. ‘Nice stationery,’ she commented, running her forefinger over the embossed coat of arms on the flap, before flicking it open to slip out the letter.

She carefully unfolded the two sheets of paper and spread them out on the table before delving into her jacket pocket for her glasses. Once perched on her nose she began to read.

Leaning back in my seat I watched her face. By the time she’d reached the second page her expression was full of sympathy.

‘How terrible,’ she said, returning the letter into the envelope and sliding it back across the table to me. ‘Did you know his brother Oliver?’

I shoved the letter in my pocket. ‘I met him on a couple of occasions. I stayed at Kingsmead several times when Simon and I were home on leave together.’

‘So you were good friends with Simon?’

I nodded, feeling a little guilty. We’d been best mates at one time; him, me and Reggie. If I dropped this last bit of

information into the pot, I knew exactly what would happen: if Emma had any idea her late husband was one of the three amigos, our bags would be packed by the morning.

‘We sort of lost touch once we left the forces,’ I told her. There was more to it, but it had been many years ago and best forgotten.

‘Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to reacquaint yourselves.’

I doubted it would. Then I started to think about all the good times we’d had, and we did have a lot of them. We were young, we were reckless and we thought we could rule the world. Maybe Emms was right. He had offered an olive branch and perhaps I should accept it.

‘It would do you good. It would do us both good to get away,’ she pushed.

I gave a morose laugh. ‘To visit a crime scene? You really think?’

‘You’d be helping out a friend in need.’

Knocking back the last of my drink I said, ‘I don’t do that sort of thing any more.’

‘And you miss it.’

I slowly shook my head. ‘No, I don’t.’

She very sensibly kept any thoughts she might have on the subject to herself, instead asking, ‘Do you want another?’

I contemplated my empty glass. ‘Maybe just the one,’ I replied.

With a smile she took my glass into the next room and, while I waited for her to return, I thought about Simon and how fond he’d been of Oliver. They had grown close when they’d lost their elder brother, Edward. From memory Oliver had been a couple of years younger, but there had

been a full ten years or more between him and Simon. He hadn't talked about it much, but from what I remembered Edward had died in a freak accident and the family had never been the same afterwards. On one occasion, when Simon was in his cups, he'd told me that after Edward's death it had been like living in a mausoleum – hence Simon joining the forces as soon as he could.

'Well?' Emma asked, when she returned with the drinks.

'What?'

'Are you going to call your friend and say we'll be coming?'

I thought about it a moment longer. We wouldn't be meeting again under the happiest of circumstances, but if we were ever to make amends, now was probably the time, neither of us were getting any younger. 'All right,' I said.

'Really?' she said, with a surprised smile.

'Yes, really. Just for a few days.'

She didn't argue. She'd won the battle. She'd concentrate on winning her never-ending war to get me to go away on a proper holiday upon our return. I didn't mind; she kept me on my toes.

Simon had been uncharacteristically grateful when I called to tell him we'd be on our way for the weekend and it brought me up short. Had he changed so much? Had I also changed into a man he would barely recognise? Maybe this *was* a mistake.

Emma brushed aside my concerns. 'The poor man is probably still reeling from the shock of losing his brother,' she said as she packed my suitcase. 'Besides you *both* will have changed. How long ago was it since you last saw him?'

I sat down on the bed beside the suitcase. ‘Do we really need all this for two or three days?’

‘Yes,’ she said, slapping my hand away when I reached into the case to check what she’d packed for me.

I knew when to give in and went back to trying to remember when Simon and I had parted company. ‘It must have been twenty-five years or more,’ I said.

She gave me a sideways look. ‘Did he and Reggie know each other?’

‘Hmm,’ I said and decided now we were going to Kingsmead I might as well tell her – it was bound to come out over the course of the next few days, anyway. ‘They did, but towards the end they didn’t get on.’

‘Really?’ she said with a frown. ‘Why ever not?’

‘You know what toffs are like.’

‘Reggie was not a toff.’

That made me laugh. ‘Yes, he bloody was. Simon and him were both old school tie. Why Reggie ever chose to be friends with me I have no idea.’

She stopped what she was doing to look at me. ‘Because you were both good men, perhaps?’ Emma’s smile had returned. I knew she would always love Reggie, but I didn’t mind as long as there was a little bit left for me. ‘And if I recall rightly, you spent your formative years at a rather good boarding school.’

‘Huh, it was no Eton or Gordonstoun.’

‘Still . . .’

Grabbing her hand, I pulled her towards me. Standing above me, her knees touching the bed between my legs, she began to laugh before leaning forward and, cupping my cheek, planted a kiss on my lips.

