

SHADOW KISSING

Tanith Lee

Chapter 1

She saw him that first day, in the old garden. It was a sort of shock. Addie hadn't warned her.

He stood just behind the riot of ivy and overblown roses, with the sun on his face. Vivien's heart lurched. Never, in all her life, had she seen a man so handsome. No, perfect.

For some while she stood there, gazing up at him. And then she spoke aloud. "Well, I shall have to paint you. If you'll allow me to." But of course he would. He was made of stone.

"You are so unworldly, Viv."

"Yes."

Vivien never liked being called by that particular moniker, but Addie nearly always used it. The "unworldliness" Vivien had to accept. Not every artist, every painter, was like that, of course. Some were very practical.

The nonartistic Addie Preece was certainly practical. That Saturday morning when she brought around the keys, she stared dismissively at Vivien's tiny Camden apartment.

"Please take the money for a taxi," said Addie. She slapped down a ten-pound note, which wasn't enough for the cab fare from here to there. "I can't understand why you don't drive. No car, no computer—and you still don't have a mobile phone. You are so unworldly, Viv."

And Vivien had coolly agreed.

She had already agreed to be live-in caretaker of Addie's flat for three weeks, while Addie was in the south of France and Spain.

The flat was the last in a terrace of incredibly gracious London houses, dating from the eighteen hundreds, mostly now turned into apartments to die for. Addie, however, was moving out in the near future. When she had invited Vivien there last week, to suggest she flat-sit, Vivien had glimpsed furniture and belongings already under dust sheets or packed in large sturdy boxes, rather like Addie herself.

"I haven't decided when I'll go. The first offer on the flat was way too low. I'm holding out for several thousand more." She had assured Vivien, "I won't offer to pay you for flat-sitting. But it's quiet here—the other flats are empty, as is the next-door property—another reason someone needs to keep an eye on things. But you could paint, couldn't you? There's a garden—" She had waved at the closed after-dark drapes. "It's private, exclusive to this flat. And otherwise, none of this is a big responsibility, is it? I'll leave you a list of anything you might need to know."

Addie, Vivien thought, was like certain wealthy people—rather mean. She had chosen Vivien because Vivien owed her a favor and wouldn't ask for payment.

So all this was like an interview—similar to the interviews Vivien had had with Addie when Addie put her forward for book-jacket illustrations with three reputable publishers. Interviewer and interviewee. They weren't friends.

I don't have any friends, Vivien thought, except Ellie, who has now moved back to the States. And no lovers.

That Saturday, after Addie had delivered the keys, Vivien had paused by her ornate, dusty mirror and looked at herself pensively. She saw a slim, pale woman of twenty-eight. Her mass of dark hair poured back from her face and over her shoulders, unrestrained, and her large gray eyes met themselves in the glass, almost questioning. Her second name was Gray. People made jokes about gray-eyed Vivien Gray. And *he* had said to her, "Eyes gray as glass..."

Angrily Vivien turned from the mirror and the memory.

No friends, no lovers. The one she had loved ultimately hadn't wanted her, and in the three years since, *she* hadn't wanted anyone else. And he was stuck there, in the bottom of her heart, like bottled darkness.

The taxi was hot and stuffy—the underground would probably have been worse. It was late July, the summer like a hot blue lid clamped down over London. When they reached Coronet Square, the trees in the small public park looked tarnished.

Vivien lugged her bags and folded-up easel round to the arched doorway of the gracious ground-floor flat.

Ten minutes later, throwing open Addie's French doors to the private garden, Vivien, startled and pleased, went out along a lush green avenue, between rowdy bay trees and tangled lilacs, turned a corner and saw—*him*.

He was a life-size statue. He stood there, six feet tall, and naked but for a little modest drapery at the hips. He had no look of anyone she had ever known—yet his beauty made him seem somehow familiar. Influenced rather by Greek Classical style, but with a hint of Art Nouveau. He was astonishing.

Even his marble was polished by weather rather than stained or chipped—or maybe he had been recently cleaned. At the thought of washing and rubbing this smooth male surface, Vivien felt a strange heat come into her face. How absurd.

His eyes were bleak, yet not truly blank in the way of most statues. His hair was long, thick and chiseled to look like sea waves coiling down his back. His body was faultlessly proportioned—long runner's legs, the torso leanly muscular, shoulders wide, neck a column. It made her think of lions, pumas, hunting dogs of the Renaissance. His face was that of a pagan god.

She studied him some while.

Tomorrow, she would sketch the statue. It was a must.

Only as she was about to turn away did she see that letters had been cut into the plinth where he stood. Vivien drew off the thin veil of ivy, and read, "My heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand."

She thought she knew the words—Shakespeare, surely—but which play? Ellie would have known right off.

The sun now moved behind tall surrounding buildings. Shadows fell, changing the color of the roses to blood.

The flat was absolutely enormous. She hadn't seen it properly on the previous occasion. A hall, with a spacious cloakroom on one side and a dining room and cupboards on the other, led into a vast, weird and wonderful eight-sided room, with cornices and elaborate plasterwork overhead. It had a narrow window at one end, and more French windows at the other. Further doors led off into a couple of separate halls.

There were, altogether, three bedrooms, plus Addie's study, which was a barren room full of files and *four* computers—all switched off and under plastic tents—two bathrooms in ceramic tiles, and a small conservatory off the kitchen that also opened onto the garden. No plants lived in the conservatory. Addie never bothered with things like that, which was why the garden had run, literally, to seed.

The kitchen had a larder full of closed boxes and crates and depleted wine racks and a main area with white counters sparsely manned by microwave, coffee grinder and so on.

The fridge was the size of a small bus, and contained a bottle of Evian, half a carton of milk—which had gone off—and one slice of white bread, and a lettuce leaf that had obviously escaped and hidden long ago. Vivien needed to go shopping.

When she came back from the expensive local store, it was almost seven. The phone was ringing on and on, its tape clearly already message-full. As Vivien touched the phone, it rang off. Then, as she went back down the hall, it began again.

"Hello?"

"Finally! Is that Adelaide Preece?" It was an impatient female voice.

"No, I'm afraid she isn't here right now."

"Who on earth's that then I'm speaking to?"

Vivien frowned. "May I ask who *you* are?"

"Cinnamon Boyle-Martin." Then, before Vivien could respond, she added rudely, "and you're Ms. Whoever, right. So, my partner and I would like to come round tomorrow as agreed. Okay?"

"Why, exactly?"

"Addis must have told you. My partner and I are interested in some of her stuff."

"She didn't say anything."

"Too bad. She's selling off a few things. I'll bring her letter if I must. Do you have e-mail?"

"No," said Vivien firmly.

"Well, we'll be by about ten-thirty tomorrow morning."

"I'm not—"

"Ciao!" warbled Cinnamon, and was gone.

Had any of this been on Addie's lists of instructions? There was one under the grinder, but that seemed to be a warning not to use Addie's coffee beans. The other list, Vivien, who had not paid it much attention, now checked over. Ah. Scratched in the corner she read, *Antique scavengers—CS and spice name, poss sun.*

Vivien decided to worry about it tomorrow.

As the dark began to gather, she sat by the French windows on a chair released from its dust wrapper. The statue wasn't to be seen from here. She shut her eyes and, not expecting to, fell asleep.

The nearly naked, perfect man stood before her, among the trees. Slowly his head turned towards her—his eyes gleamed, human and alive, full of dark light...

Vivien woke with a start. It was nearly 11:00 p.m.

She switched on a lamp, which glimmered out through the glass and down the path. Presently she undid the doors and went out.

Looking back up at the building, if she had had any doubts, now she could see there were no lights anywhere, nor in the large house that immediately adjoined this one. Empty, as Addie had said. The dividing garden wall, half-hidden in creepers and trees, was ten feet high at least.

Vivien walked back down the path, feeling strange yet foolish.

He stood there now in darkness. Yet faint illumination from the electric false "gas lamps" of the square dappled him through the leaves.

Vivien stared. Who could ever compare with *this*?

Are you falling in love with a statue? Vivien asked herself. Listen, Gray, there are some mistakes even *you* aren't allowed.

Her heart beat fast. That was the artist in her, she thought sternly, excited by the prospect of sketching this wonderful image.

She could imagine telling Ellie, and Ellie hooting with laughter, hurtling her back to sanity once more. But she couldn't very well call Ellie in New York on Addie's phone.

Vivien turned smartly to go back indoors.

Something...

She stopped, looking now intently where her shadow fell away from the dim streetlights. The shadow was faint, too, and broken up by the shade-shapes of leaves—but there beside it stretched another, second shadow, which was male. By some fluke of the garden's contours, the shadows suggested he stood right beside her. His right arm extended slightly, as if... as if he had put his hand on her shoulder, intimately inviting her to stay...

Vivien looked back—it was irresistible. There he stood, above her, not close at all, unmoved and cold with night.

Vivien had set her alarm clock for seven-thirty, as usual, *Unusually*, it hadn't managed to wake her. She opened her eyes just before ten.

She was standing in her robe, hair still damp from the shower and a mug of mint tea in hand, when the door buzzer sounded on the kitchen wall.

Horrified, Vivien remembered what she had thought she wouldn't forget.

"Hello, yes?"

"Yes, this is Cinnamon Boyle-Martin and my partner, Connor Sinclair. Going to let us in?"

Her instinct was to say no. But good manners forced from her a reluctant "All right. Just a minute."

She drained her scalding tea like brandy. Confound it, why was she so nervous? They couldn't be burglars if they knew Addie—could they?

Vivien, vulnerable in her long, belted robe, shook back her hair and undid the front door. And there they stood, against the morning sunlight.

Her first impression was of Cinnamon, as rash and gaudy as expected. The tall man stood just behind her.

As Vivien's eyes adjusted, every element inside her body seemed to turn itself over. She didn't know what she felt—but fear was surely paramount.

For she had seen the man at the door *yesterday*. Clothed and colored in, Connor Sinclair was like Addie's statue in every way but one: *He* was flesh and blood.

Chapter 2



His hair was very thick and long, and black—very black. From the tanned, expressionless mask of his face, two eyes, heavily inked in by brows and lashes, looked down at Vivien. They were the color of hot black coffee—and cold as ice. He wore jeans and a white T-shirt, both of which showed very clearly the exact lines of a strong and muscular body, broad shoulders, narrow hips, long legs. The sleeves of the shirt were rolled up. His muscled forearms were the deep brown color of oak wood and dusted by dark hair. Beautiful hands, Vivien thought stupidly, powerful and calloused, with long fingers whose ends were squared rather than tapering—a working artist's hands. Had she noticed this on the statue—the statue whose living double this man was?

