



NINE YEARS AGO HE
TOOK HER VIRGINITY.

NOW HE WANTS REVENGE.

necromancist

SEVEN FORBIDDEN ARTS #6

CHARMAINE PAULS

Necromancist

**Seven Forbidden Arts
Book 6**

Charmaine Pauls



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For Catherine

Prologue

With the letter from the London Academy of Performing Arts in her pocket, Alice Jones ran home as fast as her eighteen-year-old legs could carry her. The news was exactly what she needed in her life. Now she could move a whole continent away from dumbass Ivan.

Throwing open the door of their Manhattan townhouse on Fifty-fourth Avenue, she called for her mom. “Where are you?” She dropped her backpack in the entrance and hurried to the kitchen. “You’re not going to believe this!”

The glow from the late afternoon sun caught a day’s layer of dust on the clutter-free black marble surfaces. There were no cooking utensils or rinsed veggies on the central island counter, not even the habitual glass of wine.

She took the stairs two by two and skidded to a halt in front of her parents’ bedroom. “Mom! I’ve been chosen for the exchange program.” She yanked the door open with a squeal. “I’m going to London! I’ve—”

The scene in front of her cut her short. The room was dark with all the curtains drawn. None of her mother’s recorded arias played on the sound system. Clara sat in front of the dressing table with her head in her hands.

Alice’s gut twisted. The only things that helped when her mom was like this were sympathy and distraction. She’d go for the latter. The constant reassurance was too draining.

“Mom? Look.” She held out the letter. “They chose me. I won.”

When Clara lifted her head and pushed back her hair, Alice sucked in a breath. A clown’s face stared at her from the mirror. Red circles marked Clara’s cheeks and the tip of her nose while blue eclipses around her eyes formed a stark contrast with her white-painted skin.

“Mom?” She couldn’t hide the tremor in her voice. “What happened?”

Clara pushed a newspaper over the vanity top, knocking down bottles of perfume and face creams. Alice went down on her knees to collect the cosmetics, but Clara’s shrill voice halted her.

“Leave it!”

She straightened to study the paper. When her eyes skimmed over the unflattering critique of a theatre review, she understood the cause of today’s

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drama.

“I’m the clown of the music world.” Clara quoted the print by heart. “A fading diva who’ll be wise to quit when she’s at a high. Better placed in supporting roles, her leading days are over.”

She patted her mom’s shoulder. “It’s just one review.”

“Just one review?” Clara uttered a hysterical laugh. “Just one review? Are you listening to yourself? Don’t you dare patronize me. Do you think I’m a child? I’ve been in this business for longer than you’ve lived. I know when a nail is being hit into a coffin and *that*,” she pointed at the article, “is a fucking nine-inch nail.”

“Mom...” What was she supposed to say?

“Clara?” a deep male voice said from the door.

Alice spun around to face her dad. Thank God he was home from the office today and not at a meeting or dinner.

He crossed the floor slowly, as if he concentrated on each step. “What’s going on?”

With a sweep of her arm Clara cleared the dressing table, sending brushes and jewelry flying.

Her dad turned to her, his expression closed. “Alice, give your mom and I a moment, please.”

She retracted her steps to the hallway and stood trembling on the landing. By now, she should be used to the outbursts, but she couldn’t help how they affected her. She clutched her stomach with one hand and gripped the balustrade with the other.

“What’s wrong?” her dad repeated.

“See for yourself.”

After a moment’s silence, her dad said, “It’s one person’s opinion.”

“It’s the one opinion in the world that matters most! This is what everyone thinks. They don’t say it, but they all believe it. Everyone thinks I’m a failure. All those years of sacrifice, of practicing hour after hour, of eating nothing but lettuce and apples to fit into those goddamn costumes, all of it for nothing!”

“Darling, calm down. You’re upset about one bad write-up, but you forget about all the good ones.”

“It’s over. My life’s over.”

“There are other things in life than singing. You can teach. The opera will gladly have you.”

Her laugh sounded hollow. “They’ll be happy to have me where? Backstage, a shriveling star hidden from view like they’re ashamed of me? Am I to be discarded, too old for them or you? Is that it? Are you going to

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stick around, or will you throw me away, too?”

“What in God’s name are you carrying on about? I love you. You’re my wife.”

“You love me? You loved me when I was pretty and young. Admit it. You’re going to leave me for someone younger, a girl with a tight body and smooth face. Who wants to be with a fading diva?”

“Stop this madness, right now. I’ve never loved you for your voice. I love *you*.”

“Who is she? Where do you go at night when you don’t come home?”

“There’s no one else. You know what my job involves.”

Alice’s stomach churned at her mom’s cold snigger.

“That sinister business of yours is not a job,” Clara continued. “You work with deranged people, these so-called *agents* of yours. Do you think I don’t know of your demonic activities? People who manipulate the weather and fire and the earth... I want you to quit.”

“We’ve spoken about this.” Her dad’s voice held a note of warning. “I can’t have you advertise this to the world.”

“I’m sick of secrets. I don’t care anymore. If you don’t quit, I’ll tell.”

“You’ll put yourself—our family—at risk. Besides, no one will believe you.”

“I hate you!”

“You can’t carry on like this. Let me get you help, please.”

“You want to lock me up in an institution. You want to declare me insane so you can spend my money and divorce me.”

“The money’s *ours*, Clara, but I’ve earned it. You squandered your inheritance within the first year.” There was a pause and then his address softened. “You’re setting yourself up for failure by not accepting the inevitable. We’re all growing older.”

Her mother’s voice turned hard. “What are you saying? That I’m not desirable any longer?”

“I’m saying you have to let it go.”

“Well, I have news for you. Men still find me irresistible. Why look so shocked? It’s the truth. Want to know something else? I slept with Fabian Davis. That weekend in Miami, I wasn’t rehearsing. I was with him on his yacht.”

Alice bit down on the back of her hand to silence a sob. It couldn’t be true. Her parents were happy. She loved her dad. Fabian Davis was the most hateful man on the face of the earth. Everyone knew the tycoon slept his way around the city.