‘I am not, and never will be, a member of the “Old Boys’ Club”,’ I grumbled.

‘And I wouldn’t want you to be any different to the man you are.’ She stroked my cheek, her eyes sparkling, and any concerns I had about our forthcoming trip melted away. There would be time enough to worry in the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Good Lord,’ Emma muttered as the Jaguar rumbled to a halt outside the six-foot-high electric gates blocking our entry into Kingsmead. ‘They certainly take their security seriously.’

‘Not seriously enough, judging by recent events,’ I said, winding down my window to announce our arrival into the intercom at the side of the gate. A disinterested voice took my name and the gates began to slowly swing open.

‘Was it like this when you were here last?’ she asked.

Gazing up at the razor wire strung out across the top of the ten-foot-high brick walls I gave a grunt. ‘More or less. I seem to recall Simon saying sometime, way back when, one of the Pomeroy’s was a politician and we all know how popular they are. I believe they used to have Dobermanns running around the grounds at night.’

‘Not now?’ Emma said, peering through the gates.

Emma loved dogs, I’m surprised she never had one, but even she would draw the line at a pack of Dobes. Or

perhaps not – knowing her I wouldn't be surprised if she had them rolling over to have their tummies tickled within five minutes of meeting them.

'Fortunately not.' As I guessed, her expression was slightly disappointed.

I put the Jaguar into gear and rolled forward through the still-opening gates and onto the drive, the gravel crunching beneath the tyres as we rumbled along.

'When you said Kingsmead was a country estate, I didn't for one minute think it would be so huge.'

'It's smaller than Reggie's family pile.'

Emma shifted in her seat, leaning back and folding her arms. 'I only went there once and it was dark.'

I glanced her way and could have bitten my tongue. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, and I'm sure if I could have looked more closely her eyes would have been sparkling with unshed tears.

Reggie's family, for some incomprehensible reason, had disapproved of his choice of wife and, when they told him to choose between them and her, he chose Emma. Out of all his siblings he was the only one to have had a happy marriage, and this alone should have vindicated his decision, but his family never forgave him and not one of them attended his funeral. This had hurt Emma more than anything they might have ever said about her.

We carried on along the tree-flanked drive, meandering through vast expanses of manicured lawns. I had left the window open and the scent of freshly mown grass filled the car. Last time I'd been here there'd been a team of gardeners keeping the grounds in check. I doubted this had changed much throughout the years, though the motorised

lawnmowers had probably become more efficient.

Then we reached the brow of the gentle upward slope and there, spread out below us, was Kingsmead Manor. I drew the Jag to a halt so Emma could get the full effect.

She actually gasped. ‘My God, it’s massive.’

It was impressive. I had forgotten how huge the H-shaped building was, and the woodland beyond the fields behind it, a mass of relentless green disappearing into the distance for as far as the eye could see.

We started down the slope. It was too late to turn back now, and I had a moment of stomach-fluttering disquiet. We hadn’t even reached the building and I was already experiencing the tingling sensation at the back of my neck I usually get when someone from beyond the veil wants to make themselves known. I hunched my shoulders, ignoring it, and concentrated on the driveway ahead.

Out front of the house I swung the Jag in next to a blue Mercedes convertible parked close to a low, ornate stone pillar wall separating the drive from more lush lawns as smooth and green as any snooker table.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘we’re here.’

‘Do you think they dress for dinner?’ Emma asked, peering out at the steps leading to the front door.

I frowned at her. ‘What?’

‘I packed you a suit, but—’

‘Emms, he’s just lost his brother – the last thing he’ll be thinking of is dinner parties.’

She took a deep breath. ‘I suppose you’re right.’

I took her hand in mine. ‘Emma, you have wined and dined dukes and duchesses and heads of state, why are you getting in a panic over this?’

She exhaled – slowly. ‘I know I’m being stupid.’

‘Err, yes. If anyone’s going to muck up it’ll be me, so stop stressing.’ She laughed and leant in to kiss me on the cheek. ‘Come on,’ I said, ‘let’s get this over with.’

I slid out of the car and, by the time I’d crunched my way across the gravel to open the passenger door, Emma was already pushing it closed behind her. I hefted the cases from the boot and, as I slammed down the lid, a blonde, floppy-haired young man, in white shirt and black trousers, came hurrying down the steps to take them from me. His smile was a little tentative and nervous. I guessed he hadn’t worked here long and, judging from his fading acne, was probably not a lot older than seventeen. He gestured we go first and followed us up the marble steps to the front entrance.