Decidedly, his eyes were as bleak and ungiven.

The Cinnamon woman was gabbling off some stuff about Addie, which Vivien wasn't taking in. Suddenly the man spoke over her, not loudly but with the perfect pitch of an actor.

"Shut up, Cinnamon." And then to Vivien, he said flatly, "I don't know who you are, but either you can let us in, or I can call the police."

"What?" Vivien now stared at him in astonishment.

"Well, you could be a vandal, or a squatter, couldn't you. Adelaide didn't say anyone was going to be here, except for herself. I suppose she *isn't* here?"

Vivien tried to pull herself together. "No, she's not. I'm minding the place while she's away."

"Really? We'll have to take your word for that, won't we."

From stupefaction, and then purely physical admiration, Vivien felt herself pass into a rapid rage. How had he so flawlessly wrong-footed her? She should slam the door in his face and call the cops herself—

Cinnamon thrust a card and a letter into Vivien's hand. Vivien read the card: Scavengers Ltd. And then his name: Connor Sinclair. The badly written letter was from Addie. It agreed to something unreadable on Sunday.

"All right," said Vivien. She stepped aside, and Cinnamon dived past her like some sort of dyed-blond raccoon.

As *he* moved forward, Vivien found herself shrinking back against one wall, as if to be touched by him might burn her—or would it be frostbite?

He stalked down the hall. Cinnamon was already in the octagonal room, turning round and round, hair and jangly earrings dangling back so she could view the corniced ceiling.

"Pity we can't scrape *that* off, eh, Conn?"

"Mmm."

Noncommittal, he stood there, dominating the space. If the statue was six feet tall, Connor Sinclair was more like six foot three. A difference, then.

Oh, there were plenty. The statue, for one thing, didn't have these eyes, or these bladed lashes, so dense, long and black. Didn't have any of the colors. The statue was... unclothed.

A tingling flame stirred out of nowhere, suddenly, in Vivien's spine. Her sense of sexual desire was so abrupt, so unwanted, it was almost hurtful.

"I gather she's left crates somewhere?" His musical, infuriating voice.

Vivien gathered herself together again.

"Yes, the kitchen."

"That's what I'm going to look at, then. Also there's something I want to see in the garden. If all that's quite all right with you?"

His sarcasm was like a wasp sting.

"I can't very well stop you," she said.

"No. So I suggest you let me get on."

Vivien realized that, in this labyrinth of a flat, she must show him the way to the kitchen.

It was like taking the manorial lord downstairs. The second hallway became some long ramble in a stately home, and Vivien, the downstairs maid, lowest of the low.

She could feel him at her back—actually *feel* his presence, like great heat... cold... *pressure*.

The kitchen might have been the surface of the moon. She gazed at it dementedly, and surprised herself by saying, apparently as cool as ever, "The crates are in the larder. That's there—"

"Thank you. I can actually see where it is."

Cinnamon came springing in with a clatter of her ghastly jewelry.

"I'll leave you to it," said Vivien, picking up her pot of mint tea. She would offer these creatures nothing. A shame, it might have been fun to poison them...

Back in her bedroom, Vivien threw on clothes, jeans and a loose black shirt, one of three she preferred to work in. She brushed her hair and it sizzled with sparks.

For heaven's sake, she thought. He doesn't matter. They'll be gone in an hour or less.

Someone rapped on her door. It had to be him. It was like the knock of the Spanish Inquisition—besides, no jangle of bangles.

"Yes?"

She stood glaring up at him. He was plainly as indifferent to her annoyance as to her.

"I need to see the garden now."

"Do you."

"The French doors are locked."

"So you just came along to this room?" She thought, *He knew where I was. He must know this fiat, I'm sure of it.*

"The sooner you allow me to do my work here, the sooner I'll be out of your hair." As he said this, he glanced at her hair, then glanced, it seemed to her, right into and *through* her eyes. The effect on her was intense, and to dispel it, she had to look and move away.

Back then to the eight-sided room. Cinnamon, cross-legged on the floor, had a box-load of items spread out before her like exotic wares on an Eastern carpet. Vivien had no notion if these things—bowls, little boxes, candelabra—had come from Addie's selected crates or been stolen by the Scavengers from cupboards.

When she had found the key and unlocked the doors, he walked straight past her into the garden.

It was a glorious day, hot already, the shade blue along the path, and the scent of late lilac and rose mingling with the dustier aromas of London. He paused, looking around him.

Vivien thought once more, *He knows this place.*

He headed off along the path and unfalteringly turned the corner at the biggest lilac tree. He was now out of sight. And he was where the statue was.

Cinnamon rattled out and down the path.

Nearly hypnotized, Vivien followed her.

He was standing looking up... at *himself*. His hair, which wasn't tied back, poured down his back in shining black ropes. From this angle, Vivien couldn't see his face. Correction—yes, she *could*. For there it was again, looking back at him from the plinth.

Cinnamon, too, was squinting at the statue. Abruptly she announced, "Y'know, it's a bit like you, Conn."

Vivien recoiled. She didn't know why. As if, ridiculously, the resemblance, so underestimated, had become her property to defend.

Connor Sinclair said, not looking round, "So I've been told. I never see it, myself."

"No, but it *is*—it could *be* you, sort of—"

"I'm not *that* damned effete," he said.

He turned. He looked over Cinnamon's head at Vivien. "The statue's what I'm really after. I expect you guessed that? It's called *Jealousy*."

Vivien swallowed. "Why?"

"You don't know the quote cut in the base? No—" Scornful of her ignorance, he spoke the line in his dark, extraordinary voice: " 'My heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand.' From *Othello*. Perhaps you don't know the play."

"Of *course* I know the play," Vivien replied icily. "Presumably this comes after his mind has been turned against his wife by Iago—when Othello begins to plan to kill her."

"Ten out of ten," said Connor Sinclair.

Cinnamon yawned. "I never could stand Shakespeare."

"No, Cinnamon," he said. That was all.

But she must have the hide of a rhinoceros, Vivien thought with reluctant envy, not to have shriveled at his tone.

By half-past twelve, Vivien decided she would have to go back to the main room and ask when they would be leaving. As she had been sorting her painting things in the bedroom, she had thought she heard the front door open and shut, but then had made out again the distant noises of objects being packed up or moved.

When she walked in, only he was there, sitting on the dust-sheeted couch, turning a tiny white figurine round in his hands.

Vivien angrily noted they had made themselves coffee—and from the Colombian beans Vivien had bought herself yesterday as a treat. At least he, the monster, hadn't drunk her milk. The dregs in his mug were black—just like his eyes.

He paid Vivien no attention. She might have been a small spider that had just crawled out on the carpet. Unless he didn't like spiders, in which case he would, of course, step on her.

"Has your partner left?"

"My—Oh, Cinnamon. She isn't my partner, in any sense of the word. But yes, she's gone."

"And are you planning to leave?" Vivien asked, as discourteous as Cinnamon had been. "I have things to do."

"Don't let me stop you."

"You *are* stopping me, Mr. Sinclair. You're in my way. I need to set up in here."

At that he looked up. She found it very difficult to meet and hold his eyes. When she did so, he smiled fastidiously, and then himself looked away. She had obviously failed another test.

"Set up? You have plans to redecorate the room?" He wrapped the figurine in newspaper. "You don't strike me as the painter-decorator type."

"I'm not. I paint pictures. Your intrusion is holding up my work."

"I see. All right. Another ten minutes and I'll be out." Deflated, Vivien turned to go. He said, "However, I'm afraid I'll be back tomorrow. I'll be bringing someone in to look at the statue."

"That garden isn't open to the public, Mr. Sinclair," she said frigidly.

He stood up. "While these debates with you are undoubtedly delightful, Ms.—?"

"Gray—"

"Ms. Gray. They seem to be wasting a lot of our mutual time. The statue is mine, and I'm moving it out. To do that successfully I need someone else to take a look at it first."

"*Yours*? How can it be yours? It's part of the flat garden and it's from the late-nineteenth century—"

"I know that. Listen, Ms. Gray, I suggest you phone Adelaide Preece. Obviously she forgot to inform you of any of this."

"I can't phone her—"

He swore. It wasn't the worst Vivien had heard, but coming from him, it was like a cold blow in the stomach.

He had produced a mobile phone. As he hit the buttons, Vivien grasped he was phoning Addie in France.

Feeling like a reprimanded child, and entirely mutinous, Vivien sat down on the nearest chair.

Connor Sinclair spoke to the mobile.

"Adelaide, good morning. Yes, Connor. Were you? Well, never mind, you're awake now. There is a young woman living in your flat. She's—let's see—approximately a hundred and seven pounds, five foot four, has a few yards of brunette hair, and—" he stared in Vivien's face, insulting, frankly terrifying—"eyes like Chaucer's nun, gray as glass."

Vivien's mouth fell open. She shut it firmly.

He was saying, "You know about her? Oh, good. Would you have a word with her, then? She is quite tenacious about guarding what she considers to be your property, including the statue in the garden. She would make someone a lovely guard dog. A rottweiler, possibly."

He strolled to Vivien and handed her the phone. He looked amused at her embarrassment and anger. How dare he—all those personal details. To make it worse, he had judged her height exactly, even if he had knocked two pounds off her weight. As for the Chaucer quote... only one other had ever applied that to Vivien. The reference had shaken her.

But Addie's voice, gruff with disturbed post-travel sleep and irritation, pounced into Vivien's ear.

"Didn't you read my note, Viv?"

"Yes, it didn't say—"

"The antique bits I've already sold him. The statue is Connor's own property, like a couple of other things there. For heaven's sake, I bought the flat from him in the first place."

"Oh." Vivien felt herself flush. She didn't really know why. But she certainly had made a fool of herself, or been made a fool *of*.

"Just let him get on with it, okay? Please don't call me again unless it's urgent."

The signal ceased as abruptly as a slap.

Vivien handed the mobile back to Connor Sinclair, her hand seemingly numbed by the feel of his personal electricity all over it.

"I'm sorry. She didn't tell me, so I didn't know."

"Now you do."

He pointed at the new boxes he and Cinnamon had packed. "I'll take those out to the van."

She propped the front door open to make the maneuver easier for him. He carried the boxes out two by two, making nothing of their weight, as he had verbally made nothing of hers. Or, of her.

Why should she apologize to him, anyway? He was a boor and a monster. He could have explained himself, and found the kitchen and keys on his own.

