

FROM
DEATH
TO
DAWN



CHELE COOKE



A crack of thunder rumbled across the sky. Before the echo had faded, she felt the first splashes of rain hit her face. A large droplet rolled down her neck and under her collar.

The pressure stiffening the air broke and the deep greys and blues of the street became rich in silver and midnight through the rain.

She paused as a shudder ran through her, and gazed through barred gates into a middle city cemetery she'd never noticed before. The discolouration in the headstones was bright with the life of the moss and grass that grew around them.

The shiver settled as a cold throbbing between her shoulder blades. She rubbed at the spot. For the briefest of moments, anger and disappointment rippled up into her mind.

"Come on! We're going to miss the bus!"

She tightened her coat around herself. As she jogged to catch her friends, voices rose from the other side of the railing.

Vengeance calling to her.

ONE



My shoulders hunched against the cold as I descended the slippery steps out of Tower Hill tube station. The yellow glow of fluorescent lamps gave way to the grey-blue hue of a weak autumn sun fighting through a cloud-covered sky. The leaves had long since given up their brief blaze of golden and russet tones, and had fallen to form a wet, composting mulch across every pavement within twenty metres of a tree. When the temperature dropped below freezing, it would become treacherous underfoot, always promising snow but never delivering. I hated London in the winter; living in a place where all the colour and natural beauty was sucked out of the world, replaced with monotonous grey.

Crossing over the road, my gaze wandered the imposing walls of the Tower of London. The surrounding area was being consumed by glass and metal; each new building that speared up looked more dystopian and fragile than the last. But here, at least, was safe; buffeted on one side by the ever-unchangeable river Thames, and enclosed in

a ring of cream stone buildings that had already survived a century and a couple of wars. I doubted they would surrender to the invasion of new fashions.

Here, magic still existed; impervious to the dulling of the seasons and the monotony of modern living. The Tower of London, the cathedrals, and the theatres; the history that was brought alive by standing in their presence. Even when the history was gruesome, there was a magic to it.

I walked down the wide pedestrian pavement from the tube station towards the river. It was quicker to go through the city streets, but I enjoyed walking by the river, especially during autumn and winter when most of the tourists had disappeared for another season.

Perched on top of the Beauchamp Tower, three ravens stared down at me as I passed. I found myself unable to look away from them and, the further I walked, the more their heads turned, following me in my trek down towards the river. As I passed the gift shop, one of them leapt from the side of the wall, swooping on slick black wings to land on Byward Tower, the entrance to the Tower of London. It let out a gurgling caw as I turned away to head west along the north riverbank and, when I turned back, its two friends had joined it, side by side, their gazes fixed on me.

I hurried along the river path towards work. It was surely my imagination, fighting the monotony of another week, creating intrigue and superstition in the mundane. I quickened my step and pushed the curious ravens out of my mind.

It wasn't just the ravens. By the time I'd reached work, three homeless people had asked for change, two different tourists needed directions for the Thames tour boat docks, and a harassed banker enquired over the time while he clutched his phone in his hand, the time clearly visible on the screen.

The moment I arrived in the office, I dumped my bag and my travel mug on the desk and dashed to the bathrooms. I checked myself over in the mirror. Was I wearing my jumper inside out? Had I spilled something? Was mascara running down my face, or did I have something stuck in my teeth? Aside from my dark hair resembling a nest thanks to the riverside winds, there was nothing I could see that would account for all the attention. I smoothed my hair, untangling the knots with my fingers, and returned to my desk, glowering at the black computer screen as if it might provide the answers.

It didn't, so I turned on the computer and, like I had with the ravens, pushed the encounters to the back of my mind, letting the details fade and melt; a dream dribbled away through the sieve of consciousness.

As much as I tried not to think about it as I worked—answering the phones, replying to emails, confirming new bookings—I couldn't ignore the tingling at the back of my neck. The raised hairs. The goosebumps. The sense of someone watching me. I received a few looks from others in the office, before they thought better of whatever they had been considering and turned back to their work.

“Have you heard there is some kind of office tour today?” Rachel asked, perching herself on the corner of my desk and resting her forearm across the top of my monitor.

I blinked and turned away from the screen. “What? No.”

“It’s in the public diary. Just after lunch. Melissa put it in.”

I had no reason to think Rachel would lie about something like that, but I clicked out of my emails and selected the calendar, anyway. Sure enough, there was a two-hour slot from one until three when our manager, Melissa, would be unavailable due to providing a tour.

“Who’s NH?”

