

JOSHUA WINNING

AN ANCIENT
EVIL HAS
RETURNED...



SENTINEL

BOOK ONE OF THE SENTINEL TRILOGY

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PROLOGUE

18 AUGUST, 1589

IT WAS MAGIC, ISABEL HAD SAID, but Jessica still didn't quite believe it. She'd pouted at first and turned her head. Isabel's reproach had been hot like a needle in her ear.

"They become confounded in the afterworlds and they wander until time is nothing more than dull heartache. They require our help."

Isabel had looked perfectly sane as she'd said it. Jessica had searched for a tell-tale twinkle in her eye or an uncharacteristic curl of her lip, but there had been nothing. Only that familiar stern brow, those thin, pressed lips and the cobweb crinkles about her eyes.

Now they were sitting hand-in-hand and Jessica was more confused than ever. She felt small, wished she was at home, even if that meant curling into a corner of the bed away from a man she didn't love.

A faint vibration. A grumble of thunder. She was probably imagining it. Here, the only sound she could be certain of was the quick gasp of her own breath.

A crisp blue light quivered before her. It spiralled up from a bowl at the centre of the table, caught between their outstretched arms. The pentagon-shaped room glowed and the hairs on Jessica's arms shivered.

"I have never seen blue fire," she murmured.

She could only just discern the old woman's watery outline through the light.

"It is a gateway," Isabel explained. "A temporary opening between

the worlds. Through it we are able to commune with those lost on the lonely roads, guide them toward rest.”

Jessica was ready with a tart retort, but the defiance died as it met her lips. A shape had stirred within the light. It looked like... a face. A man's face. Deep-set eyes like wounds.

“Friend,” Isabel said. Jessica realised she wasn't addressing her but the thing in the light. “Tell us your name, friend.”

Silence. Then—

“Harold Baxter.”

The voice convulsed awkwardly and Jessica trembled.

“Harold,” Isabel continued calmly. She didn't sound like herself. The usually hard, clipped vowels were longer. Softer.

“Harold,” Isabel purred. “Why do you linger here?”

“JEREMY! He looks livid. What have I done? He's- OH GOD! Blood!”

“Harold,” Isabel snapped. “Forget that. It is in the past now. You are free of such horrors.”

Silence. Then—

“There is another here.”

A faint jangle of bracelets. Jessica thought she saw Isabel's face droop. It was impossible to tell through the curtain of light.

“Speak,” Isabel uttered.

A moment's quiet. Then—

“Free me.”

It crashed like thunder. The voice made Jessica's head pound.

Isabel's grip tightened about her hands.

Choking heat blasted her face. The blue light fizzled and flames erupted.

The column of light blazed red fire.

Twin pinpricks flashed within the gateway and Jessica screamed.

★

She broke out into the night, where the folds of her dress were snatched up by the wind.

Terrified, Jessica collapsed in front of the house. She sobbed with her face in her hands.

PROLOGUE

Rain drove from above and the storm threatened to swallow her whole.

Caaw! Caaw!

The sound sang over the storm's bellowing and Jessica scoured the shadows uncertainly.

Then she saw it.

Flitting through the darkness on powerful wings was a raven. Barely visible in the night, its keen eyes flashed in response to the lightning. It dropped to the ground a mere foot from the young woman.

They regarded one another for a moment. Overpowered by curiosity, Jessica got to her feet.

Caaw!

The bird took to the air once more and, smiling now, Jessica followed it into the storm.

CHAPTER ONE

ALONE

8 AUGUST, 2013

ANITA HALLOW TOOK A DEEP BREATH and tried to settle her nerves. At least they were here now. Soon they'd be moving, and the quicker that happened, the quicker she could do what she had to. She'd be home again soon. Her insides shuddered and she searched about for a distraction.

There, in the window: the reflection of a worry-tired woman. Anita changed her focus and peered out at the platform.

Cambridge train station was typically teeming for a Friday night. A tinny voice rang over the tannoy and though the rush hour had long since passed, the station was still alive.

"For God's sake, Bobby!" a voice whinnied, and Anita was plucked from her reverie. She watched in the window as the reflection of a couple trudged down the carriage aisle; a plump woman was waddling along behind a man with spider-like limbs.