“How long?” her dad asked, his tone flat.

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“The better part of a year.”

A long silence followed. She needed to get away, to process what had just happened. She didn't want her parents to divorce. She didn't want them to fight. If only her mom had waited for the next review. Maybe the next one would be good.

“Where are you going?” her mom shouted.

“I can take a lot, but this...” Her dad sounded so broken.

“Come back here! Don't you dare walk out on me!”

“I need time alone.”

“Where are you going?”

“Don't wait for me to have dinner. I'll be home later.”

“I swear to God, if you walk out that door, I won't be here when you get back.”

“I love you, Clara, but I can't do this anymore. If you don't want to be a mother to your daughter and a wife to me, I set you free. I'll give you a divorce if that's what you want, but if you decide to stay, we'll talk about finding you help when I get back.”

“I'll kill myself! When you come back, there'll be nothing to talk about because I'll be dead.”

Her father's footsteps approached the door.

“I'll do it, damn you! You'll be happy to be free of me, won't you?”

Alice jumped into the spare room and shuffled behind the door. Her dad's shoes echoed on the marble floor as he made his way downstairs. From the crack between the door and the wall, she watched him go. His suit jacket stretched over his hunched shoulders. It was the first time she saw him with anything but a straight and proud back.

When the front door closed, she took a breath, trying to calm her shaking. Tears ran hot over her cheeks. What if her father left them? What if he never came back? Shame for her mom's behavior and sadness for her dad grew to anger. How dare her mother destroy their family? She only cared for herself and her stupid voice. Alice wiped her face on her sleeve and pushed her ear against the wall. Next door, her mom was quiet. The next step would be a bottle of wine and sleeping pills followed by a massive hangover the next morning and a day at the spa. Clara would come home with some crazy anti-ageing treatment of snail spit or snake shit that cost a fortune.

Alice sniffed her tears away and ran to her room. She called Becca and went over to her friend's house for dinner. Not able to face her mom just yet, she spent the evening at Becca's doing homework. When she got home three hours later, her dad's car wasn't parked in the driveway, but all the lights were on up and downstairs.

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Steeling herself in case her mom was still awake, she opened the door and listened. The house was quiet except for the ticking of the cuckoo clock. She tiptoed into the entrance, careful not to make any noise. About to flip off the lights, her hand froze in midair as she noticed one red shoe, like a lost Cinderella slipper, in the middle of the floor. She squinted behind her glasses. The velvet stiletto had diamante detail on the bridge. It could only be the shoes her mother had worn for her part in *La Traviata*, Clara's favorite and most acclaimed performance. Clara may throw many things around the house, but never her sacred shoes. Alice lifted her gaze to the top of the stairs, almost expecting her mom to be standing there, ready to hurl the other shoe.

It took a moment for her brain to process the sight that greeted her. Her body turned to fire and then to ice, a cold burn creeping up from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head.

Clara's body hung from the second floor balustrade on a rope tied around her neck. Bulging eyes and a swollen tongue peeking through her lips distorted her beautiful features. On the toes of her left foot dangled a red shoe.

Chapter One

Nine years later

“I-van! I-van! I-van!”

The audience in the Madison Square Garden concert hall was nothing but segments of raised arms and groping fingers freeze-framed in the surfing spotlights. Slowly, Ivan Kray came out of the trance of the final song, his attention once more anchoring in reality. From his advantage point on stage, he glimpsed flickering expressions in the teeming faces as the light caught them. It was like fanning a deck of cards too fast, seeing the clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds, but not the numbers. The concert goers remained nameless while their emotions took on palpable shapes of adoration, awe, jealousy, and the worst of all, the needy ones that said ‘pick me’.

Without warning, the darkness in the hall exploded with color that wasn’t part of tonight’s lighting choreography. The intensity drove him a step back. The radiance was enough to bring the whole hall to their knees, but he was the only one seeing it. The ability to distinguish a human soul as a spectrum of light was his gift and curse.

Involuntarily, his brain searched for a rainbow, a unique mélange associated with one person, but as always there were only red, blue, yellow, and the hues in between. Why he still hoped she’d show up he didn’t know. Maybe because he wanted her to see he was everything her family said he’d never be. Maybe because he missed her so much it still ripped his heart out every day.

“En-core! En-core! En-core!”

The euphoria of the performance was wearing off. He felt flat, like taking a nosedive after a rocket climb into space. The only way after going up was coming down, and he was coming down big time. The screaming girls in the golden circle only reminded him how the person he sang for wasn’t here.

Spreading his arms and hanging his head, he took his bow. A glance from under his lashes at Locke told him the drummer was wary. Fleet on

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guitar shuffled like he was nervous. They should be wary and nervous. He wasn't known as a nutcase for nothing. Unpredictable. Wouldn't be the first time he made a scene on stage because he couldn't handle the light.

"En-core! En-core! En-core!"

Fleet lifted his brow in a questioning gesture. Tonight, his fans weren't getting more. There was nothing left to give. He ignored the protest that swelled through the hall as he walked offstage.

Sweat dripped from his body. A stagehand took his guitar. He made his way to his dressing room, peeling off his leather jacket as he went. Underneath the jacket, his chest was bare. Cool air raised goose bumps on his wet skin. Someone took the jacket and replaced it with a towel. He wiped his face and hair. The cheering of the crowd chased after him down the tungsten lit corridor.

"I-van! I-van!"

His boots slammed the concrete as he hurried to the privacy he craved.

A fist punched the air in front of his face. "Good job, man!"

"Yeah! Fucking rocking, Iv."

He threw the towel at no one in particular. Someone always caught it. Fingers ruffled his hair. He ducked the onslaught and covered his ears to block out the high-pitched fan-hollering that filtered through the walls.

Smartphones flashed.

"Iv!"

"Ivan!"

He had to get away from the noise and light pollution. When he rounded the corner, Kate, his sixty-year-old agent, waited in front of his dressing room. Good, reliable Kate. Immediately, he breathed easier.