Rachel shrugged and leaned forwards over my monitor to stare at the screen. “No idea. It wasn’t there on Friday. Only spotted it when I got in. Think we’re getting a new manager?”

I leaned back in my seat and scrunched my face. Melissa was not my favourite person in the world, but she was a decent manager. It would be a pain to suddenly be working under someone else.

The phone chirped from behind my keyboard, its call joining with the flock chirping to life across the office. Rachel hopped up onto her feet and flitted across to her own desk, collecting the receiver and singing her good morning as she landed back in her seat.

I blinked and shook my head. I needed to get my mind off birds.

It did not prove difficult to put the ravens out of my thoughts. The calls came in thicker and faster, and emails flooded the inboxes to be organised and acknowledged. By the time Zoe laid her hand on my shoulder and told me it was my turn to take a break, I had forgotten about my morning walk.

I returned from a cheap café lunch and retrieved the post from the building security desk downstairs, separating it out for the different departments in the elevator. I came out at the Accounts level, one above my floor. I only ever came up here after lunch to deliver their post, though why they couldn't collect it themselves I'd never know. It was one of those routines I had slipped into, and now everyone expected it from me.

Pushing open the glass door, I wandered across the offices to the assistants' desks.

"He was very handsome, wasn't he?" one of them said.

Another, rifling through invoices, huffed and shrugged. "Not my type."

"Come on. Even if he's not your type, you can't say he wasn't attractive. We all have different interests in romantic and sexual partners, but you can't deny the conventions of beauty and how they impact our perceptions of strangers."

I stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed as the worker who'd deemed their visitor as not her type paused in her rifling, lifted her head, and considered the point.

"Conventionally, very handsome," she said, and returned to her rifling.

"And what about you, Ivy? Did you think he was handsome?"

My stare shifted from vacant and impressed to abject horror as the conversation turned to me. Apart from the shock of being asked what I thought of someone, I didn't want to admit that after three years working here, I still couldn't remember which one was Jenny and which was Cathy, though they

knew who I was, out of the ten people who worked in the office below them.

“Who?”

“Mr. Hastings.”

My horror melted to a complete and utter loss as I shuffled forwards and placed the small pile of mail onto Jenny or Cathy’s desk. She beamed at me and collected the stack.

“I don’t know who that is,” I said.

“Our visitor, the one Melissa is showing around,” Cathy-Jenny said, propping her elbows on her desk and her chin on her knuckles. “Nice suit, and lovely eyes. Funny. I rarely like pale guys.”

I shuffled back out of the office, giving them both a wave as I fled the conversation. The moment the glass door closed behind me, they had their heads together and were muttering about something. I ignored it. If a new person was coming in at a prominent position, it wouldn’t change my job. If they were being given a tour, and wore a noticeably nice suit, it wasn’t like they’d be coming into a job I was qualified for.

It wouldn’t change anything.



“Psst! Close Facebook.” Zoe leaned out from behind her desk to hiss across the office. “Melissa’s coming, and she’s brought someone.”

Zoe had the perfect desk for watching the corridor outside the office door, and it wasn’t uncommon for her to give warnings when important people were coming. Mostly when Melissa was coming.

Around the office, people hurried to close whatever non-work-related tabs they had open on their desktop. James, in the corner, saved and closed a Word document that, from this angle, looked suspiciously like a CV. Within ten seconds—by the time the glass door swooshed open—we were the perfect, dedicated workspace.

“This is the service office team,” Melissa announced as she strode forwards into the centre of the office. “Bookings, enquiries, publicity, and social media.”

She stood beside the end of my desk, her perfect nails perched against the corner. I kept my gaze on my screen, though I could not think of what I wanted to write in the email I had open. Goosebumps erupted down the back of my neck anew; a tingling sensation that ran all the way down my spine.

After closing the email, I moved to the booking screen. I hit refresh and watched the dial rotate as the entries loaded, trying to keep myself from glancing up at Melissa. She always made me feel awkward. She was more of a businesswoman than most who worked in theatre, even in the back-of-house jobs like ours. She wasn't high fashion, but she was always so perfectly put together that it made me feel messy, even in my most work-appropriate clothes.

“Contracts and finance are upstairs. It's good to have everything in one place,” a man said.

Despite myself, I turned to look over my shoulder. One brief glance was all it took to realise it was certainly not me that Melissa's attention was fixed on. He was tall, classically handsome in that aristocratic way Hollywood loved about British

actors, and in a suit that was clearly out of my price range. This was the man Jenny and Cathy had been talking about. The tour.