"Whatever you do it always goes wrong," the woman shrieked. "I don't know why you even bother, I just don't. If it's not one thing it's something else. You're a walking—"

The admonishments faded into the distance.

Anita shrank further into her seat as the carriage began to fill up. Around her, people hollered into their mobile phones; joking and arguing, shamelessly sharing the most colourful details of their lives. She wondered what those lives were like, dislocated as they were from the worries of her world.

A hand reached out and touched hers.

Anita jumped, then remembered Max. He was sitting across the table from her, his hair a scruff of sandy blond, eyes twinkling wryly. Nothing ever seemed to bother him.

“I told you about worrying.” He squeezed her hand warmly.

It would be easy to mistake them as strangers, they made such an unusual pairing. Anita’s timid, frowning countenance was thrown into stark contrast by her husband’s easy confidence. Yet here they were, eighteen years married. Their conflicting personalities complemented one another in ways that made them both better people. Anita’s gentle, compassionate nature ensured that she was able to defuse some of Max’s more fiery tempers, while Max’s determination meant that he was able to instil in Anita the confidence that she so often lacked.

“I’m not worrying.” Anita raised a defiant eyebrow. There was no fooling Max, though, and she sighed. “I just... I can’t,” she began, but she was aware that the carriage was now groaning with people. A nervous glance about her confirmed that none of the other passengers were taking any notice of them. And why should they?

“Everything will be fine, Nicholas can take care of himself,” Max said. “He’s not a child anymore. Isn’t that exactly why we’ve been called?”

“But that’s just it – we have no idea. It’s been fifteen years, what if something awful has happened?”

“All the more reason to keep calm,” Max reasoned. “If Nicholas needs anything he’s got Tabatha next door. I told you not to have that coffee; it always makes you jittery.”

Anita offered a weak smile. “I know.”

She turned to peruse the crowds once more. As they sat quietly, Anita’s fingers moved absentmindedly to a silver pendant threaded about her neck. She stroked the surface, tracing the familiar contours, finding reassurance in their permanence.

“Pardon me, is this seat taken?”

Anita looked up as a figure paused at their table. He was an elderly gentleman, his stern face creased with experience, silver-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of a large nose. He wore black from head to toe and the only other shade on his person was a slash of white at the neck; a clerical collar that marked him out as a man of the cloth.

“Feel free,” Anita said.

“Ah,” the priest said pleasantly, seating himself next to Max. “Much obliged.” He set a leather bag down on the table.

The blinkered lights above the train doorway beeped, and with a mechanical hiss the doors closed. The train’s engine gathered momentum, causing the windowpanes to judder, and finally they began their departure from Cambridge station. Summer air gusted in through the window and Anita peered up into the dark sky where a full moon peered back at her.

Max read his newspaper. Next to him, the priest popped open his bag, retrieving a pen and a pad of paper.

Anita watched him from across the table, observing the pen as it crept over the paper, gripped by knobby fingers. She had always admired the men and women of the clergy. Though she didn’t believe in God – at least not the God that the Christians worshipped – she sensed the ardour of their conviction and respected them for it. What she admired most was the unwavering commitment of their faith. These people had devoted their entire lives to the belief that out there, somewhere, somebody was watching over and protecting them. They put their trust in something that they couldn’t physically prove, but rather felt. Faith was a complicated and wonderful thing.

Outside the panorama began to change. Cambridge gave way to a collection of small towns and fields.

“Can we trust her?” Anita murmured, mostly to herself. Opposite her, Max lowered his paper. “Tabatha, I mean,” Anita explained. She flashed a look at the priest, who was still absorbed in writing.

“I can’t think of anybody more worthy of our trust,” Max said. “Except Sam of course, but he’ll be with us.”

“I know, but at least Sam knows—” She stopped mid-thought, not daring to finish it here, where anybody could overhear them.

“Why don’t you get a bit of shuteye? We’ve a good hour ahead of us.” Max offered her a knowing smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t leave the train without you.”

Anita returned the smile, though hers didn’t seem to fit right. She sank into the chair; too nervy to think clearly, too tired to sleep. She sat listening to the *click-a-clack* of the train.