"Good job." She patted his shoulder and yanked her hand away. "Yuk. I forget how much you sweat."

He grinned. "I need a shower."

One of the dark-eyed brunettes from the groupies ran up to them. Her big bosom spilled over the low cut of her top like white bread dough.

"Iv—" She stood on tiptoe and kissed his ear just above the silver hoop ring. "Can I give you a hand, baby?"

He tried to be gentle but the words came out gritty with a detectable bite. "Not now, girl."

The light in her eyes dimmed. "Crim. My name's Crimson."

He didn't remember her name, even if he'd fucked her into a semi-coma last night. He never did. He never asked.

Feeling like a shitbag, he touched her hair. "Later, all right?" To Kate, he said under his breath, "Get her out of here."

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The girl was a newbie, but everyone knew he needed to be alone after a concert.

Crim reached for him. “Iv, I—”

Her fingers felt like an insult on his skin, marring the thought he still had in his head of the one woman who wasn’t at his show. He pulled away. “Out of my space.” He added in a softer tone, “Please.”

She flinched, making him feel like an even bigger asshole. That was why he never made promises. He gave them the truth before sleeping with them. They all said it didn’t matter that he didn’t give a flying fuck, but it always did.

He went inside and shut the door in both women’s faces, leaving Kate to deal with the pale-faced Crim. Facing the vanity mirror, he took a deep breath and held it until his lungs burned. This was the moment he’d been breaking his back for, the high after the performance he was supposed to celebrate. A party would follow with booze and girls. Journalists would line up for interviews. Everyone would look at him with envy and desire. Anything he wanted he could have with the simple act of signing a check. Success couldn’t get sweeter. Then why the hell did he have this void inside of him? He pushed his palms on the makeup counter and hung his head.

“I made it.”

He said the mantra after every show. No matter how many times he repeated the words, how much money he made, or how many new fans he gained with each passing day, it was never enough.

“I made it.”

From nothing. He got himself out of the gutter, out of poverty and abuse, and out from under the condemning stares of people who were born someone, people with money and good surnames, not scum like him. Why did he still feel like he’d achieved nothing?

The face staring back at him was both familiar and strange, as if he didn’t belong in his own skin. His kohl-lined eyes—his most shocking feature with one being blue and the other brown—appeared lively, but behind them lay the hidden doubt and unbearable pain he didn’t show the world. His black hair was shaved short on the sides and left longer on top. With a beard and sideburns trimmed close to the skin, he was thrown into the footballer fashion category as far as women were concerned. To the female species he was hot and sexy—some even described him as handsome—but all he saw was the empty mold of a body that missed a heart.

“Damn you, Ivan Kray. You made it, do you hear me?”

No matter what he said, he’d always be the malnourished two-year-old boy who’d barely been kept alive by a neighbor’s nursing dog. If not for the

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generous bitch's milk, he wouldn't be standing here, right now.

He slammed his fist into the mirror. It cracked from the center into a cobweb of fractured glass. A sharp pain pierced his knuckle where a splinter lodged into the skin. Drops of blood splattered on the shelf.

"Goddammit."

He shook his aching fist but welcomed the pain. It looked like he was replacing another mirror. Broken mirrors had become his world tour trademark.

With a wry chuckle, he pulled the shard from his hand and looked around for something to use as a bandage. He settled for his bandana, twisting it around his knuckles.

He pulled a hand over his beard, staring at the damage he'd done, and then jerked. The distorted image of a man sitting on the sofa met him in the broken reflection of the mirror. He flung around. Automatically, light streamed into his vision. It was his mind's way of conceptualizing data in order to put it into a frame of reference. Objects bounced colors back to him, except for the figure on the sofa. His shape was a solid black amidst the shine.

Ivan went cold. It had been a while since he'd seen a dead person. He forced his eyes to focus and bring the room back into perspective. "What do you want?"

The man had gentle blue eyes and full lips. Thick blond hair fell over his forehead. The posture of his muscular body, clad in black slacks and a white shirt, was relaxed.

"Hello, Ivan," the man said in a deep and warm voice.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nicolas."

"How did you get in?"

Nicolas smiled. "Not through the door."

He was in no mood for jokes. "You know what I mean."

Spirits could only be brought back to earth by a medium or someone like himself. The dead always sought out the most powerful necromancist they could find, as it was the only way for them to communicate with the living.

"A medium," Nicolas said.

Whoever had brought him back shouldn't have done it. The dead were best left exactly that—dead.

"Before you judge her," Nicolas continued, "she didn't do it voluntarily. I used her body." He tilted his head. "She's not a very kind person, and I didn't enjoy the experience."

"What?" Spirits couldn't do that. They had to be invited.

"I know what you're thinking. I have a special ability, but I promise not

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to use it again. I had to break the rules, only this once.”

A dull ache set into his hand as the adrenalin started to wear off. “Why?”

“I’m going to do you a favor.”

Ivan laughed. “That’ll be a first.”

“They’ll be coming for you soon,” Nicolas said, unaffected by his sarcasm.

“Who?”

“Spirits, hundreds of them, thousands.”

He’d had visits from time to time, a lost soul who’d been let in by a medium and needed closure to find their eternal rest, but hundreds? “How’s that possible?”

“You’ll know soon enough. When they come, the only way to save yourself is to find Alice.”

The name made him freeze. The sound of it was sacred, so off-limits he didn’t dare say it out loud. His fighting mode kicked in. “What the fuck do you know about her?”

“Find her if you want to be saved.”

He curled his hands into fists, ignoring the burn under his bandanna. “Have you been near her?”

“I’ve seen her.”

Envy washed over him, followed by fury. “If you did anything to her...”

“You know I can’t touch a human.” Nicolas’ eyes filled with compassion. “I couldn’t help it. When I found you a minute ago, your head was so filled with her it took me straight there.”

“Shut the fuck up! Who sent you? Why are you doing this to me?”

“You have little time. If you don’t play your cards right, her life will be in danger.”