The van was light blue. There was no lettering on it.

He came back along the front path and stopped in front of her. The sun was high now, gilding the black of his hair. She saw for the first time, with sudden surprise, that his chiseled nose was slightly crooked—an imperfection!

"I'll be here about 9:00 a.m. tomorrow, Ms. Gray, with one other person. Should he and I bring any ID? Perhaps family records... or would our passports do?"

Vivien looked him in the eyes. "Just bring better manners, Mr. Sinclair."

He started to laugh. She hadn't expected that. Oh, but it must amuse him so, when anyone was brave enough to answer back.

She left him to it, retreating inside and shutting the door with what she hoped was the right amount of controlled vehemence.

Her blood was boiling. But she couldn't entirely deceive herself—it wasn't only from fury.

Nor was her mood improved when, clearing up the mess of spilled coffee beans, spoiled milk and clogged grinder Cinnamon had left, Vivien found the other half of Addie's note. It was squashed in with Addie's warning about the use of coffee, and it picked up on the other note about CS and Scavengers, adding that a statue was due to be taken from the garden.

Grim though Addie's handwriting was, there could now be absolutely no doubt.

Despite her best efforts, Vivien couldn't come to grips with any work that day.

The octagonal room, to which she had brought her drawing and painting materials, was soon littered with torn-off pages marked in useless lines and curls. She was getting behind on the single commission she had been given this year, which was for a book-jacket. Addie had got her the commission. Another black mark.

Vivien's plan had been to work all morning, take a short lunch break, then allow herself to sketch the garden, and the statue.

She hadn't earned the right to attempt that yet, after her failure with the commissioned work. The heavens agreed with her, it seemed. As she stood in the kitchen eating a piece of brie and an apple, the skies blackened, and then emptied out a downpour of rain that crashed against the conservatory roof. The storm didn't clear until dusk was coming down.

She couldn't sleep. Finally she must have dozed, but woke at 2:00 a.m., alert and startled, as if someone had shouted in her ear. She had an idea the phone had been ringing, but now it wasn't.

She had been dreaming. What had the dream involved?

Vivien could remember only that it had somehow been... uncomfortable.

She got up, and went along to the kitchen to make herbal tea.

As she waited there for the kettle to boil, her bare feet on the Italian-tiled floor, the close, still night around her, Vivien caught herself once more thinking about Connor Sinclair.

Every time she did so, sparks of anger filled her. But also just *sparks*, glittering through and through her body, making her even angrier. It was this, she knew, that had stopped her working. And probably this that she had dreamed about.

Vivien, don't fancy a man who has the social skills of a pig crossed with a hunting leopard. The voice in her head was reasonable and sane. *You'll get hurt.*

Oh—she thought back at it—and I've never been hurt before, have I.

Why had Connor Sinclair used that one phrase—the one *he*, back there in her past, had used? *Eyes gray as glass...*

I won't think about him. About *either* of them.

She took her tea back to bed, downed it and dropped herself on the pillows, determined to lose consciousness, despite the ominous creakings of the unknown flat above and around her. She managed to sleep almost at once.

The rain was gone, just a light crystal sparkle here and there on bay leaves and rose petals. In the ghostly lambency of the streetlights the statue stood on his plinth, gazing down at her. His eyes were dark now. *Alive* now.

In awe, but not horror, Vivien watched as he stepped casually off the plinth. He walked towards her, and Vivien, half surprised at herself, backed away.

Surprised because it seemed really quite natural that a stone man had moved, and now approached her.

He walked in a slow, easy prowl. Yet he was, despite the living eyes, still a creature formed from marble.

Raindrops brushed off into Vivien's hair; she felt them on her bare skin. She was naked, then, as the statue—*more* naked than he.

She continued to edge away. And suddenly the glass of the French windows met her back, cold in the warmth of the heavy summer night.

He did not pause. Why would he? She had no escape from him now.

She imagined, astonished, what it would be like, that icy caress of smooth stone hands, sliding over her naked body, gently teasing on her breasts, subtle and sure between her thighs...

But somehow, she was in through the closed doors, *inside* the glass and in the room—though still he came towards her and still she backed away.

His hands were not yet on her, but on the lock of the doors. Could he undo it? Had she even locked them—did she want this, *desire* it—or was she utterly afraid... ?

Vivien woke. She threw herself upright in the bed, gasping—and heard again, in the waking world, the quiet scrape of stone against metal.

"Oh God—"

Vivien sprang from the bed, slamming at the light switch, blinding herself for a moment as the lamps came on.

Her impulse was to race for the French doors and secure them. Then something occurred to her. She couldn't surely have heard such a soft scraping from *here*. No. It must come from much nearer, from down the hall—the conservatory off the kitchen.

Vivien wildly pulled on a T-shirt. She flew along the passage. She jumped into the kitchen, bashing on the overhead light as she passed. She had had to do it all like that. Her true inclination had been to hide under the bed.

Beyond the lighted kitchen, the black glass box of the empty conservatory showed only the faintest wisp of filtered lamplight.

Nothing was out there. Nothing wonderful and terrible scratched at the door.

Where light fell on the paved path between the trees, the rain had already dried. Only shadows lay there.

Vivien checked the door. It was locked, the padlock rusty, bolted, too, on the inside. The glass, Addie had informed her, like that of the French doors and all the windows, was bulletproof.

Vivien went to check every window, and the French doors in the octagonal room. Nothing was out of place, despite the apprehension she felt each time. Only the closeness of night, dully synchronized by far-off London sounds—none of which were like the noise of stone fingers moving on a lock.

She did *not* go to check if the statue was still on the plinth. Instead, she left on every light in the apartment.

At five-thirty, when it was full daylight, Vivien got up again and showered and dressed. She hadn't got any more sleep, and she had that muzzy, cinder-eyed reaction to insomnia she always did. When she went back to the kitchen and

looked through into the conservatory, however, her blurry vision showed her something that last night, in the brilliance of the kitchen spotlights, she hadn't seen.

It lay there in the conservatory's far corner. Now unmissable.

A rose. Perfect, she thought, until she touched it. Only the stem, fierce with thorns, stayed intact. The flower's head had already fallen apart—or been shattered—every petal like a drop of blood.

Chapter 3



"Hi. I'm Lewis Blake. You must be Ms. Gray?"

Vivien stared at the tallish, heavily muscular man in her doorway. He wore a tattered black T-shirt, and jeans covered in dust or chalk—both garments seemed to have been expensive but he had cheerfully ruined them without a backward glance. He *looked* cheerful, too, despite his bristly shaven head and the gold ring through his eyebrow.

Not meaning to, like a child watching for Santa Claus—or the bogeyman—Vivien's eyes slid around him.

"Don't be apprehensive yet," said Lewis Blake, grinning in a curiously kind manner. "I'm afraid he *is* coming—but he'll be about five minutes. Monday morning traffic leaves nowhere to park the van."

"You mean Mr. Sinclair?" Vivien thought she sounded arch and silly. "You're here with him about the statue?"

Lewis nodded. "Sure am. But it's fine if you want to wait till he gets here, to verify my status. I can appreciate you don't just want to let any old stranger loose in the flat."

"A shame Mr. Sinclair didn't appreciate that." It was out before she could contain it.

But Lewis Blake looked intently at her. "Sorry about that," he said.

"*You* didn't do it."

"No, well... I don't have much reason to."

"Oh, look," she said, "please come in."

As they walked in through the first hall, Lewis said, "Do I gather he gave you a bit of a rough time? He can be... Well, there are reasons, I suppose."

Vivien ignored this. The monster hadn't even arrived yet, and already they were talking about him, conjuring him up. Her head ached from lack of sleep. From puzzling over a broken rose that couldn't have been where it was.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Love it. Ta."

They went along to the kitchen. Vivien poured them a mug each. Lewis enthusiastically spooned brown sugar into his.

"Nice garden out there. I like letting things relax in a garden. I've got a woman like a demon, though, daren't leave her alone five minutes but she's off hauling wildflowers out of the lawn. Butterflies like those. Will she listen? But I'm crazy about her anyway. Need to be. With her family, she's probably nuttier than I am."

Vivien felt an actual pang of envy. For Lewis Blake and his woman with a nutty family. How good that sounded. Some people did manage to have those, and also to meet each other and be happy in a relationship. What was the secret?

She liked him despite her envy. He was *likable*—if only by default.

"Tell me about the statue," Vivien said. She wasn't making conversation; by now she felt she needed to know.

"It's a genuine Nevins. You've never heard of him, probably. A little-known but now somewhat collectible sculptor of the late 1800s. Someone wants this one for a film from the period. That's what we do at Scavengers. We don't pick up antiques to sell. We hire them out to film companies and the theaters. You may have seen bits of our stuff in movies. Ever see *The Lion's Answer*?"

"Yes," said Vivien.

"We practically dressed every set. Statues, fountains, chairs, clocks—the National Theatre had a load of things off us for their last production of *Venice Preserved*."

"I saw that, too."

Vivien was mildly, pleasantly impressed. Or was that only because Lewis was a nice guy and actually bothering to speak to her like a human being?

"That statue of Connor's, though, that's got a funny history," said Lewis.

"Funny how?"

"Well, more a *rotten* history. Er, I guess it's all right to tell you, you'd find it in any book that listed Nevins. He took up with a married lady, an actress. In fact, she was the wife of the subject of the statue. And—" Lewis broke off.

Vivien saw he had said more than maybe he had meant to. Why such a dark secret about something over a century old?

She decided to tease him. "The usual tale, then. Infidelity, jealousy, crime and punishment."

She saw he wasn't teased, only on edge.

"While Nevins was sculpting the handsome image of the lady's husband, and making love to the lady, the husband found out. As they do. He was an actor-manager—one of those fantastically successful ones, a bit like Tree, and Martin-Harvey—he had it all in front of him. But he went off his head and shot her—Emily, his wife. And then he shot himself. The quote on the base—Nevins put it there afterwards, before he went and drank himself to death. Nevins, you see, the angry husband never touched. Nevins is supposed to have said he wished Sinclair had done it—punished him, too."

Vivien spoke softly. "You said *Sinclair*?"

"Yup. Forget I'm saying this. I mean, Connor is my boss, he started Scavengers... But the jealous actor was Patrick Aspen Sinclair, and his wife was Emily Sinclair, famous in her day for her portrayals of Juliet and Ophelia. Some people say the Nevins statue looks like Conn. It does. Conn won't ever see it But there's a reason for the resemblance. Patrick and Emily died young, he saw to that. But they left children. Patrick Aspen Sinclair was Connor's great-great-grandfather."

