

CHAPTER ONE

Alex

1987

OF COURSE, I always knew I was ugly. How could I not know when those around me took pains to remind me at every given opportunity? I'm told my mother Beatrix cried her eyes out when the nurses presented me to her at the hospital. Apparently, my grandmother almost fainted. My father Neville refused to believe I was his offspring and accused my mother of having an affair, despite me having the same unique blue-green eyes as his. He said no way could I possibly be his, no way could his good genes and breeding have produced such a freak of nature.

But sadly, I am indeed a Kingswood. Believe me, sometimes I wish it weren't so. Many times, over the years, I've fantasised that the man I called Dad wasn't related to me, but...there it is. You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. But I digress. Back to the subject of my hideousness.

My aunt Priscilla once told me that my unfortunate appearance was God's punishment for my father's murky business dealings—the sins of the parent falling on the child, as it were. My dad was a wealthy arms dealer who spent half the year working abroad in the Middle East negotiating lucrative trade deals. Behind his back, Aunt Priscilla constant-

ly berated her brother-in-law for profiteering from the pain and bloodshed of others. She said all he cared about was money and had no concern for the lives destroyed by the wars facilitated by the rapacious stakeholders of his company.

Another theory was that my accursed face was some sort of karma for my ancestors dabbling in witchcraft. The Kingswood family have long been famous for their nefarious obsession with the occult, the most prominent being my great uncle Lionel, a deeply feared black magician who worked as Winston Churchill's personal advisor during World War II.

Whether this is true or not, I couldn't say. All I do know is that when it came to me, my father was a cold, cold bastard. Amongst our extended family, there were whispers he spent so much time abroad because he couldn't bear the sight of me, so repulsed was he by my monstrous appearance. It wouldn't surprise me if this was true.

On the face of it, I had an enviable lifestyle. My family lived in Claremont Hall, an impressive manor house on the outskirts of the village of Grimschurch in Surrey. Nestled in an array of beautiful gardens and immaculate lawns, to an outsider, my father's ancestral estate looked like a dream but in reality, the stately home was more like a prison cell.

As a child, I was rarely allowed to go out, although I longed to explore the world outside. There was no warmth in my household growing up. No "I love you's," no hugs, no kisses. It was always purely formal. My father treated me with a mixture of disgust and disdain and had little time for me. The servants were polite but kept to themselves.

Even my mother Beatrix, who deep down I knew loved me, was never very demonstrative. I ached for her to hold me, to cuddle me, but she never did. It was as if she didn't want to touch me and could only offer her brand of love from

a distance. Her feelings for me were complex, no doubt fraught with bitterness, as if she was resentful of the sacrifices she'd had to make for my sake.

Aunt Priscilla told me that before I was born, my mother had been a social butterfly, but retreated from the London party scene once I came along, becoming a virtual recluse to protect me from the daily abuse I attracted from strangers. The guilt-tripping was endless and made me feel bad for even existing, as if I was to blame for everything wrong in my parents' lives.

Very early on, it was decided that I would need to be home schooled. Beatrix's frequent trips to the village with me as a young child saw to it that this was the only way to go. Whenever the neighbourhood kids saw me coming, they screamed and ran away. They called me a monster and all manner of hurtful names; sometimes they even threw stones. Their cruel taunts made me cry but even so, I still longed to be with them. All I wanted was to play with the other children, to be accepted by them, but after a while, it became clear that the safest option was for me to stay locked up inside, shielded from prying eyes.

My mother engaged a governess, and I was taught English, Maths, Latin and French with a little History thrown in for good measure. I was also forced to learn the piano, which I hated as I wasn't very good at it, but my mother insisted I carry on regardless. My grandfather had been a celebrated concert pianist so it was assumed I must have inherited some of his musical talent (believe me, I hadn't).

The turning point in my life came in the winter of 1987 when Aunt Priscilla gifted me a beautiful ginger kitten for my tenth birthday. Soft as silk with a lovely shiny coat, the cat was the sweetest creature I had ever seen, and I was

overjoyed that she was mine. I had been begging for a pet for years, but Neville had always forbidden it as he detested animals. However, with him safely away on a business trip to Saudi Arabia, I'm sure Aunt Priscilla was making mischief, but I couldn't care less.