She had known this day was approaching, but she hadn't ever expected it to arrive. The shock upon receiving the letter had been unpleasant, and for the first time in a long time she had felt scared.

What if they took Nicholas away from them? From her? What if they considered her unfit to handle him? Bad things always seemed to come at the best of times, like weeds corrupting a bed of flowers. He was just a kid and she didn't want him to be a part of any of this.

Anita had been fighting her entire life. Never the smartest girl at school, she stayed up studying into the smallest hours of the night to keep up with her peers. And now, after so many years of peace and quiet, something had come to set her nerves on edge once more. That old, familiar anxiety returned in a suffocating flood. As the weeks, months and years slipped by, she had almost forgotten that their lives were different. They were nearly (dare she even think it?) *normal*. The letter was the rude awakening she hoped would never come.

It would come eventually, of course. How could it not?

"Sorry, but I don't suppose you saw what that last station was?"

The voice tugged Anita out of her morose thoughts.

The priest was peering at her over the rims of his spectacles.

"Uh," She hadn't been paying attention to the little stations as they periodically whooshed past in the dark. "Newmarket, possibly?"

"Much obliged." The priest's voice was kindly despite his bloodless features.

"Nervous traveller," he explained. "Always worried I'll miss my stop." He held her gaze for a second longer. "Going far?"

"Not really. Just an hour or so."

"I never liked trains," the priest commented. "Even as a boy. Of course they were all steam then, entirely different creatures. My father loved them, but they were too big and loud for me."

Anita nodded politely. The elderly gentleman seemed to detect the worry in her face. "You're leaving somebody behind?" he asked.

Anita looked at him in surprise, and she nodded unsurely.

"Yes."

"Somebody you love dearly," the priest observed. "One of the most difficult things to do in this world; bid farewell to those we hold dear. It happens far too frequently now, I fear."

Anita nodded again, pursing her lips. She could feel the colour rising in her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," the priest said hastily. "I didn't mean to upset you. You'll see him again soon enough, don't you worry."

"How did you know?"

"A mother's love for her son is a powerful thing. One of the most powerful forces in existence, perhaps. That love and ache is written in you plain as day."

Anita frowned, unsettled by the ease with which the priest had read her. Max lowered his newspaper, sharing a look with her across the table.

Harvester.

The thought leapt to her in a burst of panic. No, she told herself. He's just a friendly old priest. No way he could be one of them; unless they were getting very good at what they did.

Calm. Stay calm.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?" she asked.

"I don't believe so. Why, I—"

Whatever the priest had been about to say never left his mouth, because at that moment the train gave a jolt that caused Max to drop his paper.

"What was that?" Anita demanded.

"I don't know," Max said, casting a look down the carriage. It shuddered for a second time and Anita bolted upright.

The windows made a clattering complaint.

A raucous squealing shattered the still night.

"That doesn't sound good," the priest muttered.

"It's the brakes," Anita yelled over the noise. "Someone's thrown on the brakes!"

"Why would they do that?" Max shouted back.

Anita pressed her forehead against the glass, cupping her hands either side of her face. "We're over water," she said. "Why would the driver brake on a bridge?"

Her insides knotted themselves up as she watched orange sparks spew out from beneath the train. They showered down over the side of the bridge and hissed on the river far below.

No, no, no.

Instantly, Anita thought the worst. She attempted to shrink away from the dread that was nipping at her mind, but it was almost impossible.

Next to Max, the priest crossed himself quickly and raised his eyes to the ceiling, whispering what could only have been a solemn prayer.

Other passengers strained to peer out of the windows.

Panicked murmurs rippled through the train.

“A car!” somebody hollered. “There’s a car on the track!”

Another voice took up the cry: “He’ll never brake in time!”

Anita shot her husband a fearful look.

“Max?”

She watched her husband struggle to answer. He looked paler than she’d seen him in a long time, and despair speared her gut. *Was this it?* They had struggled for so long to be happy; their lives seemed almost perfect. Perfect, at least, in comparison to what they had grown up with. She couldn’t let it end here. She wouldn’t let *them* destroy that.

Even as determination kindled inside her, Anita watched her husband’s jaw clench. She understood in an instant.

“They’ve found us, haven’t they?”

Before Max could reply there came a sudden crunching smash and Anita was thrown against the table.