“Yes, that’s right,” Melissa trilled in the sweet, high-pitched voice she adopted when she was excited about something. “I thought you’d like to see the full operation.”

The man moved further into the office, past Melissa and into my eyeline. I pulled a notepad towards me and tapped the end of my pen against it, gritting my teeth. The tingling sensation had moved from the back of my neck to a line down my collarbone, like water dribbling towards my navel.

“This is the full team in reservations?”

“Yes, and publicity. When we have big names, they will sometimes take over an account for a day. A little event. You see it all the time on Twitter and Instagram, these days. But that never happens in the offices.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Oh, of course you are,” Melissa said, brushing her auburn hair back over her shoulder. “I just meant—”

“I wouldn’t mind going back upstairs to billing and contracts,” the man said. “Getting a couple of your standard agreements to look over.”

Melissa looked stunned by his blunt request, and I realised it was the first time I had ever seen her flustered. It wasn’t like I spent a lot of time around the higher powered people within the company, but I’d always seen her as unflappable. Even the time we’d lost an entire show’s worth of bookings because of a server malfunction hadn’t phased her.

She waved a hand and marched off back towards the office door. But the man stayed put, anchored

in the top corner of my vision. When I glanced up from my screen, I found him staring at me. His blue eyes narrowed in curiosity, and his lips pulled up in a half-smile. I looked down again, but he moved towards my desk.

“Do you have a social media card?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

My gaze darted up again, but I wished I hadn't looked. From where he stood at the end of my desk, I could see his eyes in detail. They were a myriad of blues, all encompassed by a solid black ring around the iris, made all the brighter by his pale skin and dark hair.

“A social media card for the company,” he said. “With the platforms?”

My mouth dropped open.

“Oh. Oh, yes. Of course.”

I opened my top drawer, regretting the state it was in, and dug out a clear plastic box of business cards. They had my name on them, but they also listed the company's social media accounts, and it was the only thing I could think of.

I grimaced when I had to break the tape seal in order to take off the lid and hand him one. His fingers brushed mine as he took it; his hands were cold from the wind chill outside, and smooth as silk. I pulled back far quicker than was polite. He grinned down at me.

“Good day,” he said before glancing at the card in his hand. “Ivy.”

“Good day.”

He nodded and turned towards the door before pausing. I could feel the frosty glare from Melissa on the back of my neck. He turned back to me.

“Nice tattoo,” he said quietly.

I clamped my hand to the back of my neck, where my tattoo just peeked out from beneath the neckline of my shirt. He left my desk and went back to the door. Melissa and the man disappeared out of the office without another word between them.

Within ten minutes, the only conversation was about the man’s identity and why he was being shown around the offices like visiting royalty. There were theories about a new management position, or a director bringing in a new production. But in three years, the company had never shown a director the offices. They rarely cared about how we ran the booking systems as long as the theatre seats were filled.

Plus, who wanted to visit accounts and contracts? True, they had a lot more information about incoming changes. After all, they’d dealt with the money and agreements before the changes came in. But if the conversation I’d overheard from Jenny and Cathy had anything to do with it, they knew as little as we did.

That didn’t comfort me.

TWO



I left the office to find our mysterious visitor stood outside the building, talking on his phone. He made little listening noises as his nostrils flared. He turned to look at me. His gaze roamed down and back up, and he smiled. He held up a hand and rolled his eyes in exasperation as the person on the other end of the phone kept talking.

“Yes, it is a nice location,” he said, falling silent again.

I moved to the side of the pavement, edging between him and the parked cars. I gave him a polite nod and moved away, expecting to never see him again. I knew that one morning I would open my email to find a notification that someone new was starting in the company. When I asked who they were, I’d be reminded of the time he came to the offices.

But, as I moved past him, he caught my arm in a light grip and interrupted whoever was on the end of the call.

“No, sorry, I have to go,” he said. “I’ll call you later on, okay? Alright. You, too. Bye.”

I quickly extracted myself from his grasp and shoved my hands further into my pockets as he tucked his phone away. He held up his hand apologetically and stepped away from me.

“Ms. Monroe, right?”

I nodded.

He didn't look at all perturbed by my selective mutism as I tried not to stare too hard at his eyes. Was it possible they were even brighter in the early evening gloom? His skin looked paler, as well. There was something hypnotic about the way he looked down at me.

“Gods, where are my manners?” He extended a hand towards me. “Nate Hastings. We met upstairs?”