Something cold and shadowy had settled in the kitchen.

Into the depths of it the front-door buzzer drilled with the shock of a bullet.

"I'd better go let my boss in," said Lewis. He was his old breezy self again. "Remember, I didn't tell you any of this."

Vivien's impulse was to vacate the kitchen and find something "urgent she must do elsewhere." There was also, of course, the opposite impulse.

Resist, she thought. Connor Sinclair is the worst kind of man, and he has fallen deeply in dislike of you—which is mutual. Admire his looks if you must. That's all.

A double dose of coffee had cleared her head—perhaps too much. She felt hyped up and a little dizzy.

The other question remained. How had a shattered red rose gotten into the conservatory through a locked and bolted door?

Almost irresistibly, she walked into the conservatory. She stood there looking at the rose. Who could she have asked about *this*? In the day's heat, already the petals and the stalk were withering.

She was standing over the dead rose when Lewis—and Connor—came into the kitchen. She had left flight too late. She must turn now, and confront him.

"I like these tiles, Conn," Lewis was saying—trying, Vivien supposed, to behave as if they were all normal people.

Connor said, "They're all right."

His voice seemed to pull Vivien's eyes towards him, like some kind of science fiction power-beam.

He wore black jeans today and a sky-blue shirt tucked into them. His body, which all his clothes seemed carefully made to describe, filled Vivien with a deep, thrilling, deadly vertigo. She wished she could step out of her body and shake herself.

Somehow, she spoke levelly. "Good morning, Mr. Sinclair."

"Good morning, Ms. Gray." His eyes flicked over her, and were gone. "Do we have your gracious permission to go into the garden?"

Vivien saw Lewis raise his eyes to heaven.

She refused to be fazed.

"Both doors are unlocked. You know where everything is. I'll leave you to it."

As she left the room, she heard Lewis give a low, half mocking, half appreciative whistle. "Well, that's *you* sorted, Conn."

Connor said nothing.

Reaching the bedroom, Vivien shut her eyes. She found Connor's face was as clear in her mind as if some artist, far more clever than she, had painted it on the inside of her lids. The fiery dark of his eyes, the straight black bars of his eyebrows, the nose that wasn't quite straight, the long slim line of his mouth—what would it be like to kiss that mouth... to taste that mouth... to—

Vivien growled. *No*. He is *nothing*. And stop skulking here like some kid with a crush.

She marched out and along to the octagonal room. She flung open the French doors. She set up her easel and laid out her sketchpad and brushes. She would not hide. Life would go on.

She got no further than that.

She saw him suddenly. Connor was striding back up the path from the garden like the incarnation of a storm. Straight into the room by the doors she had opened. His face now was a mask of granite.

"What the *hell* have you been doing?"

Vivien put down the pad.

"*What?*"

"I said, what have you been doing? No, don't bother. It is very obvious, *Ms. Gray*, what you've been *trying* to do."

"I don't know, *Mr. Sinclair*, what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" He glowered at her. She had never, she thought, known before the full meaning of that expression. "Then, you'd better come and see, hadn't you."

"Don't talk to me as if I'm some ignorant child."

"Then, don't act like one."

Lewis appeared behind Connor. "Er, Conn, maybe—"

"Maybe what?" Connor's steely rage was now turned on Lewis, who backed off, holding up placatory hands.

"Er, *Ms. Gray*, it's like this—"

"*Someone*—" Connor cut through "—and who *ever* could that be? *Someone* has been attempting to remove the statue. Now, perhaps this was a neighbor, clambering over the wall for a merry bit of vandalism. Or maybe it was a little crook called Vivien Gray, who got some mates in to try to lift the statue, now that she knows it might be valuable—"

He stopped in midsentence. Vivien, white as any marble, flared back at him. "I think what you just said could be slanderous. Do you really think, if I were to *do* such a thing, I'd still be hanging around here?"

"Yes. Because you didn't manage the job."

Lewis said, uneasily, "It *has* shifted. But, Conn—"

Vivien ceased to hear either of them. Through the drumming in her ears, the implication of all this—now far beyond any petty accusation—hit home.

The statue had *moved*—

When she darted past both of them and down the garden, on legs that were made of water, Vivien dimly realized this might well look like proof to him of her guilt. Did it matter? Not if a man formed from marble could move...

She was standing in front of the statue, staring at it, trembling, when Lewis came out to join her.

"Oh boy—Vivien, may I? Vivien, look, I'm really sorry. I mean, there was rain yesterday, and see, the plinth is all over ivy. Things like that can tilt—dry weather, sudden rain—I've said all that to him. But when Connor's in a temper... Nevins cut the figure off the plinth anyway, when he had the lettering cut in," Lewis added. Vivien wished he would be quiet. "Old Patrick's pinned to the base now, and his feet were resculpted—so if the base tilts, well, that could do it—"

Vivien went on staring at the statue, angled there on its plinth, one strong, arched foot—*half off the base*—like that of a man about to step free, step down, walk towards her. As she in turn backs away...

I am packing up and going back to Camden.

Vivien had made her choice. She would call Addie tomorrow, apologize and explain that some fictitious emergency required her to rush elsewhere.

Addie would be miffed. She might make sure Vivien got no further work with Addie's pet publishers. It couldn't be helped.

Vivien hadn't thought she would feel homesick for her closet-size flat. Now she longed to be there.

Of course, she had been foolish about the statue. Once Lewis Blake had shut up and gone, having patted her arm consolingly, she began to see the ordinary truth of what he had said.

Obviously the ground had become waterlogged; the statue had shifted, dislodged one foot. Maybe all this had even happened before. Statues did not, of themselves, move. Or, only in dreams.

Nevertheless, this place was unnerving her, stopping her working. And, too, *he* would be coming back again, for Patrick Aspen Sinclair. Lewis Blake had explained as much, contritely, before he went away. Connor had already gone, it seemed.

Lewis looked very embarrassed. Vivien had tried to be civil. It wasn't Lewis's fault.

Vivien cleaned up in the flat, stripped the bed she had used and put the sheets in the washing machine. She cleaned the bathroom she had used and the kitchen. She didn't want to make more trouble for herself with Addie than was unavoidable.

At about 6:00 p.m., the telephone rang in the hall.

Leave it? It wasn't her problem now.

But the phone kept on. It rang for five minutes, stopped, and immediately began again. Perhaps it *was* Addie?

"Hi, Lewis Blake here. Look, have you got a couple of minutes?"

"No, really, Mr. Blake. Sorry."

"Hang on. Please, Vivien. I've been wrestling with this all afternoon. I didn't know whether to tell you or not. I mean, I *shouldn't*. But then, after the way Connor was with you... Heck, Vivien. I think you've got a right to know why he was such a bastard."

"Just his natural talent, I thought," said Vivien acidly.

"That's not completely fair on him. And yes, he was stinking unfair to *you*. I'd better spill the beans."

"I don't want to hear any more of your unpleasant friend's secrets."

"Oh, look—"

"If I thought I could do it, I'd sue him and call you as star witness."

"You're really angry," said Lewis glumly.

"You're *surprised*? Excuse me, I *am* really busy. It was good to meet you, Lewis. Thanks for trying to help. But I'm not interested in his reasons. Goodbye."

As she put the receiver down she heard Lewis say, "Two of a kind."

Who—? She and *Connor*?

That riled her worse.

She hauled the sheets from the machine and beat them into folded submission for the airing cupboard.

Then she took from the cabinet the bottle of Merlot that she had bought herself for the weekend and hadn't opened.

Tearing out the cork, she told herself it was sacrilege to drink this delicious velvety wine as a tranquilizer, but really, right now, nothing else was going to work.

After three or four sips, and one gulp, she put the glass down half-full.

The evening was still brilliant. A drop of westering sunlight somehow evaded the surrounding houses and burned like a ruby in her glass. Red for passion. For a broken rose—and a man mad with jealousy, who shed the blood of his wife, and next his own, and left her lover alive to bear the red, shameful guilt of it.

Now, too late, she asked herself just what Lewis had been going to tell her about Connor Sinclair. Should she have heard him out? The secret of the statue was dire enough. What other event was worse—so bad Lewis had had to "wrestle" with it—all afternoon?

She had found the card of a cab firm under Addie's phone. An odd name, Cwick Cabs. So much for Addie's insistence that she drove herself always.

Vivien had packed her things and was in the first hall waiting for the cab, when the doorbell went. Good, they were early. Vivien opened the front door at once.

And Connor Sinclair was outside, standing there in silence and the last rays of the sun.

Chapter 4



In the rich golden light, his skin, too, seemed made of gold, and with the black hair, the blue of his shirt and the scarlet flowers he carried, he had become almost heraldic. There was a great difference to him. His face was no longer frozen, or angry, but set and grave.

"Before you slam the door in my face," he said, "though you have every right to, may I ask you to allow me to apologize?"

What had she anticipated? Anything but this.

She said nothing. But neither did she slam the door.

"I'm not at my best when I'm freaked out, Vivien Gray, and as you may realize from my behavior, I was very freaked out, both yesterday and today. However, that is no excuse. Please believe me, I don't expect you to forgive me. But I appreciate your allowing me to say I'm sorry for behaving like scum. I brought you these. Maybe you'll just throw them on the floor and tread them into pieces. Why do I think you won't? It's not their faults—the roses—and I suspect you're a very just woman."

There were two dozen of them, each exactly the scarlet of the roses by the statue. She stared at them. But when he held them out, she took them.

She said, "There are roses in the garden, Mr. Sinclair."

"I know. But if you pick any, they don't last. I thought these might brighten up the rooms full of dust sheets and shut boxes, or even that soulless toilet-white Adelaide uses for her kitchen."

Vivien stood there, holding the roses.

He stood there, looking at her, his eyes searching her face with a slow, waiting stillness.

It was a moment out of time, captured like some glowing seed in the resinous amber of the setting sun.

She said, "I'll put them in water. Thank you."

She wanted to be dignified and cold. She couldn't turn either mood on, it seemed, not with this man standing here in front of her, near enough his scent reached her—his warm clean skin and hair, the hint of some masculine cologne, unidentifiable, unique.

Something about him now made Vivien want to cry.

Which was more stupid than anything.

He had behaved, as he said, like scum. A few roses he could obviously well afford, and a glib apology, shouldn't suffice to take away the sting.

But no, the apology hadn't been glib.

Vivien could see something there, lingering behind his eyes, the something that his former discourtesy and knifelike words had cunningly kept concealed.

