

## CHAPTER I



*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.

“Encore! Encore! Encore!”

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 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.

“Encore! Encore! Encore!”

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 goosebumps 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 breasts 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.”

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.” Then 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 pressed 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 pulled 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 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 dragged 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 spun 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 to use it, again. I had to break the rules, only this once.”

A dull ache set into his hand as the adrenaline 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’s 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 asked, but Nicolas's body was already dispersing into nothingness.

"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. It 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?" asked 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."

Johnny addressed their secretary. "Tilly, 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 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’s 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.

Johnny’s voice brought her back to the present. “Alice?”

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 in 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.”

“You’re getting defensive because of your mom.” Mandy gave her an apologetic look. “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. “Do you have the publicity under control, Alice?”

“Sure.” She’d 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 had been 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 had been 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?

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 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. She lowered her gaze 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 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. It had been just a dream. When her heartbeat calmed, she went downstairs, made a cup of tea, and tried to go back to sleep after drinking it but only managed to drift off in the early morning hours.

She grunted when her alarm went off at seven. With 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."

Tilly 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 in the mirror Tilly pushed into her hand. She did look slightly better. Ensuring her hair was still in place in the bun 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 at the table. 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 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 is 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 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 asked.

"Scotch, straight."

"Hey, aren't you—"

"Nobody." Ivan lifted his face and fixed the bald man with a stare. "I'm 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 back the liquor and grimaced as the burn moved down his throat to his stomach, warming his insides. 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 responsive in his arms, sweet and innocent, 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 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 was 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. 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 and interrupting 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 sounded as lightning split the sky and lit up the windows, illuminating an outline of the bridge over 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 gaze 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.

Her 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.”

“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 rein 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 still 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 bun 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 gaze to the motion.

“I forgot my umbrella in the underground,” she said.

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

“No, thanks.”

Hardheaded, pretty little mule. The gods help him, but she'd drive him more nuts than what he already was. Holding her gaze, he draped the coat over her shoulders, silently daring her to defy him. She pretended it didn't matter, indifference 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."

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 coat 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?"

"Your agent. Your bodyguard told her where you are." 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."

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

The barman put a glass of wine in front of her.

"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 an 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 sweaty, and acid pushed up his throat. Remembering Nicolas's 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. When she removed his coat and deposited it on the bar stool, he shifted his hand for their fingers to touch. She jerked her hand away. Bullshit. For all her aloofness, she was as 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 asked 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’s 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 opposite him in shock. No spirit had ever done what Boris had just managed. With one touch, he’d given Ivan a summary of his life, captured like picture frames in a horror film reel.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Boris asked.

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 with 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 spun around in his chair. The barman stood 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.