I absolutely adored the kitten who I named Trinity, and everywhere I went, she followed. Soon, the two of us were inseparable and we did everything together. Having a pet was a complete revelation. Trinity was not afraid of me, she loved me to touch and stroke her, and for the first time ever, I knew what it felt like to be loved unconditionally and not be judged on my looks. Trinity wanted to be around me all the time, even slept next to me every night on my pillow. She more than quelled my deep sense of loneliness and I had never known such happiness. Finally, at last, I had the warmth and companionship I had so long craved and for six glorious months, that darling kitten was my best friend.

Then one cold Saturday morning in early November, I awoke to find Trinity missing from her usual place on my pillow. Frantically, I searched high and low but could find no sign of her anywhere. I asked my mother, the housekeeper, the butler, the cook, everyone, but nobody had seen her. And then I heard a car engine outside and was immediately hit by a deep sense of foreboding. I knew that sound well. It was the sound of my dad's Mercedes-Benz pulling into the driveway, returning unannounced from his business trip.

Racing downstairs, I got outside just in time to see Trinity's little corpse lying beneath the wheels of the car. My father had backed into her, killing her instantly. Uttering a guttural cry, I fell to my knees in tears, every part of my body numb with grief. It was like the sound had been turned down on everything. No, this couldn't be happening.

“Trinity, you killed Trinity!” was all I kept saying.

For a few moments, my father remained silently in his car, and then he got out and for a split-second we locked eyes and I saw a look of cruel defiance on his face. And I knew, I just knew, that it hadn’t been an accident. He had sadistically run over my cat on purpose to inflict as much pain on me as possible and for that, I would never forgive him. He had taken away my best friend and her loss was like a knife in my heart. Something inside me died that day and I would never be the same again.

As I continued to sob my heart out, everyone rushed outside to see what all the commotion was about. Suddenly realising he had an audience, my dad switched his demeanour from triumphant devil to one of faux outrage.

“Who the fuck brought a cat into this house?” he demanded of no one in particular. “I thought I said no pets allowed. How the hell was I supposed to know there was a cat prowling around for me to be on the lookout?”

“Oh Neville, how terrible,” Beatrix gasped, staring in horror at Trinity’s motionless body. “What an awful, unfortunate accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident!” I shrieked. “He did it on purpose! He killed Trinity on purpose, I just know he did! It wasn’t an accident...”

“Shut up, you little shit! How dare you make such scurrilous accusations? Of course, I didn’t do it on purpose. I couldn’t bloody see the thing, could I? And it just came darting out of nowhere. This is why I said no pets, because they’re more trouble than they’re worth. Whose bright idea was it to bring a cat into the house? Tell me! Oh, stop your snivelling, will you? It’s only a stupid cat, the world hasn’t ended. You’re making such a fuss about nothing. Time to

man-up and get over it, boy, or I'll really give you something to cry about."

That was the moment when I realised that I truly hated my dad. Up until that point, I had always disliked him but retained a sort of grudging respect for him, hoping that one day I might be able to win him over. But not anymore. Now I despised him with a black hatred that was all encompassing. My mind was made up and there was no going back. As far as I was concerned, he had murdered Trinity, so he and I were now mortal enemies. At the tender age of ten, I privately swore to avenge the death of my one true friend and no matter how long it took, I promised that one day, I would wipe that evil smirk off his face.

Against Neville's wishes, we buried Trinity at the bottom of the garden and my mother received a severe beating that night for allowing me to own a pet. In some twisted way, it seemed my dad blamed her for what had happened and took out all his rage and frustration on her. And that made me feel terrible. I felt so guilty for being the cause of the suffering my poor mum was going through.

Throughout the night, tears rolled down my cheeks as I listened to the crash of furniture drifting up from my parents' bedroom. The terrible noises of Beatrix sobbing and begging forgiveness. My father's booming voice berating her for daring to disobey his wishes. And nobody intervened. Not even one of the servants questioned what was happening. Nobody did a thing to help my mother in her time of need. They all turned a blind eye to my dad's violence because they feared for their jobs. The fucking cowards.