"Well," he said. "Thanks for accepting the token. I'll leave you in peace." He turned and went back towards the road.

Vivien didn't move.

In another instant he had swung round and returned to her. Her heart bolted into breakneck speed.

"Look, I meant to say, I'll send Lewis over with the gang for the statue. Obviously, I'm the last person you'll want to see. Vivien, please believe I am really sorry for the bloody rubbish I said to you."

"You're afraid that I *will* sue."

He smiled, seeming glad she had come back at him with her own touch of wryness.

"Feel free. I won't contest the case. What damages would you settle for?"

Everything was happening too fast. As well as the pain and dark behind his eyes there was now the appearance of this playfulness, an elegant and winning charm—which after a second he shut away again, as if to play like that now was to insult her further.

How could someone so aware of a woman's feelings ever have been so obtuse?

To *conceal*. To *hide*. To disguise the shadow behind his eyes.

"The roses are fine," Vivien said. "I'll settle for the roses."

"You are, as I said, very just. And far too kind."

Now he didn't move away. Yet in another second he must do so. Then, of course, she would never see him again. He would take care she didn't, sparing her the nasty event.

He said, "Look, Vivien, can you allow me five minutes more of your time?"

It was almost precisely what Lewis had said to her on the phone.

Cautious now, Vivien said, "I have a taxi coming any minute."

"Just until it arrives, then. I really don't expect you to invite me in. We can talk out here."

It seemed to Vivien that Connor, like Lewis, wanted to tell her the truth that lay beneath Connor's actions. Did she want to know? Would she be a fool not to accept the chance of finding out? Some mystery, crouching and sinister, hung, both across the flat Addie had so insensitively inhabited, and on the man who, with such unusual humbleness, now offered himself up for her judgment or her censure.

"I need to put the flowers in water," Vivien said. "Why don't you come in?"

He glanced at her bags in the hall, but made no comment. The flat by now was shadowy, until Vivien switched on some side lights.

She knew she wouldn't be leaving until Connor had told her whatever it was he meant to say.

In the kitchen, he stood against one of the despised white walls, watching Vivien as she put his flowers into a vase.

She had never felt, she thought, so self-conscious doing anything. When one of the roses dropped onto the floor, Connor, like an Elizabethan courtier, picked it up and gave it back to her.

Oddly, their hands did not touch. They hadn't ever touched, even by accident, even outside, when first he offered her the flowers.

It seemed, she thought, that he was trying *not* to make physical contact with her. But was she doing the same with him?

All this time, ever since coming into the flat, they had said little to each other, just a trivial word or two.

Their double silence lay in darkening swaths across the kitchen.

When Vivien went back into the octagonal room, he walked behind her.

There was something both disturbing and exciting about this that Vivien refused to acknowledge.

When she had put down the vase, the spray of roses vivid as fire, she saw, too, the opened bottle of Merlot, still almost full, which she had carelessly forgotten.

Connor sat down only when she suggested he do so.

These rooms had been his. He knew them, but was uneasy here. So much was now evident. Why? And why had he sold the apartment to Addie? Gone away and left behind the "collectible" statue of Patrick Aspen Sinclair?

"Do you drink wine?" Vivien asked.

"Sometimes."

"May I offer you a glass of this?"

How formal she sounded—how formal and constrained both of them were now. It had been easier to communicate in rage.

They sat facing each other across Addie's Persian carpet, drinking wine in the lamplight, as the sky beyond the French doors faded and the garden changed from bronze to ebony.

"I like the wine, Vivien—You don't mind my calling you by your first name?"

"Just not *Viv*, Mr. Sinclair."

"No. *Vivien*, always. Try Connor, would you?"

Vivien smiled. She spoke his name obediently, and felt a flush, seeming as vivid as the roses, flare in her cheeks. She ignored it. She said, primly, "Then, what was it you wanted to say to me... Connor?"

"I think Lewis told you about my ancestor, Patrick, the guy the statue was modeled on? Am I right? You won't be breaking Lewis's confidences, he's a gossip and I know it. I concentrate on his good qualities."

"He did say something."

"Did he tell you what happened with the sculptor, Nevins?"

"Yes."

"He told you about Emily, and—" Connor paused. He drained his glass of wine, then began to turn the empty vessel in his hand. "Patrick shot her and himself. And left Nevins alive. An interesting move. Not what Othello meant to do."

"I really do know the play."

"Of course you do. So do I. I've acted in it—oh, not Othello himself. A black actor took that part. I had the pleasure of acting the lying villain Iago. It's strange, isn't it, that Nevins had the Othello quote cut in the statue's base. Ironic. He died in 1906 in Paris, from alcohol and laudanum. A waste, like Patrick and Emily."

Another long silence came.

Vivien thought, *The story is horrible, and sad, but how can it be only this that haunts him?*

"Look, Vivien, I can't go into details. Something—Something bad happened to me when I lived here. Something bad, so bad—to me, and to someone else—I got out and sold the flat to Adelaide. I thought that her flawlessly unimaginative and stomping life would exorcise the place. Maybe it has. And maybe not. But I was dreading coming back here. And the statue... I don't know if objects carry a stigma, but for my money that one does. The moment I got the interest from the movie people I knew it was too good a chance to pass up. And a real bonus to get rid of the thing while I was at it. I *inherited* that statue, Vivien. About all I did inherit. But that's yet another story."

"Why did you come here at all, if you dreaded to? Wouldn't Lewis—"

"Yes, of course. But the dreams started again. I just thought, I have to do this, face it, finish with it, now and forever. I even armed myself with dear batty Cinnamon. I thought she would certainly quash any lingering darkness here. And then, you opened the door."

Vivien blinked.

Connor looked down into the empty glass. "A girl in a cloud of hair, like a Waterhouse nymph in a bathrobe."

What could Vivien say to that? Waterhouse was the pre-Raphaelite painter famous for his depictions of water nymphs and mermaids, so Connor was flattering her. Also he was telling her so much—yet telling her, really, nothing...

"I'm sorry I upset you," she said quietly.

"I had no right to be upset by anything as graceful, lovely or wonderful as you, Vivien. But that was the trouble, I'm afraid. The unforgivable bloody trouble."

Vivien got up. She carried the bottle to him and refilled his glass. He sat there looking at it.

"It's all right, Connor. Thank you for explaining. It doesn't matter. I promise—" again she smiled "—I really won't sue."

She didn't expect it—but then she hadn't been able to expect anything he had done tonight. He stood up in front of her, tall and symmetrically strong, a burning barrier between her and the light. Against the lamp, she couldn't see his face, but she felt his hands come weightlessly to rest on her upper arms.

Though weightless, the heat of his touch carried a charge of the fiercest electricity. She was relieved she had put down the wine bottle, or she might have dropped it. She was glad they hadn't touched before.

After all, she *could* see him. He was the only thing she could see in the room...

Vivien gazed upward into his face, which hovered over hers, so close now, she felt his warm breath on her lips.

Then he straightened abruptly away from her.

"No," he said. The coldness in his voice she had heard before.

Vivien recoiled.

"Wait—" he said. He had let her go. He spoke softly. "I'm sorry, yet once more. You don't want this. Not from me."

But she thought, Oh, Connor, I do. *I do...*

An appalling alien noise exploded through the room. It was the doorbell.

"Your taxi," he said.

"Yes... "

"Shall I—I'll tell him to wait a minute."

Vivien said lamely, "It's all right. I'll do it."

She walked out of the room and down the hall, and opened the front door. The man outside presented an unfriendly face, apparently annoyed she hadn't heard him sounding the car horn on the street, so he had had to walk a few feet to the house. He seemed very scruffy and had black sunglasses of incongruous fashionableness.

"I'm sorry," she said. So many apologies tonight. "I won't be needing your cab."

"Is that right?" He appeared actually menacing.

It seemed prudent to add, "My friend just arrived."

As if to assist, from the eight-sided room came the quiet *clink* of glassware.

She felt the glare through the shades. "Well, thanks a bunch, lady. You people—Next time call and cancel, all right?"

She gave him a couple of pounds, guilty to have misled him. Ungraciously he pocketed the coins and went off.

Vivien hesitated in the hall. What was she doing? Did she, after all, mean to stay in this place—the place where something so "bad" had happened?

Yes.

Connor was standing now by the French windows, looking out into the black garden. The second glass of wine, undrunk, sat on a table.

Again, time stopped.

Then he turned and looked at her. Turned and looked *through* her.

With a courtesy that scalded her now more than his abrasiveness had before, Connor Sinclair said, "You've been fantastic, Vivien. Thank you for so generously letting me off. I won't forget it. Take care of yourself. I hope everything goes well for you, always."

He walked past her. He walked out into the hall. She heard the front door open. Close. He was gone.

Sternly she held herself motionless, seeing before her the gaping abyss of her empty life, void of him, the life where he had wished her well for always.

Chapter 5



Exhaustion, physical and mental, sent Vivien to sleep almost the moment she lay down in bed. She hadn't thought it could.

Somewhere, though, in the dark of night and slumber, she dreamed she heard a series of soft noises, passing up and down the apartment, now in the eight-sided room, now along a corridor—footsteps, a faint *thud*, like a cat jumping from a windowsill...

Even in her dream, Vivien took charge of herself. *Don't be stupid.* There's nothing there. All places make sounds, especially after a hot day when the night air is cooler. This time I'm *not* going out to see.

She woke near dawn and recalled the dream. She thought with great clarity, If I'm going to stay on, I need to pull myself together. Statues don't move—it was rain or soil subsiding. As for the rose in the conservatory, Addie hasn't looked after the frame, just as she's left the garden to riot. There's probably some tiny hole and something got in, some little animal (curious image of a mouse carrying a rose...). All my problems here, *all* of them, are to do with an overactive imagination.

The alarm clock woke her at seven-thirty.

She didn't feel refreshed by her long sleep, but leaden. Even the shower didn't help. Deciding on strong leaf tea in preference to coffee, she traipsed along to the kitchen with—despite her resolve—a slight feeling of apprehension.

But nothing was wrong. And out in the conservatory the rose had withered away.

She drank the whole pot, staring at nothing, tasting nothing.

She thought, *Be glad he turned out to be a decent guy, Vivien. He tried to behave well. That's got to be better, even if*

But, she thought, he had wanted to kiss her. He *meant* to kiss her—the very air of the room had been alight with his wanting that. Or was it only *her* wanting it that she had felt?

The last rejection, three years ago, had been far more simple. Her lover had used her—no other term was possible—once only, and discarded her after like a broken pencil. Her bewildered, tactful attempt to discover what she had done to offend him had met with, "Oh, come on, Vivien. Can't we have a bit of fun without it turning into grand opera?"