If he could’ve grabbed the ghost by his neck and shook him, he would’ve. “Tell me what’s going on, or I’ll damn you to walk the earth for the rest of your pathetic existence.”

“No, you won’t. Don’t forget I can see into your soul.”

“What do you want?” They all wanted something.

“When the time comes, I’ll let you know.”

Just as he’d thought. There was always a price. Ivan shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“You do,” Nicolas said with certainty.

Damn, he hated encounters with spirits. He couldn’t hide the truth from them, not like with humans.

“Why will her life be in danger?” Ivan said, but Nicolas’ body was already dispersing into nothingness.

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“Talk to me!”

Nicolas offered him a last smile before he vanished.

Ivan’s very soul trembled. Her name. He hadn’t spoken it in nine years, yet she was the first thing on his mind when he woke and the last before he fell asleep. Each nameless girl he fucked, he pretended was *her*. He’d promised himself he’d prove to the world he was good enough for her after how her family had treated him. He’d told himself he’d find her when he’d made his name. A person couldn’t achieve much more than he had. Yet, he’d put it off never feeling ready. Looked like the moment had arrived.

He stared at the shattered mirror and uttered the one word he hadn’t granted himself the pleasure of tasting on his lips for a very long time.

“Alice.”

* * * *

A queasy feeling made Alice break out in a sweat. Her body went from hot to cold and back to hot in a second, the pen trembling in her hand. She ducked her head and swallowed.

“Did you get that, Alice?” said Johnny, her boss and head of the marketing department.

“Uh-huh.” She pushed her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and tapped her pen on her notebook. “Tomorrow at three o’clock.”

“Tilly,” Johnny addressed their secretary, “book the boardroom—we want to look professional—and order refreshments.”

“Ohmegosh.” Mandy, the art director placed a hand on her forehead. “I can’t believe I’m going to meet Ivan Kray in person. Ohmegosh.”

“Calm down,” Alice said, a tad hostile. “He’s a human being, just like us.”

“He’s *so* not human.” Mandy wiggled her shoulders. “He’s a god. I’m not shaking hands when we meet. I’m going straight for the mouth.”

Johnny folded his hands on the table. “Mr. Kray is bringing his own bodyguards, but speak to Quentin about stepping up our security measures, Alice, just in case. The man’s life has been threatened and according to his agent the fanatic fan mail hasn’t stopped.”

Alice listened with half an ear to the rest of the discussion. Ivan coming to the New Royal Theater shouldn’t come as a shock. He was a world-famous rock star, after all. So much for believing she was safe in a classic performing environment. The symphonic pop concert was the board’s idea of bringing younger feet to the theater. They wouldn’t have approached someone of Ivan’s stature had his agent not contacted them with an offer. Ivan should’ve stayed in the concert halls where he belonged. The theater was her holy

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ground. He had no right trespassing in her sanctuary, the only place she felt at peace.

After Ivan's recent world tour success, she'd expected nothing less than the board jumping at the opportunity, but she'd still hoped she never had to face him again. The last time they'd been together, they were both naked with her having the first and most explosive orgasm of her life. After losing her virginity to him, he'd gone downstairs for 'a glass of water', walked out of her parents' house, and never came back. Embarrassment at the memory burned on her cheeks.

The idiot had the nerve to tell the whole school he'd been Alice Jones' first fuck, and he'd be her last. It took months to live down the humiliation. She'd been a fool to fall for his poor orphan, rebel act. When she, a born and bred New Yorker from a wealthy family, had left for London the following year, he'd stayed behind in Brooklyn with his struggling foster family and earned a fortune.

Now he was here.

"Alice?" Johnny's voice brought her back to the present.

She looked up. "Yes?"

"Send out the memo to the press. Apologize for the short notice. Tell everyone he only signed the contract today. We have a month for rehearsals and three performances scheduled. Every other evening will be dark night."

Bummer, that meant almost two months with *him* around. "Why every second night? The theater will be standing empty for three nights. Can't he handle at least one consecutive week?"

"That's the only timeline his agent would agree to. Mr. Kray's voice needs to rest after every performance."

"This one's gonna be a crazy cookie to work with," Tilly said. "I heard he's as nuts as a chameleon tap dancing on an M&M box."

"He's hearing voices and seeing visions." Mandy chuckled. "He can see any vision he wants as long as he's seeing them between my legs."

Alice closed her laptop with a bang. "You shouldn't listen to everything people say."

"I read it in the Today magazine," Mandy said.

"Exactly." Alice pushed back her chair. "You're making an assumption based on gossip."

"I'm sorry to say," Mandy said, "but Tilly's right. This time, we're going to have our hands full with a nutcase."

Alice placed her empty cup on the tray with more force than needed. "You can't call him a nutcase just because he's eccentric. He's probably no different than any other artist we've worked with."

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“You’re getting defensive because of your mom. I didn’t mean to generalize, and no comparison to your mom intended, but he’s got a reputation for being more than plain old difficult.”

“We’ll handle it like we always do.” Johnny got to his feet. “You got the publicity under control, Alice?”

“Sure.” She would just have to do what she always did—keep her head up and pretend everything was fine.

Unsettled, Alice left the office at five o’clock sharp—an unusual occurrence as she usually worked late—and went straight home to her semi-detached townhouse in Fulham. After a long bath she retrieved a photo album from the back of her closet under boxes of shoes, wiped off the layer of dust, and carried it downstairs.

Tonight was one of those rare times she needed a drink. Going through the kitchen, all she found was a bottle of wine that had been open for a couple of months. She poured a glass and sat down on the sofa with the album in her lap. She swallowed a big mouthful, took a deep breath, and turned the cover.

The plastic sleeve glue had disintegrated on the yellowed cardboard. She stared at the two young people in the photo. Ivan was thinner back then, nothing like the six-pack and set of muscles he sported now. His legs were long and scrawny but his shoulders broad. His black fringe hid the wounded look that was always present in his startling mismatching eyes. Next to him, a smile dominated her face. The photo was taken on the day Ivan had taken her for a surprise picnic by the lake shortly after they’d met at the performing arts school where they’d both studied music. The insects had attacked the food he’d put out beforehand and she’d gotten a mouthful of ants in her marshmallow.