His voice went up at the end, like I might not remember the absurdly handsome man shown around our office hours earlier. Like perhaps this was a regular occurrence, and I might have mistaken him for the tall, rich businessman I was introduced to last Tuesday afternoon.

“Ivy,” I said before I remembered he had taken my card and that was how he knew my surname. I took his hand, once again surprised by his cold fingers. True, winter was on the way, but it wasn't like he'd been standing out here for hours. At least I hoped he hadn't. “Were you looking for Melissa? Uh, I mean, Ms. Hobson?”

Nate Hastings shook his head and indicated down the road.

“Were you heading to the Tube?”

“Tower Hill.”

“Fantastic. Do you mind if I walk with you? I get so turned around in this part of the city.”

I made my best attempt at not looking horrified, shoved my headphones back into my bag, and tucked my phone away.

“No problem.”

He didn't look much older than me. Mid-thirties perhaps. But it felt as if there was a chasm between us. His expensive suit, perfectly styled hair, classic good looks... He might as well have been two decades my senior for how I felt walking beside him.

I worried that he was going to try to make idle conversation. Or worse, ask me questions about the company until I felt like I was being interrogated by invaders for the secrets of the kingdom. But he remained silent, strolling beside me as if he didn't have a care in the world. When his phone beeped, I watched from the corner of my eye as he extracted it from his inside pocket and looked at the screen.

“Oh, bugger off.”

He put his phone back in his pocket as I sniggered at his outburst. He smiled at me.

“Some people don't appreciate working hours.”

It was the perfect opportunity to make conversation. Instead, I fell silent, keeping company by our footsteps. We reached the river without another word passing between us, and by then I was more worried about making idiotic small talk myself than I was about him coming out with it.

“Are you starting work for Ketteridge and Heathe?” I blurted.

Nate looked at me sideways as we walked. He swept his jacket open despite the cold wind and tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. There was more bounce in his step.

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Everyone’s curious about why you were being shown around.”

He smiled. “I do love a bit of intrigue.”

I stared up at Nate, waiting for him to tell me why Melissa had shown him around the offices. But he just peered out across the river. If he’d been any more theatrical, he may have started whistling. He didn’t.

“So?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why were you shown around?”

“Oh, that,” he said.

“Yes, that.”

He went back to watching boats pass by on the river. I harrumphed and crossed my arms over my chest. When he glanced back, he had a wicked gleam in his eye and wore a broad smirk.

“I’m thinking of buying it. At least, my family are.”

“The offices?”

“The company.”

My eyes widened, and I let out a long breath. “Wow!”

He *could* buy the company. I didn’t know the finances of Ketteridge and Heathe Theatres, of course, but I knew they did well, and they put on good productions that people liked.

He shrugged. “With the Ketteridge and Heathe situation, I was sent to see what we would get on the administrative side of things. It’ll help make the decision.”

It took a few moments for my brain to catch up to my shock at being in the presence of someone who may be a millionaire. But when I caught up, I was smacked in the face with the implications.

“Are you going to fire us?” I asked. “Bring in your own people?”

“It’s not how we operate. Usually, the theatres have been failing for some time, racking up debts, or closed entirely. There’s always the financial side to consider, but there is no reason to purchase a functioning company with fully trained staff in place, paying top dollar in part for that reason, and then fire them.”

Nate drew his hand from his pocket and laid it on my shoulder.

“You’ll not be losing your job, Ivy,” he said gently. “The company is not up for public sale.”

“And yet you want to buy it?”

“We’re considering making an offer. It’s why I came today.”

As I moved to give space to a pedestrian heading in the other direction, Nate’s hand slipped from my shoulder across the back of my neck.

I yelped, leaping half a foot in the air as an icy blade shot through the back of my neck and down my spine. He yanked his hand away, taking a sidestep and putting more distance between us.

“I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

I rubbed my hand across the back of my neck, winced, and lifted my shoulders up towards my ears.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. “I don’t know what happened. Static, perhaps? I just got this jolt.”

Nate sucked his cheek between his molars and chewed for a moment. His gaze was darker, more intent, as he set it upon me.

“Maybe you have a sore muscle,” he said, choosing each word carefully. “Or something.”

Nodding, I took a deep breath and let a shudder run through my body.

I straightened up. “We should keep walking.”

Nate extended his hand in front of him, in invitation, and fell into step by my side. He tucked his hands back into his pockets, with his jacket open and swept behind his wrists. I glanced sideways at him and shivered against the Thames wind. I wore a shirt, woollen jumper, and a coat over the top, and I still felt the wind rushing off the water.

“Are you not cold?”