She couldn't imagine Connor Sinclair, even at his worst, behaving in such a way. She had sensed about him last night a quality more appealing even than his awareness, or his charm—a kind of loyalty. Yes, he could lash out with words, but he was ultimately honorable.

Then again, what did she know about him? Next to nothing. And now, she never would.

Too sluggish for work yet, Vivien decided to clean the flat properly. This was something else Addie never bothered with. She periodically hired girls to clean and then sacked them, or had them walk out in disgust at Addie's manner.

Housework, though, could take your mind off other things.

Vivien located a few dust cloths and took the deluxe Hoover from its cupboard. Then she walked into the eight-sided room.

"What—" Vivien stalled.

She stared. The fine hairs rose on the back of her neck, and something icy trickled down her spine—

She had left the remainder of the wine in its bottle, uncorked. By it on the table, Connor had placed his undrunk second glass, and she her undrunk half glass.

Vivien knew this, had no doubts.

The bottle was empty and lay on its side on the carpet. Both glasses were empty also.

But this wasn't the worst. Oh, no.

Every single long-stemmed rose had been removed from the vase, the heads cut off, and stalks and petals scattered over the carpet and the wooden floor beyond.

Last night she hadn't drawn the drapes at the French windows, and now the garden lay outside, ripe and sunlit—*innocent*.

Vivien backed out of the room. Outside, she walked quite briskly down the hall to the telephone. And so passed the dining room on the right.

It was a somber room, done in maroon, and not huge in size. Even so, Addie kept in there, along with an oak table and chairs, her only bookcase. None of these things had yet been packed or sheeted over.

Vivien saw the book at once, lying where it hadn't been yesterday, facedown on the table.

It had obviously been pulled out of the case—or had itself sprung across the room.

Vivien, feeling as though she had stopped breathing and never would breathe again, walked to the table and turned the book right side up.

She knew which page it would be open at.

How convenient for it—whatever *it* was—that Addie, who seldom read anything longer than five hundred words, kept the regulation show-off classics. There in the bookcase, a set of Jane Austen in leather and gilt, a purple-backed Milton and Shelley, and four volumes of Shakespeare in white cloth: Comedies, Histories, Sonnets—and Tragedies.

It was the Tragedies on the table, naturally.

Unable to resist, Vivien found herself reading the words on the page.

Oth:... A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!

Iago: Nay, you must forget that.

Oth: Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight; For she shall not live; no, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand...

Vivien snapped the book shut. Somehow then she dropped it. Maybe not surprisingly—her hands weren't quite steady.

It landed back on the table, open again. This time at the title page. An old photograph had been reproduced as a frontispiece. Vivien stared at it. A woman in a long pale robe, tightly belted at her narrow waist, her very dark hair unbound and springing, her large eyes gazing... The credit read: "The actress Emily Sinclair, in one of her most famous roles: Ophelia."

Someone had written on the title page—slapdash, in bold yet feminine handwriting: *To C with love from K. I bet you wish you could meet this gorgeous great-gran of yours! If you do, I guess I'd better leave!*

K, then, was someone in Connor's life, or had been. For C was definitely Connor Sinclair, since this was the picture of his great-great-grandmother, Emily—the faithless wife Patrick Sinclair had shot.

Connor's book, then. Left behind. Like the statue. Like K?

Unwillingly, so unwillingly, Vivien's eyes strayed back to the photograph. In her head she could hear a voice telling her, facing up to what Vivien herself didn't want to face. For Emily Sinclair very, very closely resembled Vivien Gray.

No one else had called the flat after Lewis Blake had done so the previous evening. Vivien, as she pressed the required 1471 to see if his number had been registered, noted her hands were trembling. But the first hurdle was quickly passed. Lewis hadn't thought to withhold his number.

Vivien stabbed at the buttons again.

After eight rings, a girl's voice, very young, announced, "Hi, this is Scavengers. Can I help?"

Vivien asked for Lewis.

"Sorry, he's out. Do you want to leave a message?"

Vivien faltered. All this while, standing here, she kept looking over her shoulder at the quiet sun-and-shadow hall.

"No. It's all right, thank you."

What a liar she was. It was far from all right.

Anyway, what would she have said to Lewis? *Listen, I know you're a gossip, your friend and business associate Connor told me so. So tell me what you wanted to before. Now I really need to know.*

Something made a sound in the eight-sided room.

Vivien jumped.

After a moment, she pushed herself forward. Reaching the room, she stood in the doorway, staring around wide-eyed. But nothing seemed altered. The wine bottle and roses were still lying on the floor.

No, after all, she wouldn't stay here. Whatever was going on was unbelievable, and deeply threatening. Vivien felt she had had enough.

Her bags were still mostly packed. She shoved back in whatever she had taken out last night. She had to fight with the folding easel. *It* didn't want to go.

Thinking of Addie still, however, Vivien made herself do certain things. She replaced the Shakespeare in the bookcase. She cleared up the roses and the bottle, washed the glasses and dried them and put them away in the drinks cabinet of the octagonal room.

Everything she did was punctuated by turning constantly, to look over one shoulder or the other. Nothing happened. It was *lulling* her.

Outside the windows the summer had opened its generous wings. Birds sang in the private garden and from the public park; traffic murmured. All this informed Vivien she was being silly, had made a mistake.

She couldn't call last night's cab firm. Going on how the driver had reacted, they would refuse to send anyone. Two she found in the phone book said they had no cars to spare.

So, after she had checked every bolt and lock, Vivien let herself out of Addie's flat and trudged with bags and easel towards the nearest tube station. Rather ironically, as she was leaving the square, she thought she actually saw the sunglassed driver from Cwick Cabs shoot past her in an unmarked car. If the recognition was mutual, he paid her no attention—she was now beneath his notice.

The tube was crowded and subject to delays. Altogether it took almost two hours to get back to her flat off the West Camden Road.

Her phone was ringing as she staggered in. She had a wild idea Lewis had found her number in the directory and called her back.

"Yes—Hello... "

"Good morning, and wow! You sound *so* together and collected," said Ellie. "Whatever are you at, Vivien Gray?"

"Oh, Ellie—"

"Hey." Concern sharpened the sparkling tones. "Take it slowly. You've really been on my mind. Did I sense something? What's going down there?"

Vivien seated herself on the floor, her back to the wall, and told Ellie everything, over the blessed miracle of the transatlantic line.

Vivien had eaten lunch and drunk most of a two-liter bottle of water. She sat in the afternoon light, looking out of the window of her hot little front room, away through the traffic fumes, over roofs and between church steeples, to the fashionable end of Camden that lay opposite to her own.

Talking to an Ellie 8:00 a.m. fresh on a New York morning had calmed Vivien and cheered her. But Ellie invariably had this effect. Working as she did in quite a high-powered bookshop in downtown Manhattan, Ellie's philosophy was

deceptively straightforward. On her office wall was pinned a large black square with large pink lettering that read *Carpe diem*—its unflinching advice slightly offset by the cartoon of someone struggling with a fish, and the yellow print beneath which said, *Seize the carp*.

But Elliot Leiber *did* seize the day, every day. She had a gift for it.

"Listen, Vivien," she had said over the phone. "First of all, what happened back there—I bet it has some ordinary explanation. Things like that—ghosts—maybe they do exist, but they're never going to hurt you. That's for books and movies. So even if there is a ghost, it just likes a drop of booze, gets high and spills the roses. Hey, it's spent all its time in the backyards—what do you expect? House-trained?"

"It bit the flowers' heads off, Ellie."

"How d'you know? Maybe they just broke when they hit the floor. It didn't break the vase, did it? Or the glasses and bottle? As for the photo of Emily—you're pretty het up, girl. Maybe the likeness is less strong? Though, if you're right, that could help explain why this guy turned into a monster when he saw you. You must have scared him half to death. Which brings me to *this guy*."

Vivien said, "Well, there's not much I can do now."

"Oh, you English. Say, Vivien, take off the crinoline. From what you told me the man is drooling over you. Okay, he didn't have the cheek to just kiss you, but honey, that means he has the guts to realize he acted like a louse before. So he rode off into the sunset. But you've got the number of his outfit now. Why don't you call him?"

"I *can't*, Ellie."

"Chicken."

"Ellie, he is in some awful trouble—"

"Then, give him some help, why don't you. Yes, it's a risk. He may turn on some more of his freeze-out repartee. But you have to take the risk now and then, because if you never jump those high fences, for all the times you jump them and land in the garbage, you are going to miss that one special time you land on the feather bed. And just think who might be sharing that feather bed with you!"

"I just don't think—"

"Sure. You don't. Call him."

"What do I say?"

"Oh my lord—Say, 'Hi, Connor, are you free for a coffee, a drink, a kiss?'"

"He will say no. To all three."

"Right, it stinks. But what have you lost? Your dignity? Suppose he says *yes*?"

Vivien diverted the conversation after that. Ellie let her. They talked about other subjects for a laughing, dollar-eating half hour before Ellie had to hang up and go to work.

Sitting in her own front room, Vivien knew she wasn't going to call Connor Sinclair. She didn't have the courage.

On the other hand, she *was* going to call Lewis.

It was true, the... ghost hadn't hurt her. If it was Patrick Aspen Sinclair... trapped in a marble statue...

Even Addie, surely, would have noticed things like the roses, the wine. Presumably such things never *had* happened when she was there. She had exorcised the place, just as Connor had said.

But Vivien was different. Even if she wasn't Emily's twin, she *was* over-aware, and carried her own baggage of sorrow, frustration, rage. And Connor also had come back, driven by this second secret he hadn't disclosed.

What had gone on in that apartment? What had happened bad enough to change him from a man so easily to be desired, to be *loved*, into a block of ice and poison?

The voice on the phone was known, but it wasn't exactly a joyous reunion.

"This is Cinnamon Boyle-Martin at Scavengers. How can I help?"

"I'd like to speak to Lewis Blake, please."

"Who is *that*? Wait—I know. It's Ms. *Whoever*, isn't it? Hi, Ms. *Whoever*. What do you want Lew for?"

"I'll tell him when I speak to him," said Vivien, trying to find the balance between politeness and authority.

Cinnamon of course was immune to both.

"Lew is very busy. Maybe you can bring yourself to give me the teeniest itty-bitty bit of an idea."

"Thank you. But that will only waste your time. Lew is the one I'd like to speak to."

"What if I say you can't?" Cinnamon sounded now like a bullying child.