It was hard to believe the happy girl in the picture was her. It felt like a scene from a movie instead of from her life. So much had happened since. She looked at the picture for a long time, hungrily hunting for details she may have missed on the day and never granted herself the luxury of revisiting, not even in her memory. The spring grass had been green. She hadn’t noticed it, then. All she had focused on was Ivan—the tingle of his fingers on her skin, the gentle press of his lips against hers, and the warmth of his breath on her ear. Foolishly, she’d believed every word of love he’d whispered.

How could it still hurt so much? She’d moved on, for crying out loud. What was wrong with her? Holding on to the pain after nine long years wasn’t normal. It had to be because he was her first love. Nothing hurt like first love, only she’d never carried on to a second or a third. Maybe if she had someone in her life, her pain wouldn’t feel so fresh. Would she ever be able to look back and not ache?

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She blew out a breath with a shudder and turned the page. The second held a pressed rose, the once red leaves now faded to brown and halfway disintegrated into fine powder. She traced the thorny stem through the plastic and allowed herself to waddle in disgusting self-pity.

“I’ll always love you,” he’d said, catching her behind the school hall and pressing her back against the rough brick wall. He’d folded her fingers around the stem, the sharp prick of a thorn a reminder that she wasn’t dreaming, and whispered in her ear, “Just you and me, Princess. Forever.”

It was the very first flower he’d given her. The last one was the day of her eighteenth birthday, the day they’d slept together for the first and last time, the day he’d stripped her from her clothes and her defenses to leave her cold, vulnerable and lonely. It had been the worst year of her life. Shortly after, her mom had committed suicide, and her grieving dad had abandoned her.

Not able to stomach more memories, she slammed the album shut. A puff of dust blew up in the air and made her sneeze. She took another sip of the wine and pulled a face. It tasted like vinegar. The rest she chucked down the sink, watching as what used to be a very good cultivar wasted down the drain. She washed and polished the glass until it shined, put the album back in the dark corner of the closet where it belonged, and crawled into bed.

A short while later, she woke in the dark from a weight on her legs. The neighbor’s cat sometimes climbed through the window and made himself comfortable on top of her covers. The curtains billowed in the breeze, letting a cloud of mist into the room. Shivering, she switched on the nightstand lamp, expecting Mr. Whiskers to be draped over the foot of the bed, but instead a woman sat perched on the edge. Her heart dropped in her ribcage like an ax splitting wood. The woman wore a costume from *La Traviata*, her face made up as a clown. She started to hum *Addio del Passato* while swinging her leg to the rhythm, causing the red shoe on her foot to slip from her heel and balance on her toes.

“Mom?” Alice said on a sob.

The woman didn’t answer. Alice tried to shut her eyes but she couldn’t. Her gaze lowered to the carpet, noticing the woman’s other foot was bare. She tried to jump from the bed but the woman sat on her legs, pinning her down.

Alice shot upright in bed, her body covered in sweat. She flicked on the light and felt for her glasses on the nightstand. Looking around, she confirmed there was no one. Only the curtains lifted in front of the open window, giving her a view of the mist outside after the rain. She fell back on the pillow with her arm draped over her head. When her heartbeat calmed she went downstairs, made a cup of tea, and tried to go back to sleep after drinking it,

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but only managed to drift off in the early morning hours.

She grunted when her alarm went off at seven. Her nerves shot, she couldn't face breakfast. After a quick shower, she went through her closet. It didn't matter what she wore. It wasn't like she wanted to impress *him*. Pulling on the first dress her hand fell on, she turned sideways to inspect her image. Her hips were wider and her thighs fuller than in high school. While Ivan had turned into a mouthwatering sculpture, she'd changed into a cupcake. To top it all off, her face was pale today.

A bit of makeup hid the dark circles under her eyes and added color to her cheeks. Even if she had no desire to look pretty, there was no point in giving him the satisfaction of knowing she'd suffered one ounce because of him.

The summer day was gray with rain as she made her way the few blocks to the theater, arriving five minutes before eight. For the rest of the day, writing and compiling press kits kept her busy, but she couldn't help glancing at the clock on the wall with increasing frequency the closer it got to three o'clock. Several cups of tea hadn't helped to soothe her nerves.

Tilly swept into her office fifteen minutes before the dreaded meeting.

"Hey, you look like shit. Late night?"

Alice sighed. "Thanks a lot."

"Come here." Tilly led her to the adjoining office where she produced a cosmetic bag. "Let's touch you up."

"I don't need a touchup."

"You're going to meet a rock star, for heaven's sake."

"Tilly," she growled, "just let it go."

She removed Alice's glasses. "I've never seen you look this bad on the job. It's unprofessional."

Alice submitted to Tilly's well intended manhandling, allowing her to apply lip-gloss and mascara.

"There we go." The secretary took a step back to admire her work. "Now you're ready."

Alice looked into the mirror Tilly pushed into her hand. She did look slightly better. Ensuring her hair was still in place in the chignon she'd twisted at the nape of her neck, she mumbled her gratitude, braced herself, and took the elevator with Tilly to the executive boardroom on the ground floor.

Alice took her place between Johnny and Mandy. She focused hard on not tapping her pen on the tabletop. She imagined *him* walking through the door at least a hundred times, practicing to keep her expression even. Ten minutes after three she felt like exploding from tension. She hated that Ivan

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Kray still had this power over her. It had to stop right now. She wasn't a teenager, any longer.

Johnny checked his watch after five more minutes. "They're late."

"They always are," Mandy offered.

To distract herself, Alice typed up the advertising roster on her laptop.

Thirty minutes later, Johnny walked to the corner. "I'm calling his agent." After a hushed conversation, he faced the people around the table. "The meeting's off. Kate doesn't know where he is."