From that point on, I slipped into a dark depression. Nothing could console me or cheer my spirits and I felt as if everything and everyone was against me. For the next couple

of months, I operated on autopilot, attending my classes as usual, but nothing had any meaning without Trinity. Neville returned to the Middle East and my mother became even more emotionally distant. I felt so alone.

Then one evening I was in my bedroom, waiting to be called down to dinner. Looking for something to read, I went over to the bookcase to get out one of my old *Beano* annuals. In my haste, I tripped and found something sticking up from the floor. Pulling back the rug, I saw that one of the floorboards had come loose. Crouching down to slot it back in place, I noticed something lying in the dark cavity beneath.

Cautiously, I reached inside and fished out a couple of tin soldiers, a Steiff teddy bear and a pretty porcelain doll dressed in Victorian clothing. Clearly very old, they were covered in dust and I imagined they must have once belonged to another child who had slept in this bedroom many years ago. I found them fascinating.

I was just about to replace the floorboard when I realised there was something else there. Squinting in the darkness, I reached down again and pulled out a rectangular board covered with pictures of moons and suns. In the centre, running in a curve, were the letters of the alphabet, the numbers 0-9 and the words "Yes" and "No." Attached to it with a piece of string was a heart-shaped pointer made of wood with moveable wheels. I had no idea what it was. It sort of reminded me of my Fisher-Price magnetic numbers board, only much, much older.

Clutching my new toy in my arms, I raced downstairs in search of my mother to show her my exciting find. I found her in the lounge looking tired, sipping a gin and tonic.

"Mummy, you'll never guess what I found under the floorboards in my bedroom. Do you know what this thing is?"

Frowning, Beatrix put down her glass, took my strange discovery and examined it closely. "It's called a Ouija board," she said. "And that wooden pointer thing is called a planchette."

"What's a Ouija board?"

"It's an old parlour game from Victorian times. There used to be these people called mediums, who used Ouija boards to make contact with the spirit world."

"Spirits? Do you mean like ghosts and stuff?"

"Yes. Ghosts. Dead people." She shrugged. "It's just a bit of fun not to be taken seriously."

I was intrigued. "So, is it like a board game, you know, like Snakes and Ladders?"

"Not exactly, but it's definitely a game of sorts. Look, let me show you how it works."

Placing my treasured find on the table, my mother untied the planchette and demonstrated moving it around the letters of the alphabet. "This is how you play it. You ask a question, and then the planchette spells out the answer. See? Go on, ask a question."

"Erm...How old am I?"

"All right, watch." Gently, she moved the pointer from the number 'one' then slowly onto 'zero.'

I clapped my hands together excitedly. "Ten years old! That's right! Oh, this is so much fun!"

"Yes, it is." Then, massaging her temples as if feeling a headache coming, she said, "Listen Alex, you run along and have fun playing your new game, okay? I've got a few things to finish up here before dinner. Oh, and remember to wash your hands. If you've been playing in the garden again, then they're probably filthy."

"But I already *did* wash them."

“Then do it again for me.”

“Okay.”

Eagerly, I took the Ouija board back upstairs and laying it on my bedroom floor, sat down to play with it. Placing my fingers on the planchette in the way Beatrix had shown me, I began asking questions out loud, hoping to make contact with the kid who had once owned the toys I found under the floorboards.

Initially, the things I asked were innocuous: *Can you hear me? Do you want to play? How old are you?* And to each enquiry, I took control of the planchette to answer my own question, which I found strangely gratifying. Even though I knew full well I was the one moving it around, I found it comforting to have an imaginary friend. In my naivety, I thought it was all just innocent fun.

Then suddenly, there was a weird electricity in the air. An invisible force seemed to take control of the Ouija board and I watched in shock as the planchette moved of its own accord to the word “Hello.”

With a cry of fright, I bolted downstairs in search of my mother again to tell her what had happened. I found her in the bedroom in the middle of taking a call. I knew she didn’t like to be disturbed, but this was an emergency.