It was as if somebody had stamped on her chest. She choked, gasping for breath.

Screams and wails littered the carriage. Above them, the lights sputtered and died.

They were plummeted into darkness.

“Lord have mercy on our souls,” an elderly voice breathed in the dark.

“Somebody help us!” another voice howled, and there was a frantic surge of movement. People stumbled from their seats, spilling into the aisle.

Anita’s eyes began to adjust to the moonlit environment just as a hand grabbed hers from across the table.

“Come on,” Max said firmly. “Move.” He clambered over the table to join her.

“They’re here, aren’t they?” Anita said.

They’re here for us. Everybody on this train is going to die because of us.

“Go!” Max shouted.

Together they staggered into the aisle, grabbing a hold of each other. The pandemonium closed in around them.

Anita squeezed Max’s hand tight as he forged a course through the carriage. Other passengers pushed and pulled their way in different directions, elbows and knees jabbing sharply as they fought to find a way off the train.

Then the train gave another jolt, moving under their feet.

“What’s going on?” Max yelled, but his voice was lost amid the shrieks.

Anita attempted to swallow the panic rising up from her gut. She was rusty. Though this was by far the worst situation she’d ever been in, she’d have been far more clear-headed in the past. All she could think about was Nicholas. She had to survive this for him. There was no alternative.

“The exit!” she shouted. “I see the exit!”

They pushed urgently on and Anita forced herself not to look down at where fallen people lay bleeding and unconscious. Trampled. Somewhere, a passenger managed to break a window.

Finally, Max and Anita found themselves at the train door.

Peopled jostled about them like caged animals, frantic for an escape yet too panicked to make any sense of their surroundings.

Max shouldered his way up to the double doors, making sure that Anita was close behind him. He jabbed the button marked ‘OPEN’ with empty optimism, knowing that it would fail to function.

“The door,” Anita wheezed, standing her ground as limbs stabbed her painfully and feet crushed her own. “We have to get it open.”

Max cast about the exit swiftly, then gripped at the fissure at the centre of the doors. He strained against them, attempting to drag them apart. They quivered a bit, stubbornly resisting his efforts. Anita moved to help, heaving at the door with all her strength.

Another man who seemed to understand their intentions grabbed at the door. Together they all laboured, and with a submissive sigh the doors finally skated open.

Suffocating summer air rushed keenly inside.

Anita tried to push herself backwards as the wind snatched at her clothes and hair, but the wall of people prevented her from doing so.

She clung at the edge of the doorway, peering down in horror.

The carriage teetered on the edge of the bridge, the world falling away mere inches from her feet.

Below, the river's dark waters swelled hungrily in the moonlight.

"How did this happen?" a tall man asked.

"A car," Anita breathed. "Somebody said something about a car."

Gripping onto the other side of the doorway, Max eased himself out and peered down the length of the train. When he drew back inside, he was shaking.

"Well?" the tall man asked.

"The whole thing's going to go," Max told Anita quietly. "We have to get off on the other side."

At that moment, the train shifted under their feet and Anita was flung into Max's arms.

She buried her face in his chest.

"Nicholas," she whispered.

And then they were falling through the night.



The world came crashing down.

As Sam Wilkins observed the shadowy grimace on Nicholas Hallow's face, he knew that everything had changed for the fifteen year old forever. The boy's eyes were fixed on a spot on the lounge floor, unmoving, still absorbing the enormity of what he had been told.

"I'm... sorry, Nicholas," Sam said.

Attired in a scratchy grey suit, the old man's wardrobe was outdated and functional. White hair was thinning at the crown and his face was etched with the cares of seventy-one years of living. Despite this, the elderly man was in remarkable shape – he didn't slouch like so many other pensioners, as if the years were pressing down on his shoulders, nor did he have a catalogue of ailments and prescriptions to contend

with. Sam Wilkins had embraced the world all those years ago and he had no intention of letting it go just yet.

Sitting in a sturdy armchair, he struggled to conceal his anguish. He loathed that he was the one to saddle Nicholas with such terrible news – news that the lad should never have to deal with. But he wouldn't have it any other way.

“There was an accident on the railway. A car somehow found its way onto the track and caused a collision.”