The accumulated tension left Alice's body like the air from a punctured balloon, leaving her drained. All that stress for nothing. He couldn't even grace them with his presence. Anger replaced her apprehension. Apparently, some things didn't change.

Mandy's face fell. "What now?"

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose but didn't reply.

This was a good thing. If it served one purpose, it was to demonstrate that Ivan was the same, selfish bastard from before who'd lied to her to get her in bed, used her, and then ignored her like she didn't exist. It was exactly the kind of reminder she needed.

She got to her feet. "I'll deal with it. We have a newspaper interview lined up for tomorrow, and I'll be damned if he screws it up for me."

Johnny frowned at her uncharacteristic outburst. "You all right, Alice?"

"Never better." She nodded at the people around the table. "Excuse me. I've got work to do. There's no point in wasting our time further, even if Mr. Kray seems to think our time isn't valuable."

She walked out of the room, feeling much better and, for some strange reason, much worse.

* * * *

Shortly after dark, Ivan entered the pub off Kensington Street. He stopped in the doorway on the mat to shake the raindrops from his coat and hair. Damn rain. He'd forgotten how it always seemed to piss down here. With habitual tenseness, he scanned the gloomy interior. Colors radiated from the people—the usual spectrum but nothing out of the ordinary. He remained on the spot for another three seconds. When no one turned their heads in his direction, he advanced to the bar and took a seat, keeping his head low. He removed his wet trench coat and draped it over the empty stool next to him.

"What'll it be?" the barman said.

"Scotch, straight."

"Hey, aren't you—"

"Nobody." Ivan lifted his face and fixed the bald man with a stare. "I'm

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nobody.”

The man took a double take. “Blimey. No one, of course.” He took a bottle of single malt from the shelf. “Glenmorangie? For you, only the best.” He stole another glance while he served the drink.

Ivan shot the liquid back and grimaced as the burn moved down his throat to his stomach, warming his insides. A silky taste of nuts, figs, dates, and vanilla lingered on his palate. From nowhere, a whisper brushed against his ear. It was the same voice from earlier, this time accompanied by a chorus in the background. Faint, but unmistakably dead. A dead voice always had a slightly off-tune quality. The whisper came again, louder this time. He flinched and cupped a hand over his ear. His eardrum ached as if his cochlea had been blasted with a hundred and eighty decibels. His ear channel hummed as if he’d spent an evening in a nightclub with his ear pressed against a speaker.

Not ready to head to his hotel, he ordered another scotch. The sound of the rain sweeping the windows, and the droned conversations around him were better than the television he only used for background noise. It damn well beat fighting these voices in his head.

It was a fine time for the voices to start. For years he’d been preparing himself for this momentous day, for facing Alice Jones. His jaw tightened at the memory of the first night he’d spent in her pristine, white bedroom. They’d lost their virginity to each other. She’d been so very responsive in his arms, sweet and innocent, her pussy greedy for him, and then her father had thrown him out—half naked—like a lowlife into the street.

Sure, he understood her old man’s wrath. He’d act the same if he one day had a daughter, but not for the same reasons. As a dad, he’d be worried about every man’s dick, because every dick would be a potential threat to a protective father, but not because it happened to be a poor dick. The bitter pill to swallow was that Alice hadn’t stood up for him against her family. Not the day after. Never.

In no uncertain terms Mr. Jones had told him he wasn’t good enough for their family. A poor backstreet orphan who’d been saved from his own father by social services and handed from one foster family to the next wasn’t good enough for the Jones’ of Manhattan.

He’d been eager this afternoon to see her fidget like she did when she got nervous, feeling a perverse excitement at imagining her discomfort, and then, just before the meeting, the voices had started. He’d bailed out, walking around for hours, trying to get his mind straight.

It was more than the voices, though. The thing was, where Alice Jones was concerned, he didn’t know if he wanted to hate or adore her. Probably

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both. The ideas he'd been walking around with in his head for the past few years certainly involved a lot of punishment, mostly with her naked body draped over his lap. His cock hardened as it always did at the thought of Ms. Jones. A lot of water had run into the sea since his foolish youth. This time round, he was wiser. He had no illusions left about love. Plain and simple, it didn't exist. There were but two truths in life. Everybody died, and only people with money got what they wanted.

Turned out he had money, and he knew what he wanted.

The same thing as always.

Alice.

He'd own every inch of her body and every drop he could squeeze from her upper-class soul. For nine hard years he'd worked like Jacob had labored for Rachel. With blood, sweat, and tears, he'd climbed to the top of the ladder. Today, he made more money than her daddy could ever dream of earning. He was ready to take back what was his. He'd do whatever necessary. There was a darkness in his soul, thanks to Alice, that worked to his advantage. Alice had no idea what lurked inside him, because when he'd loved her, he'd loved her with everything he had. There was no more loving left to give, only this body, and he didn't believe in doing anything in half measures. When he gave, it was going to be hard. Go big or go home, baby. She'd made him a loveless bastard with one obsession only—to have her—and she'd live with what she'd created.

The door opened, letting in a gush of wind to interrupt his dark thoughts. He turned his head in that direction and stilled. Light of the kind he'd only seen with one person pulsed around the figure who entered, a whole spectrum, a rainbow captured in a body-hugging halo rather than solid. The hue was unusually bright, blinding him until he managed to look beyond the aura at the person. A woman stood in the frame, her hair dripping water and her ballerina flats soaked. Clutching a leather folder under one arm, she removed brown-rimmed glasses and wiped them with a tissue she pulled from her pocket. A beige dress clung to the parts of her voluptuous figure not obscured by a short rain jacket. Thanks to the tight fit, he could guess the roundness of her breasts and hips. They were fuller than he remembered. At eighteen she'd been a bony little thing.

Well, well, speak—or think—of the devil.