“For goodness’ sake Alex, what is it now?” she groaned, stopping the phone against her chest. “Can’t I have a moment’s peace around here? I’m trying to speak to your aunt Priscilla. Right, you have five seconds. What is the problem now?”

“Mummy, Mummy, the planchette just moved on its own! Someone said hello to me. Can you believe it?”

“That’s great. Good for you.”

“But what should I do about it?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Say hello back.”

“But I’m scared. What if it’s a ghost? Aren’t ghosts supposed to be scary?”

“If it is a ghost, then I’m sure the ghost is friendly. You know, like Casper the Friendly Ghost? Say hello back, start a conversation, have some fun with it. Now please, Alex, I really need to take this call. Go to your room and I’ll speak to you later. Go play with the ghost.”

“Okay...if you’re sure it’s friendly, then I will.”

Evidently, Beatrix didn’t believe a word and thought I was just making it up. But to my childish mind, her blessing was all I needed to start communicating with the strange force that had taken control of the Ouija board. Returning upstairs, I sat down once again and attempted to interact with the unknown presence that had seeped into every corner of my bedroom.

“Um, hello, it’s me again, I’m back,” I said, staring nervously at the planchette. “Are you still there? Hello? Anybody there?” For a few minutes, nothing happened. Everything remained silent and still and I began to wonder if I had just imagined the whole thing. Then, clearing my throat, I took one final stab at it. “My name is Alexander Kingswood, but everyone calls me Alex. What’s your name?”

Instantly, the wooden pointer began moving and spelt out the letters E-R-A-S-M-U-S.

“Erasmus? That’s a funny name. I haven’t heard it before, but it’s nice. Hello Erasmus, my name is Alex. Pleased to meet you.”

The planchette darted back to the word “Hello” and I almost fainted from excitement. I couldn’t believe it. It was as if I had suddenly entered a world where pixies and fairies and giants really did exist. I hadn’t imagined it. Somebody called

Erasmus really *was* speaking to me!

Before I could ask another question, the pointer started moving once more and spelt out the sentence: *Can I enter?*

I stared up at the ceiling, as if my invisible companion was up there somewhere, clinging to the chandelier. What did the question mean?

Can I enter? Can I enter what? The bedroom?

For a few seconds, I remained frozen with indecision, waiting for further instructions, but nothing came. Then the message was repeated on the Ouija board, this time more forcefully.

CAN I ENTER?

“Um, yes, all right,” I said with a shrug. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. As soon as I uttered the words, it was like a light bulb had suddenly been switched on and a door to another world had been thrown open. There was no going back now.

And that was when I heard it for the first time. A soft, silky voice, as quiet as a whisper yet loud enough for me to hear every syllable articulated with unmistakable distinctness. It was a man’s voice, but sweetly seductive and sugary as syrup. I was used to the harshness of my father’s deep booming voice and had no idea a man could sound like that.

“Hello Alex, would you like to play?”

“Yes, but where are you?” I replied, looking around the room. “I can’t see you anywhere.”

The invisible presence chuckled. “I’m playing hide and seek with you. I’m hiding somewhere secret where you can never find me.”

“Please come out! I want to see what you look like.”

“No. I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to reveal myself.”

“Why not?”

“Because you might be frightened.”

“Why would I be frightened?”

“Because I don’t look very pretty.”

I laughed. “Oh, that doesn’t bother me. People don’t think I’m very pretty either. Everyone’s afraid of me because I’m so ugly.”

“Oh, no, you’re not ugly, Alex. Compared with me, you look like a handsome prince.”

These words made me smile and I found myself warming to the mysterious stranger whom I couldn’t see. “Please Erasmus, come out and let me see you. I promise I won’t be frightened.”

“No. Sometime soon, perhaps. But not yet. I’m very shy.”

“Don’t be shy. Where are you from? Are you a ghost?”

“No, I’m not a ghost.”

“Are you a boy like me?”

“No, I’m not a boy.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m...*something else.*”

“What?”

“I promise I’ll tell you when the time is right, but first, let’s get to know each other better.”

I hesitated, trying to process all this information. It was a hell of a lot for a ten-year-old to take in.