"I would think Lewis might wonder why you were blocking a perfectly legitimate call."

"Or not. You do know Lewis is happily married, *don't* you, Ms. Whoever?"

Anger scorched through Vivien's veins. She tried to stay calm. "I beg your pardon?"

"Beg away. Just thought you ought to know before you got in over your head. I suppose I could push the errand boy your way—bit young for you, but beggars can't be—"

Vivien put the receiver down. The nasty little—

Stay cool. Try again later. Cinnamon isn't always going to be there. There was that girl who answered last time. Or even Lewis might answer. She hadn't tried to locate his home number, it hadn't seemed appropriate.

Anyway, Ellie, so much for your notion of calling *Connor*. I can just imagine how Cinnamon would deal with that.

Vivien tried Scavengers again at 4:00 p.m. Cinnamon answered brightly—gleefully?

Vivien broke the connection without speaking.

She wondered why she and Cinnamon had taken such an instant dislike to each other—aside from Cinnamon's general rudeness. Karma?

Vivien thrust all this from her mind, at least for now. She hadn't bothered to unpack anything but the essentials. She must try to work.

At six o'clock she broke for some tea, and drank it, nerving herself now to ring Addie at the number near Perpignan. As she stretched out her hand, the phone rang.

Was it Addie, by some strange coincidence? Bracing herself, Vivien lifted the receiver.

"Is that Vivien Gray?"

"Connor... "

"It *is* Vivien Gray. Do you know you are part of quite a sisterhood of Grays in the London directory? Luckily Adelaide spelled your name for me, and only two of you spell Gray with an A. The other lady accused me of trying to sell her double glazing."

Vivien sat down slowly. She held the receiver as if it were something very fragile, and priceless.

"Are you still there, Vivien? Have I called at a bad time?"

He was so straightforward. Joking—playful again. It was just as if he were a friend, one of long-standing, known and welcome.

"Yes, I'm still here. No, it isn't a bad time."

He sighed.

She wondered, astounded, if he, like she, had been holding a breath.

"Look, Vivien. I have to ask a favor of you."

"Yes?"

"I obviously realize you've left Adelaide's flat—I saw you'd packed to go last night. The trouble is, Lewis or I, and the team, need to get in to shift Patrick out. I could get some spare keys off Adelaide possibly, but knowing her, that might take a while. I'd rather have everything wrapped up as soon as I can. Could I ask you to let me borrow the keys she gave you? I'll let you have them back the minute we're through."

"Yes," said Vivien softly, "that's all right. When—When do you want to collect them?"

"Tonight? It'll be me. I hope that's okay?"

A kind of fiery-cold heat enveloped Vivien.

"Why not," she said. "That's fine."

"Thanks, Vivien. I appreciate this."

After she put the phone down, Vivien said to herself, He'll come to the door and take the keys and go. Tomorrow he'll return them. Maybe, that time, not even him. Someone else.

But still, for a few moments, he would, tonight, be there.

Don't love him, she thought. Gray, you are not to fall in love with Connor Sinclair.

Her own thoughts answered with stony calm: *You loved him before you even met him. You loved him the moment you saw the statue.*

She had showered again, and put on a linen skirt and loose green top. She looked at herself in the ornate mirror. Yes, you look nice, yes, just casual enough, as if you hadn't changed just because he was coming here. And all this for two minutes on the doorstep.

By seven, Vivien had become almost unbearably nervous.

The doorbell went.

She felt her heart contract and expand as if it meant to explode.

"Hello, Vivien."

The instant she saw him, any ordinary nervousness was washed away by a tide, Like that of the most buoyant and wannest sea. All thought drained from her head. Elated, frightened, she gazed up at him and heard herself say, reasonably, as if she were still entirely sane, "Hello."

A white shirt now, and not jeans but narrow dark trousers, with, surprisingly, tough-looking boots that seemed as if they could withstand a trek over some rocky Welsh mountain. The odd combination was somehow exactly right.

And, as before, he came armed with a gift. It was a bottle of Merlot, and she could tell from one glance at it, as he held it out to her, that it had cost rather more than her own.

"Really, there wasn't any need—"

"It's that sort of evening, Vivien. An evening for red wine."

Her hall was so narrow and brief that she didn't make the mistake of standing aside to let him by, but walked ahead into her kitchen.

"Here are the keys."

"Great. I'll let you have them back by next Monday at the latest. Meanwhile, perhaps you have a corkscrew for this bottle? It's at the perfect temperature, just needs to take a breath or two."

It's not alone in that, she thought, remembering to inhale.

Vivien opened a drawer and handed him the corkscrew. She took two wineglasses, unmatched—she had none that *did* match—one green, one blue, rinsed and dried them.

The wine stood on the windowsill, glowing against the deepening gilt of the sky.

"How are you?" he said, smilingly formal.

"Very well. And you?"

"Ravenously hungry and longing to walk somewhere. I've been stuck up a ladder, or crouched over nearly double all afternoon, removing unbelievably old and crumbling plasterwork. Lewis, who was up the other ladder, sends you his best, by the way."

He handed her the green glass, black with red wine.

It was perfect, the wine. But she didn't really taste the sips she took.

"This is wonderful. Thank you."

"*A votre santé, mademoiselle.*"

He had told her he was hungry, and wanted to walk. He wouldn't be staying long. Already he had pocketed Addie's keys.

"There *is* a third thing I *would* like," he added, "apart from dinner and exercise. I would truly value your company during both. I know it's short notice, but is there any chance?"

Confident; arrogant, just slightly. How many women would have said no to such an invitation from him, however short the notice? She should refuse. She was already in far too deep.

"I'd like to."

His smile broadened. It became a grin, startling as it undid the handsome sculpted face and made it irresistibly human.

While she went to get a handbag, Connor took his glass of wine through into her front room, with a relaxed "May I?"

When Vivien rejoined him, he was studying her two paintings up on the wall.

"Are these yours?"

"Oh. Yes."

"They're extremely good. Better than that."

"Thank you. They finished up how I wanted them to come out. That often doesn't happen."

"Delicate," he said, "yet strong. Mysterious. An unusual combination." He looked at her steadily.

His eyes made it plain that he didn't refer only to her painting style as he added, "I think I shouldn't be amazed at that."

Chapter 6



Having asked her if she minded walking, which she didn't, they duly walked through the lively, sun-setting city streets for twenty minutes, to a small restaurant he apparently knew.

By the time they were seated and choosing their food, Vivien found he and she were talking to each other as if they had known each other much longer and, perhaps, done this several times before. He seemed to know what she liked, for example, when he recommended to her from the list of starters an avocado dish she was already deciding on.

The restaurant was pleasantly lit and not hot, and only about half-full. As the sun went and evening settled in the open windows, a waiter came to light the rosy candles on the tables.

Connor told her then some of his history. Of an acting career he had mostly now jettisoned in favor of the work of Scavengers. A little about his gambling father, who had destroyed any joint family capital and then walked out on Connor's mother. Connor spoke of this briefly. He added no flavors either of anger or bitterness. Despite the controlled editing, Vivien's heart ached for him and the child he had been.

In turn Vivien displayed something of her rather uneventful if precarious life—her "unworldliness"—secondary school to art school, to a series of makeshift jobs, then the breakthrough into book-jackets and occasional exhibitions at modest venues. She told him, too, quickly, of her disapproving parents—her gruff father and chilly mother. She seldom saw them now, and spoke to them less often. Of Ellie Leiber, Vivien spoke at much more length, with warmth and a nostalgia Connor readily seemed to acknowledge.

"You can't choose your family, but you can make a new one with your friends," he said.

Neither of them spoke of former lovers.

She had little enough to say on that score. But with Connor, she sensed a shadow—darker by far than his fecklessly gambling father—that hung across Connor's emotional past.

Was that shadow, then, the mysterious K? Surely not. Her note to Connor in the volume of Shakespeare tragedies had been contrastingly humorous and light. K had sounded—OK. So, where was she now?

But that was silly, too. People part, not always in horrible ways.

When Connor and Vivien didn't select a dessert, the waiter brought them a dish of fresh fruit, nuts and cheese, and two tiny liqueurs, in vessels like metal thimbles. "On the house, Mr. Sinclair. With Milo's compliments."

Later Milo, the restaurant's owner, appeared with the coffee, to exchange a few words with Connor, and to bow to Vivien, as if they had all traveled back in time and geography to the Italy of the 1700s.

"The restaurant got a credit on a film we worked for," Connor remarked later on. "Milo said it increased business, and never stops thanking me. It wasn't anything, but he's one of the good guys."

After the meal, they walked again, more slowly, through still darkening evening streets beginning to blush with neon and street-lighting.

"Light pollution," said Connor scathingly.

"I wish just sometimes I could see the stars," Vivien agreed.

"There are places tucked away in London where you can. For example, there's a public garden not ten minutes from here round the side of St George's Church. The lamps along the paths are low-key. If the sky's clear, which it is, the stars are to be seen."

They walked to the park.

Vivien still did not know if this was a "date." Surely it was—yet she could not be sure. And she remained uneasy, even beneath her enjoyment of this time spent with Connor. It was a truly weird combination; never ever before had she felt, also, so strangely comfortable in the company of any man.

Be careful! said her mind. *Yes, Mother.*

The church stood up, dimly lit and pale among its pillars, and the garden opened beyond, behind wrought-iron gates. A few people roamed the paths or sat on benches, singly or in pairs. There was no noise, no disturbance. A peaceful spot, cool with summer night and scented by the foliage of tall trees.

A path wound up a slope. Connor took her hand and led her, telling her where tree roots, barely to be seen, broke the paving.

The clasp of his hand electrified her. She could hardly bear it, but worse would be the moment when he let her go...

Up among the trees, they stood now on a little hill. Above, the vast sky opened like the dome within some great cathedral, indigo velvet, sewn with a thousand stars.

They stood gazing upwards.

As if he had forgotten to, Connor had not relinquished Vivien's hand.

Neither of them spoke.

She thought, childishly, foolishly, Let this moment go on and on...

"Vivien..."

How dreamlike—yet familiar—the touch of his hands, firmly, gently, turning her towards him. After the heaven of stars, where else could her eyes travel but to his face?

For one second only, the hint of reticence, of a question in his gaze. Gone. Presumably, she had answered it.

He leaned towards her, and the rough silk mane of his hair fell over her cheeks, her neck and shoulders. It closed them in a night-dark tent. Then his left hand curved to support the back of her neck, and through her own hair she felt the heat of it on her skin. She saw, to the last instant, his eyes watching her, intent, certain of her now, and kingly, cruel with the impetus of desire.