Alice Jones was as centerfold beautiful as ever, though her conservative attire surprised him. He'd expected something eccentric but classy, like the clothes she used to wear in school. What surprised him even more was how much it pleased him and how hard his dick turned. A loud crack of thunder split the sky and lit up the windows, illuminating an outline of the bridge over

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the Thames with a flash. She remained in her spot by the door until a puddle of water had accumulated around her feet and her eyes found him in the busy room. He sat back and enjoyed the show of emotions that played on her face. He'd been dreaming of this moment for nine long years, after all, and not a second of it was disappointing. There was a moment of discomfort she couldn't quite hide, followed by disdain and nervousness. She lifted her chin and made her way to him with a regal stride. The woman had backbone; he had to give her that.

She stopped a step away and held out a steady hand. "Hi, Ivan."

"Hello, *Alice*." He took a moment to savor her name before his eyes roamed over her, making a visual meal of her body as he took her cold hand.

She pulled her fingers from his grip as if he was contagious and said drily, "So, you remember me."

Her words were a slap in the face. Like he'd ever forget. Like he hadn't tormented himself for the last decade with images of her in every waking hour and dream. Was this her way of telling him how little he'd mattered because she'd long forgotten the event that had twisted his whole goddamn life? If she thought she was going to dismiss what had happened between them with that line, she was in for a surprise. He'd be damned before he let her pretend it was of so little consequence they'd hardly remember each other. No fucking way. She'd ripped out his heart back then, and she'd trampled on it now where it lay at her feet on the floor. If she was going to play hardball, he was all game.

He let a slow smile crack up his face. "A man never forgets his first fuck."

Something like vulnerability flashed in her eyes, something he didn't care for at all, but it was too late to take back the crude remark.

A mask fell into place, obscuring her expression. "I see you took the coward's way out again."

"Coward?" He lifted an eyebrow. "You'll swallow those words—and much more—soon. That's a promise."

"Is that supposed to scare me? Since you didn't deliver on your last promise, I don't expect you to deliver on this one."

He was starting to enjoy the game. "My last promise?"

"I believe your last words to me were, 'I'll be right back.'"

"Oh, I delivered. I distinctly remember my hand over your mouth to muffle the scream that announced to the whole house just how well I delivered." He leaned back on the barstool and lifted his arms. "As you can see, I'm a man of my word, because I'm back, just like I said."

Her cheeks flushed red, but she kept her composure. "Nine years late."

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“We have a lot to catch up.”

“I’m not here to play catch up.”

He gave her another once over. “Then what *are* you here for?”

“Business.”

“What business would that be?”

From the breath she pulled in, it was clear she was trying to reign in her temper. He smiled inwardly at the effort it took.

“The publicity for your shows,” she said, her fingers fumbling with the buttons as she removed her wet coat.

“Yeah, I heard you took that PR job after giving up singing. Didn’t make it into your first year at the academy.” He was stilled pissed as hell about that.

Ignoring his jibe, she moved his coat aside and sat down. “You missed our appointment, not that it came as a surprise.”

From close up, he could study her face. Her eyes were the same amber with the darker edge, large for her small face and glowing against her pale skin. The most luscious lips he’d ever seen—blue from cold now—turned up at the corners in a smile that were void of any warmth, but there was still that flush on her cheekbones and perky nose. It was difficult to discern the color of her hair with it being wet, but he knew it was chestnut. She wore it drawn back into a severely twisted chignon at the nape of her neck. Droplets ran from the tendrils that had escaped the hairdo and splashed on the silk fabric of her dress. Her perfume had the fragrance of Casablanca lilies, and it clashed with the stale odor of the smoked-filled space.

She shivered and rubbed her arms, drawing his eyes to the motion.

“I forgot my umbrella in the underground.”

She almost sounded apologetic for being wet and cold, as if she had to justify it. The insecure part of Alice peeked its head out. He took off his jacket and held it to her, but she shook her head.

“No thanks.”

Hardheaded, pretty little mule. God help him, but she’d drive him more nuts than what he already was. Holding her gaze, he draped the jacket over her shoulders, silently daring her to defy him. She pretended it didn’t matter, ignorance her choice of weapon, but the color on her cheeks deepened as he fastened the first button, trapping her arms in the confines of the fabric.

He leaned in. “We had an appointment?”

She stood her ground, staying put even as he invaded her private space to the point of their noses almost touching.

“Kate said she put the meeting on your agenda.”

“She probably did.” Unable to resist the urge to touch her, he wiped a wet tendril from her temple. “I never check.”

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This time, she turned her face to escape the touch. “You kept four people waiting, four very busy people with tight schedules.”

He dropped his hand back on the bar, giving her the illusion of victory. “Sue me. You won’t be the first.”

“I don’t need the drama. We have enough of that at the theater.”

“Why don’t we just get to the point, *Alice*?” He said her name like a favorite treat, as if he could wrap his tongue around it and lick it. “Let’s talk about the real reason you’re here.”

She wiggled her arms under his jacket and handed him a piece of paper she took from the folder on her lap. “I brought you The Times interview questions to go over for tomorrow.”

He took the paper but barely glanced at the print. “That wasn’t the point I was referring to.”

“That interview is important,” she continued, ignoring his words. “It took me years to build a relationship with the newspaper staff, and I won’t let you ruin it.”

“That’s not why you’re here. You could’ve emailed the questions. Couldn’t wait to see me?”

She gave a cocky smile. “As you said yourself, you never check your schedule. I doubt you read your emails.”

He scrunched the paper into a ball and threw it over the counter, hitting the trashcan. “How *did* you find me?”

“You agent eventually tracked you down. Your bodyguard told her where you were.” She took another paper from the carrier and left it on the counter in front of him.

It was a copy of the one he’d just used for ball practice. “How many of these do you have?”

“Enough.”

He allowed his senses to override his mind to once more see the light around her face. The colors pulsed with vibrant luminosity. Under his stare the violet part grew brighter as her face turned hotter, but her lips remained a shade of blue.

He turned to the bar. “While you’re here, let me buy you a drink. It’ll warm you up.”

“No, thanks.”

“I insist.” He signaled for the bartender who gave them a curious look from under his eyebrows.