He spoke slowly so as not to trip over the difficult words. He didn't believe in patronising the younger generations, never had. Bare facts, while sometimes difficult to stomach, were always the best policy in his opinion. Sam knew better than anyone how terrible a creature the imagination could be if only fleeting details of such an awful event were given.

No, he had no intention of burdening Nicholas's subconscious any more than he had to.

“The crash...” he began, and somehow the truth now seemed far worse than anything Nicholas could imagine. “The crash would have lasted mere moments.”

Nicholas gave little reaction. His quiet was unnerving. Not for the first time, Sam noted the resemblance the boy bore to his mother. He was sullen-looking, having inherited both her soulful eyes and her dark, tousled hair. There was no doubt that the quick temper was his father's. His face held an almost ghostly pallor that not even the soft lamplight could warm.

“They're both...”

Nicholas's voice made Sam's chest tighten.

“Yes, lad,” the old man conceded softly. “I'm afraid so.”

He trudged over to where Nicholas was sitting on the sofa. With great care, he moved to kneel down beside him, his knees popping with the strain.

Nicholas barely moved, barely seemed to notice he was there.

“Nicholas,” Sam said. “I know this is a lot to take in, lad, but I am here for you.”

He reached out a hand and touched Nicholas's arm.

It was as if he had been struck with a bolt of electricity.

Even as the old man touched him, Nicholas shrank back in sudden anger.

“You’re lying!” he yelled. He jumped away from the sofa. “You’re lying! They’re not dead!”

His voice rose to the ceiling and the returning echoes mocked his despair.

Dead! Dead! Ead! Ed!

The boy bolted from the room, tearing up the stairs.

Sam heard his bedroom door slam shut.

The old man put a hand on the arm of the sofa and eased himself up.

A figure entered the room.

“You told him,” the newcomer said simply.

Sam didn’t look at the speaker. Instead, he walked to the fireplace.

Behind him, Tabatha Blittmore fidgeted with her over-sized woollen jumper.

“Yes,” Sam puffed wearily. “I have told him.”

Tabatha tutted.

“Poor boy,” she said sadly. “Such a loss. Such a great, great loss.”

“Max and Anita were fine people.” Sam stared into the cold fireplace. “The world is a sadder place without them.”

“However will he cope?”

“Nicholas is strong, he’ll survive. These things are sent to test us.”

There was quiet for a moment.

“What’ll happen now? He can hardly stay here all by himself.”

“The Hallows asked that you keep an eye on Nicholas,” Sam mused, “and if you were willing, perhaps you would carry out their wish... At least until an alternative is found.”

He turned to face her.

If the circumstances had been any different, the comical sight of Tabatha Blittmore would have amused him. Her tangerine jumper was four sizes too big, hanging almost to her knees, while her brown corduroy trousers tapered down to conceal her bare feet. A mountain of crimped, dirty blonde hair spilled either side of a moon-like face.

She was young – perhaps in her late twenties, he couldn’t quite tell; everybody started to look the same once you hit sixty – and naïve, but her kindness was immeasurable.

Even as Sam suggested the arrangement, Tabatha nodded, and the curls fell across her eyes.

“Of course,” she said, swiping at the bothersome locks. “I would be happy to.”

Sam nodded.

“That’s what we’ll do, then. I expect social services will be in touch. Just refer them to me.”

He retrieved a coat and battered fedora from the armchair, his voice taking on a hushed tone as he began muttering to himself.

“I’ll have to make a few phone calls, things will have to be set in motion...”

“I’m sorry?” Tabatha said.

Sam met her bemused gaze.

“I must be off,” he said. “I’ll visit again in the next few days. Don’t worry about the, uh, the funeral arrangements, I’ll see to those.”

Tabatha hurried to shake his hand.

“Thank you, Mr Wilkins. I couldn’t have broken the news to him myself.”

Sam gave her a warm smile. “You’ll do fine, my dear.” The smile slackened thoughtfully. “And if anything... happens, be sure to call me. I’m always about.”

“Thank you, I will.”

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Hours later, when Nicholas lay in a fitful slumber, two eyes watched him in a silent vigil from the windowsill.

Almost a part of the night itself, the raven perched there until dawn set the sky on fire.