“Where are you from?” I resumed after a minute’s silence.

“I’m from a land far away,” the voice replied. “A dark, dark place where there is no sadness and everyone has fun all day long.”

“What’s this place called?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

“Oh Erasmus, won’t you tell me anything?”

“I’d much prefer to talk about you. Would you like to make a wish?”

“Wow! Do you grant wishes?”

“I do indeed.”

“You mean like the genie from *Aladdin*?”

“Yes, in a way. Tell me what you want most in the world and I’ll make sure your wish comes true.”

Closing my eyes, I thought hard. “I wish...I wish I had a friend, someone who will never go away and always be with me. I used to have a friend called Trinity, but she was taken away and I...I never want that to happen again.”

“Granted. I promise I’ll be your friend forever and ever and never leave your side...”

With a gasp, I felt an enormous bolt of energy surge into me, and my fingertips felt as if they were on fire. In my mind’s eye, I saw a million distorted images flash up at the speed of light. Then I felt strong in a way I never had before, and I knew, I just knew, Erasmus was now irrevocably a part of me. It was like a seed had been planted that was growing and growing, spreading its grip throughout every one of my nerve endings.

A joyful smile spread across my lips. Erasmus had indeed kept his promise and was now burrowed deep within my subconscious, waiting to be unleashed whenever I needed him. I found the feeling both comforting and thrilling. By rights, I should have been terrified by the alien sensations pulsating through me, intruding on the very core of my being, yet somehow, I wasn’t. I loved the novelty of the phenomenon, the exciting sense of the unknown and the exhilarating

strength it gave me. With Erasmus inside my body, it meant I would never be alone again. I would always have a friend, one that would stay with me forever and ever.

Until death do us part.

“You can never tell anyone about me, Alex,” the voice whispered. “Listen closely, this is very important. If you do ever tell anyone, they might send people to try and take me away, and you wouldn’t want that, would you? You wouldn’t want people to take me away like they took away Trinity.”

“No, of course not!”

“Good. Then promise me you will always keep this a secret, just between the two of us.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you. Now who’s your favourite superhero?”

“Superman.”

“Well, my friend, I’m going to turn you into Superman and give you lots of special powers. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes! Erasmus, please, please make me into Superman!”

“All right. Your wish is my command.”

My wonderful new companion was as good as his word. The next time I sat down at the piano, I effortlessly played Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltz No 1* from start to finish without even breaking a sweat. I was channelling Erasmus’ energy through my fingertips, and he was controlling my every movement. As my hands ran up and down the piano keys, it was as if the composition was being performed through muscle memory alone, no sheet music required.

A fiendishly difficult piece to play, old Mr Fischer, my music teacher, was astounded and simply could not believe it. I had never seen my mother so happy. Giddy with joy, I started to think that letting Erasmus into my life was the best

decision I'd ever made.

At first, everything was great. My French and Latin came on in leaps and bounds as I found I could now speak both fluently and my vocabulary in general broadened under Erasmus' influence. My governess declared me a child prodigy and had it not been for my appearance, no doubt there would have been arrangements made to show me off to society.

Then there were the little day-to-day things which Erasmus did to make life easier for me. Whenever Beatrix asked me to tidy my room, all I had to do was snap my fingers, and all my toys floated back to where they belonged. With the powers bestowed upon me, I was able to move inanimate objects, just by willing it to happen. All I had to do was look at a wardrobe, and it would move positions. It was truly wonderous and I found my new abilities both exciting and liberating.

Then things began to go wrong.

My new friend started to make mischief. At nights, Erasmus would make the bed shake, waking up all the servants. Sometimes he would move chairs and tables around, completely rearranging the furniture in a room in a way which left everyone feeling unsettled. Another time, the cook narrowly escaped with his life after he was attacked by a succession of carving knives that had jumped out from the drying rack and pinned him to the wall. Then there was an incident where the maid swore blind she had been nearly strangled by vines in the garden which had suddenly come alive as she watered the plants.

Of course, Erasmus thought all this was terribly funny, and saw it as a game, but I didn't. He was beginning to upset the people I cared about, and I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. He told me I was being a spoilsport, that this was all