He peered at me for a few seconds, his face scrunching into curious confusion. Within a blink, it was gone, and he shrugged.

“Guess I don’t feel it as much.”

We turned onto the pedestrian pavilion that ran down the side of the Tower of London and began climbing the gentle slope. Within moments, the tingling sensation was back at my neck, hairs standing on end, as if someone was watching me. I looked up at Nate, but he stared past me, smirking.

A caw vibrated in the air. I whipped around towards it as another caw rippled out. Then a third. Three large ravens were perched on the tall, thick wall between the towers. I froze mid-step. Perhaps I was being ridiculous, or paranoid, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that these were the three birds that had watched me before.

“Friends of yours?”

Nate wore a teasing smile, his gaze shifting between me and the ravens up on the wall. I knew the stories about the ravens of the Tower of London, and that there had been some excitement a few years earlier at the birth of the first chicks in a long

time. It had been when I'd moved to London. My friends had always talked about going to see the chicks, but we'd never gotten around to it.

"Yeah," I replied, deadpan. "I'm the reincarnated soul of someone who died there. They know I escaped."

I shot a wary gaze up at the ravens, who were hopping along the wall, cawing and spreading their wings for their leaps across the crenels in the ramparts. They followed us up along the promenade, keeping to the safety of the Tower walls across the expanse of empty moat.

I shook my head and turned back to Nate, surprised to find him watching me with a curious, narrow-eyed stare.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head and looking away. "Did you know that actually less than a hundred prisoners died within the Tower walls due to torture?"

"I didn't. I've never actually been in."

"Me neither. I just like the history."

I wasn't liking this conversation. I tried to ignore the cawing of the ravens and chewed on my lip. I quickened my steps to pass the final corner tower and leave them and the subject behind.

"So, why Ketteridge and Heathe?" I asked.

"Sorry?"

Like me, Nate appeared to have to shake off the attention of the ravens. It clearly distracted him, silly as it was. His brow furrowed low over his eyes until the soft flesh at the bridge of his nose wrinkled.

"Why did you choose Ketteridge and Heathe to enquire about buying?" I tucked an errant lock of

hair behind my ear. “You said you usually buy failing theatres.”

“Good locations,” he said. “Good buildings. I’ve always liked the Alfred Theatre, especially. But it’s not really my decision.”

I grinned at him.

“And they wouldn’t sell you just that one?”

The distracted concern melted away from his face and he returned my smile with an expression so charming and perfect, I thought my knees might buckle beneath me. While Jenny and Cathy in finance had discussed Nate’s conventional attractiveness, there was nothing as casual as convention about it. He was beautiful; probably the most handsome man I’d ever spoken to for an extended period. The closest I usually got to people like this were press nights for new productions.

“Would you sell only the jewel instead of the whole crown?” he said.

I shrugged. “Can’t say I’ve ever considered buying crown jewels.”

Nate laughed. “No, but perhaps stealing them. Maybe that was what you were in the tower for.”

I rolled my eyes and glanced both ways along the road before hurrying to cross towards the tube station. With his long legs and extended stride, Nate barely needed to stretch to keep up with me.

“District or Circle?” I asked.

He paused at the entrance and glanced inside before shaking his head.

“I probably really should return this call,” he said, looking down at his phone.

“Oh.”

That was strange, right? He'd said he always got lost on his way to the tube, and now we were here and he wasn't going in. A flutter in my heart daydreamed that he'd said that to spend time with me; but that was ridiculous. After all, he'd mentioned his family wanting to buy the company. He probably had a wife, though from this angle I couldn't see whether he wore a wedding ring. I cursed myself for even wanting to know.

"My brother is... impatient," he said with a casual smile. "I can get off the phone quickly if I call him now."

"No need to explain." I pulled my hands from my pockets and offered him the right. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Hastings."

He took my hand. While he may not feel the cold, his fingers certainly did.

"A pleasure, Ms. Monroe. Perhaps we'll see each other again sometime."

I extracted my hand and fumbled in the front pocket of my bag for my Oyster card.

"If you end up buying the crown, then no doubt."

Nate nodded and extracted his phone from his pocket.

"Have a good evening."

"You, too. Good luck with your brother."

He smiled; his gaze locked on my eyes. As I once again felt the wobbling of my knees and the flutter in my chest, I wrenched my gaze away and hurried into the tube station. I swiped my card and rushed through the barriers. At least this way, by the time I regretted my decision to walk away from him and got myself out of the tube station, he'd probably already be gone.

I could tell myself that and forget about the entire strange day.