Faced with the man’s stare, she said, “A glass of white wine, please.” When the barman was gone, she tipped her head in the nosy man’s direction, her expression almost sympathetic. “It’s always like this.”

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It was a statement, not a question. Of course, having grown up with a mother like hers she would know.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow at ten,” she said after taking a sip of the wine. “We can go through the answers on our way to the newspaper office.”

He swiveled on his seat to face her squarely. “I signed a contract to perform. Interviews and photo shoots aren’t part of the deal.” He hated talking about himself, especially about his past.

“It’s my responsibility to see that your concert sells. Since you don’t read much, you wouldn’t have noticed, but assisting us with publicity in any way deemed reasonable *is* part of your contract.”

“My shows sell out, newspaper articles or not.”

“People know you as a rock star, not as a tenor. The tickets are expensive. Three performances are a lot of seats. We still have empty seats, and even if each one of them had a bum in it, I’d still require the interviews for the brand-building value. They’re as good for you as they are for us.”

Wind roared through the darkness, the intensity shaking the windowpanes. His instinct went on high alert. Even in London where rain was the norm, this kind of storm was uncommon. Voices fluttered around his head, faint whispers that begged to be let in. He pressed a hand on his ear in automatic but futile reflex. The light in the room exploded as his sixth sense involuntarily took over and made him see the clientele wrapped in color. Blue, red, and yellow intermingled.

His gaze traveled over the people, and then his heart yanked to a stop. Behind Alice sat a man in a seat that had, up to a second ago, been empty. Figured since he had no light. Around his face was nothing but darkness. Ivan’s eyes connected with a pair of empty, black ones. His palms turned sticky, and acid pushed up his throat. Remembering Nicolas’ disturbing words all too well, he turned to Alice.

“You’ll want to finish that drink and leave, now.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes for a second before she replaced it with the same impersonal smile from before. She took a bill from her folder and placed it on the counter.

“I said I’m buying,” he said.

She got to her feet. “It’s tax deductible for me.”

“Drinks with single men after hours?”

“I’m just doing my job.”

She emphasized ‘job’, probably to tell him in no uncertain terms she saw this as nothing more than a business meeting. She removed his jacket and when she deposited it on the bar stool, he moved his hand for their fingers to touch. She jerked her hand away. Bullshit. For all of her aloofness, she was as

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aware of him as he was of her. He searched her eyes for the truth—people’s eyes hardly ever lied—but the glasses went back onto her face like she was building a wall between them.

His gaze settled on the man at the table behind her. “How are you getting home?”

“By tube.”

“Let me get you a cab.”

“I can take care of myself, Ivan. See you tomorrow.”

The man behind her grinned.

“Don’t be late.” She turned and made her way to the door. The wind almost blew her back into the pub when she opened it and exited into the dark, wet street.

“You should have walked her home,” the colorless man said.

Ivan looked around before approaching the table. He sat down and leaned his elbows on the top. A foul smell erased the lingering fragrance of lilies. The man wore a black suit and red tie. His dark hair was combed back, each strand in place.

“What do you want?” Ivan asked quietly.

The man regarded him with an emotionless face. “Aren’t you going to ask who I am?”

Ivan shrugged. “Makes no difference. You’re dead. A corpse is a corpse. What you want is what’s important.”

The man sighed. “So much for polite small talk. I was looking forward to having a conversation. It’s been years, you know, one hundred and fifty-six, to be exact.”

“You didn’t find me because you’re bored and needed a chit-chat.”

The man tilted his head. “Call me Boris, and no, I didn’t look you up for a ‘chat’.”

“Who sent you?”

“A man called Godfrey.”

“I meant who channeled you.”

He folded his hands on the table while a lazy smile transformed his face. With that smile the dead bastard actually looked handsome. “Now who’s asking all the wrong questions? Does it matter who brought me back from my grave?”

“What does this Godfrey want?” Ivan said under his breath.

Boris leaned forward, the gleam in his eyes flat, as if light was absorbed but not reflected. “Why, a necromancist like you, of course. Why else would he send someone from the *other* side to find you?”

“I know that, you dead idiot. What I’m asking is *why* he wants a

necromancist.”

“He’s got a job for you.”

“I don’t do jobs in that field.”

“He pays rather well.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, money’s not an issue for me.”

Boris scrutinized him. “Neither is fame. Maybe power?”

“Go to hell.”

“No, thanks. I’ve been trapped between here and there for too long to want to jump into the flames now.”

“What did Godfrey promise you?”

Boris tapped his fingers on the table. “Nothing you’ll understand anything of. This is your answer?”

“No.” Ivan leaned forward. “This is—tell him to go fuck himself.”

Boris dived across the table. Before Ivan could blink, Boris’ fingers closed around his arm in a cold, painful grip. The minute the entity made contact with his skin, visions of mutilated, naked women popped into his mind. Mangled bodies toppled over one another, eyes and tongues missing from their faces. At the gruesome sight, Ivan jerked away. He stared at the homely features of the man next to him in shock. No spirit had ever done what Boris had just managed. With one touch he’d given him a summary of his life, captured like picture frames in a horror film reel.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Boris said.

Serial killer son of a bitch. The realization came as soon as he’d recovered from the worst of his aversion. “That was supposed to scare me? You don’t frighten me, dead man.”

“Godfrey isn’t expecting you to raise the dead,” Boris said with a sardonic smile. “All he asks is that you control one person’s spirit. Easy money, right?”

“I can’t do that,” Ivan said between clenched teeth.

“Of course you can. That’s what necromancists do.”

“Let me rephrase that for you.” He raised his voice an octave. “I *won’t* do it.”

Boris stood and straightened his jacket. “I’ll tell him.”

Just like that? No fight? It was too easy.

A hand on Ivan’s shoulder made him jump. He flung around in his chair to see the barman standing next to him with an uncertain expression.

“I think you’ve had enough, sir,” the man said. “Time to go home.”

He looked around the bar. The room had gone quiet. He shook off the bartender’s grip and got to his feet. The spot where Boris had been standing was empty.