A tall, grey-haired woman stood in the doorway waiting. Dressed in a black, calf-length dress with a bunch of keys hanging from her belt she was the epitome of the country estate housekeeper.

‘Mr and Mrs Cummings,’ she said, greeting us with a convivial smile. ‘How nice to meet you. Please come in. I’m Sarah Walters and if I can help you with anything during your visit please don’t hesitate to ask.’ She stepped back. ‘This way, if you please. I’m afraid Mr Simon has been caught up on the phone.’

She led us through the spacious entrance hall, the echo of Emma’s heels clicking on the white, grey and black veined marble tiles making it as welcoming as a mausoleum and I had to hold in a shudder. I remembered it as being carpeted, and fragranced by vase upon vase of colourful, scented flowers sitting upon small tables around

the periphery of the hallway. No flowers today, only the aroma of lavender furniture polish. Looking around there was plenty of wood to be kept shiny; the small tables remained, and huge chestnut-coloured banisters swept from the centre of the hall to the first floor. It was weird and almost as though the hall had been drained of any colour or life in the twenty-five or so years since I'd last crossed the threshold. It *was* a house in mourning, though I somehow doubted it had been any different in the years prior to Oliver's death.

This place was full of ghosts. Always had been and it hadn't got any better. I had an inkling it had probably got a lot worse. The first time I'd visited I'd hardly slept the first couple of nights, there had been so many of them vying for my attention. By the last time I'd been invited to stay I'd apparently become boring. By the tickle at the top of my spine I guessed their interest had been renewed.

Mrs Walters showed us into a room I remembered as being the study. My memory wasn't failing me and the room had changed hardly at all; it was still a clutter of old books, hunting memorabilia and sagging leather chairs. The same couldn't be said for my old friend. I hoped the shock didn't show in my expression. I forced a smile onto my face as he ended his phone call and hurried around the desk, a candle-wax-hued hand outstretched to greet me.

'Jed,' he said. 'It's so good to see you again.' He pumped my hand, his fingers icy in mine, and unexpectedly pulled me into a hug. After a second's hesitation I wrapped my arms around him and had I not been concerned about his health before I certainly was after his bony frame pressed against mine. Beneath his jacket he was all sharp, jutting

angles with hardly any flesh cushioning his body. He pulled away from me. 'You've hardly changed at all.'

I managed a laugh. 'I know that's not true,' I told him.

His attention turned to Emma. His smile was genuine and bright. 'And you must be Emma,' he said and took her hand, raising it to his lips to kiss it. '*Enchanté.*'

'It's lovely to meet you, Simon,' Emma said, 'and I'm only sorry it's not under better circumstances.'

He grimaced, deep lines etching his forehead and, with his sallow and waxy complexion, I could have been looking at the death mask of a man decades older. 'Yes, it hasn't been easy.' Then he snapped into host mode. 'Come, I'll show you to your room. It'll give you the chance to settle in before dinner.' He glanced at his watch. 'Shall we meet for pre-dinner drinks at say, seven? Jed, you remember where the sitting room is?'

Our bedroom was on the first floor and at the back of the house, giving us a panoramic view of the gardens, fields and the forest of trees behind them. As soon as we were alone, Emma made straight for the French windows and the balcony outside.

'This is beautiful.'

I stood in the centre of the room taking it all in. 'I prefer The Grange.'

She glanced back at me over her shoulder and laughed. 'Only because there's less lawn to mow.'

'Hmm.' I slowly turned full circle. There was a large fireplace with a pile of logs stacked decoratively to one side and I could imagine, with a fire roaring away in the winter months, it would make the room warm and cosy. On a

bright, spring day the room was dreary and a bit like the master bedrooms on show to the public in the many stately homes scattered around the countryside. I was surprised there wasn't a protective plastic sheet over the Persian carpet.

Vellum yellow wallpaper, decorated with blue and green birds interspersed with twisted vines, no doubt created by one of the masters of design in the Arts and Crafts period, covered the walls. All credit to whoever put it up, it must have been a bugger to hang and get the pattern aligned. Antique furnishings littered the room and I made a mental note of where anything vaguely breakable was located, so when I stumbled around half-asleep in the morning I knew where to avoid.

The bed was a four-poster and very nice too – if you were five foot five or so. The frame *was* beautifully carved and swathed with colourful tapestries. Some might find it romantic – to me it was just an impractical dust trap. But if anyone had ever died in this room they had moved on – and for this reason alone I'd put up with a cramped night's sleep.

'A four-poster bed,' Emma said, coming over to link her arm through mine. 'How lovely.' Then she began to laugh. I made a humphing sound, which made her laugh even more. 'It's only for a few nights.'

'Just as well.'

'We'll have to snuggle,' she said, with a naughty grin.

I sucked in air through my teeth and followed it with a dramatic sigh. 'I guess it'll be a sacrifice, but to help an old friend . . .' She thumped me on the shoulder and then she was in my arms and the cramped bed instantly became a lot more inviting.

* * *

Dinner was excellent and surprisingly the conversation flowed. So much so it could have been only a few months since Simon and I last broke bread together. It was as it had been before and I wished we hadn't left it so long, mainly because I was pretty sure Simon was dying. It wasn't only how he looked. There was what I can only describe as an aura around him: a dark grey, writhing mist gradually deepening to black at the extremities. If nothing else this made me determined to help him if I could. A man shouldn't die without knowing who had killed a loved one and why.

It wasn't until we had finished dinner and retired to the living room for after-dinner drinks that he got to the point of our visit.

'I am really grateful to you for coming,' he said, handing me a glass of good whisky.

I settled into the corner of the leather Chesterfield settee, slightly at an angle so my knee was practically touching Emma's. 'What happened?' I asked him. 'You said Oliver had been murdered, but not much else.'

He slumped back in his matching high-backed chair, his expression pained, his eyes wet and rheumy. I hadn't noticed before, I'd been so shocked by his fragility, but his once-cornflower-blue eyes had faded to a clouded opaque.

'It was nearly a month ago and, as I said in my letter, the police are getting nowhere and . . . I just need to know. I need to understand why.' His voice broke and he turned his head away for a moment while he fought to control his emotions.

Emma gave me a helpless glance. I wasn't much better; I didn't know what to do either.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Don't worry,' Emma replied, her voice gentle and tinged with sympathy. 'It's quite understandable. His death is still raw.'

He nodded, raising the crystal tumbler to his lips. His hand was trembling.

'Where did it happen?' I asked.

Simon swallowed and, cradling the glass on his knee, sagged into his chair. 'Here. Here on the estate.'

'Not in the house,' I said, and it wasn't a question. Many things had happened in Kingsmead, I sensed terrible things, but not this.

'No,' he agreed. 'Not in the house. In the woodland at the back.' He pushed himself out of his chair. 'I'll only be a moment.'

Emma leant forward. 'Can you feel anything?' she whispered.

'No, not anything connected to Oliver's death, anyhow.'

'This house has its own vibe,' she said and shivered.

'You feel it?' I asked. Emma was by no means as psychic as I am, but she did sometimes sense things, sometimes things I didn't.

She took a sip of her drink and gave an abrupt bob of the head.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

She gave me a shaky smile. 'I think so. It's just . . .' She didn't get to finish what she was about to say as Simon returned, bringing with him a Manila file.

'Here,' he said, handing it to me. 'Don't read it now; it'll give you nightmares. The morning will be soon enough.'

I held the file on my lap for a moment and rested my

hand on the cover. The unease I'd felt as we approached the house swept over me. I was sure he was right; the contents of the file were the stuff of bad dreams and night chills. I dropped it on the settee between Emma and me. I would read it by the light of day.

'Why did you fall out?' Emma asked as she took off her earrings and dropped them into a small crystal dish on the bedside table.

I pulled off my shirt and padded towards the bathroom. 'Water under the bridge, Emms. It was such a long time ago.'

'It must have been serious.'

I grunted in reply and shut the bathroom door, hoping she'd take the hint. It was something I didn't want to talk about. I was here now, when he needed me. It'd have to be enough.

She was sitting in bed, a pillow plumped behind her, when I came back out, glasses perched on the end of her nose as she pored over her latest read. I stripped off and slipped beneath the sheets beside her.

'I packed pyjamas,' she said, not looking away from the page.

'I can see,' I said, running a finger down the sleeve of the silky, lilac pyjama jacket she was wearing and I had never seen before.

'What if there's a fire?'

'I would do the same as I would back at home – run from the house stark bollock naked.'

She gave me a sideways look. 'I really believe you would.'

I grinned at her. 'It would give the fire brigade a laugh if nothing else.'

She dumped the book on the bedside table and folded her glasses, dropping them on top. ‘You are the limit,’ she said with a laugh and flicked off her light. ‘Goodnight, Jed.’

I clicked off mine and snuggled down under the covers to give her a kiss on the forehead. ‘Goodnight, sweetheart,’ I whispered and wrapped my arms around her.