His mouth was on hers. Her lips parted. His tongue, cool yet burning, tasting of wine and fruit, of night and leaves—of *him*—the essential maleness and power of him...

Vivien felt herself spinning off into the sky itself. Only the irresistible anchoring hand on her neck, the vital protecting arm encircling her, held her safe in a vortex where she rushed, all gravity disposed of.

Her hands slid on his back. Beneath the smoothness of his shirt, smooth muscles, strong enough to control all this, to hold her through the dashing whirlwind of need.

Crushed together, flying through space and constellations, she wanted nothing else.

One kiss ended, resumed, became another. When the second kiss ended, he lifted his head again and looked at her. In his face she saw, by that bright starlight, her own deep hunger mirrored. Never in her life had she wanted any man as she wanted this one. No, not even that one time in the past. She raised herself on tiptoe, drawing herself upwards against him, until every muscle of his chest beneath the shirt pressed into her, and she felt his body against her breasts as if both of them were naked. His response was immediate. His mouth returned to hers. The third kiss lasted far longer.

When again he drew back, however, quietly and in gradual stages, he let her go.

His eyes were blacker now than any night.

"Vivien," he said. That was all.

"Connor," she answered.

They stood looking at each other, connected by some pulsing chain of invisible yet nearly tactile force.

"What now?" he said. He smiled. "In fact, I'm sorry, Vivien, I have to meet Lewis in about an hour, back at the plaster ladders."

These words made no sense to Vivien at all. She nodded mutely.

"There's a private premier tomorrow—an art house-type film *Scavengers* worked on. Quite a decent film, apparently, if it can find the right distributor. Historical—French and English, with supernatural elements. Would that appeal to you?"

"Because if it would, I've got the regulation complimentary tickets. Could be interesting—these private film events sometimes are. And sometimes the movies end up winning at Cannes."

Vivien's heart bounded along as if already en route to the show.

"Yes, I'd really like to see the film."

"Some of the rest of the team are going. Lewis and Angela. His wife. I mention this to reassure you you'll be protected from my lust."

"That's a relief," she said.

"Yes, isn't it, Vivien Gray? But once we're out of the theater, I don't promise anything. Perhaps if you run away the moment we're out the door, I might not catch you. But yes, I think I *would* still catch you."

"And I would always," she murmured, "run very slowly."

He put his hands, lightly now, on her shoulders. He bent to kiss her with a closed, decorous, yet possessive kiss. "I'll find you a taxi."

In the dream, she lay on the bed of rose-colored satin. There were drapes of thinnest gauze that floated round her, drifting in some unseen breeze.

Material and breeze, too, played on her naked body, arousing her in a remote and curious way.

Soon, he would be with her.

His hands would travel her body, forming her—*inventing* her—like the hands of a sculptor working upon her human clay.

She would be anything he wished.

There was no choice. None.

Vivien heard a footstep. She opened her eyes once more. The light shone dimly amber from secret candles or lamps. Through the light, a shadow came. A white shadow.

"No—"

Her body was stone, would not move... or barely.

As she rolled her head in fear, Vivien saw, cast dark as night on the floating curtains and the wall, the shadow-shape of two beings embracing. He—and she.

It seemed already he took her—already she consented.

But maybe it was not love he brought, but retribution—and for a crime of which she was innocent.

I am *not* Emily—

A hand brushed her ribs, her stomach. A fluttering deliciousness...

How dim the light. She could not see anymore, not the shadows, nor whether her lover was formed of flesh—or marble.

She heard his voice.

It was not Connor's voice. And again, she thought what she could not say—*I am not Emily*.

"A fine woman..." said the voice "... a fair woman... a sweet woman..."

Vivien knew she must wake up. And woke.

It was ninety degrees in London. It felt like two hundred.

Connor arrived to collect her in a taxi that evening at six o'clock. He stood there a moment, looking at her. "You're beautiful," he said, and leaning forward, kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She had chosen her one really "good" dress, a sleeveless, scoop-necked glide of pale gray silk, ending just on the knee, that described her figure closely without clinging to it. Her shoes were pale green, high-heeled sandals she had bought in New York, at Ellie's insistence: "When shall I wear *these*?"

"When you are being Vivien," Ellie had enigmatically replied. Vivien also wore the long drop earrings of clear, lime-green glass, found in the market at Camden Lock.

Gradually she realized Connor, too, was wearing a gray silk shirt—of a gray so dark it was almost black. His clothes tonight looked tailored, though remained immaculately casual.

In the taxi they talked decorously about the film that was going to be shown.

"*Age of Aries*—it's set in the Napoleonic period, when France was at war with two-thirds of the world. Other sections run parallel in England. The link is a werewolf theme. Lewis and I glimpsed the actor once in full fur—quite impressive even by day, and even though he was having to eat his lunch through a straw to save his prosthetic snout."

The theater, a private one, lay among the net of roads behind Wardour Street, and the taxi pulled up short at the entry to the cobbled roadway.

An imposing man in full dress-uniform of the Napoleonic era welcomed them in through the door, saluting Connor, bending to Vivien's hand.

Laughing, they went up a narrow stair and into the hospitality suite.

Vivien, startled, stopped in the doorway.

The long room lay under a carpet of scarlet petals, and for a second an image of broken roses chilled her. Then she heard Connor say, "Geranium petals. That would be, I imagine, because the Empress Joséphine introduced geraniums to France... "

Vivien looked at him. "You're very clever."

"I am now." Connor pointed at a suitably curlicued notice on the wall, from which he had read the information about geraniums.

All around were similar snippets of knowledge, and prints dating from the early 1800s, depicting sieges, battles and naval engagements, full of fatly puffing, creamed-potato clouds of cannon smoke.

A glittering chandelier blazed overhead, adding to the heat, while on a central table rose a champagne fountain of crystal glasses waiting to be filled by streams of wine.

"It says, the shape of the champagne glass is modeled on one of Marie Antoinette's flawless breasts," said another voice.

Lewis stood there, beaming, in velvet trousers and a white ruffled shirt, somewhat incongruous with his eyebrow ring and shaven crown.

"We just don't know which one," added a red-haired woman at Lewis's side. She was thin and elegant, and wore a white cotton suit. "Hi, I'm Angie. You must be Vivien." Vivien greeted her. Lewis's wife held out a manicured hand.

Something about Angela made Vivien slightly uneasy. Vivien wasn't sure quite what. Perhaps her harshness with lawns, as reported by Lewis?

As the conversation went on, Angela seemed self-assured and friendly, and yet it was almost as if she had honed her social skills as part of some needful defence—even *attack*. Her eyes met everyone's openly, but otherwise they often scanned the room, as if looking for someone. Perhaps she was.

They took wine from a tray, one of several borne about by young women in the semitransparent or décolleté fashions of 1800s Paris and London.

Vivien noticed that Angie thirstily gulped her wine, then reached out at once for another glass.

"I can't drink red," she said to Vivien. "It gives me headaches. But then, white is so much cooler on a night like this."

"It's murder in London," said Lewis. "Ange reckons it's up to a hundred."

A man in a loose Indian shirt and with an eager, nervous look had engaged Connor in talk. A second man, who had on a joke tuxedo whose back was covered in yellow polka dots, kept soothing the first man and handing him glasses of ginger beer.

"That's the bods who made the film. J.D.'s ulcer is clearly playing up, hence the ginger. The hoped-for distributor hasn't turned up yet," croaked Lewis to Vivien in a stage whisper.

"Hush, Lewis," hissed Angela sharply. "He'll hear you."

"Sorry, ma'am." Lewis smiled at Angela. "My missus," he added to Vivien. "She keeps a strict eye on my manners. One of the reasons I love her so."

"Oh, I see, Lewis," said Angie, "*that's* why you love me." For an instant something waspish hung on the air. Then Angela smoothed it with a "Oh good, that stern man who's just swept in with his assistant—The hoped-for distributor has arrived!"

There was a flurry after this, a kind of dance where everyone kept changing partners—Vivien lost Connor in the crowd, while waiters were arranging champagne bottles. A man dressed as an officer in the army of George IV presently sliced off the corks with a sword.

Exclamations were loud as the corks soared, narrowly missing the chandelier, and a river of bubbling silvery wine flowed delicately down into every breast-shaped glass.

"My, aren't we color-coordinated."

Vivien turned to find Cinnamon at her side with two glasses of champagne.

Vivien looked at her flatly.

Undeterred, of course, Cinnamon announced, "One of these is for Conn. Where is he? Oh, with the distributor... I see he's lost *you*, then. If he wants to, Conn's good at losing women."

Vivien, taken aback, stared at Cinnamon.

"Oops," said Cinnamon, then added, "This second glass is mine by the way. I didn't get it for you. Hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all."

"You don't know much about Connor, do you," Cinnamon asked coyly, around her champagne glass. "The initial *K* doesn't mean anything?"

Vivien felt something—her heart? the floor of her stomach?—drop through her body.

Quietly she said, "Presumably it does to *you*."

"*Me*? Not a chance. Did I say something?"

Vivien thought, I am not going to play this game with you, Cinnamon. Vivien had met Cinnamon's type before. Troublemakers, ready with anything to throw you off balance. Cinnamon fancied Connor and was jealous of Vivien.

Yes, Vivien knew about a K. Funny, humorous K. Who surely no longer had any part in Connor's life?

Cinnamon's feral eyes were brightening, lifting.

Ah, Connor had come back...

Someone she had known through a hundred lifetimes touched Vivien's arm. With a deep, wounding, bewildered joy, she thought, I would know his touch, the sensation of his hands on me—anywhere—among a million others.

Connor gave a glass of champagne to Vivien, having already collected one for himself. "Here's to *Age of Aries*. Oh, Cinnamon, *two* drinks? That's rather greedy, isn't it?"

"One of them's for Ange," invented Cinnamon, shaking earrings that put the chandelier to shame. "We all know, she'll need as much as we can pour down her before we can even wheel her into the movie."

"Cinnamon, use your mouth to drink with."

"*Ooh*, don't be so *cruel* to me, Conn-conn—"

Connor turned his back on her. He led Vivien calmly away through the crowd: "There's someone I want you to meet."

The room behind the bar was also crowded, but gave on a balcony, open to a shimmering red-gold evening packed by roofs and fire escapes. No one else was out there, having given up on the notion of getting any air—there seemed very little.

Connor stood Vivien quietly before him.

"Who is it you want me to meet, Connor?"

"Me."

"Oh. I thought we'd met."

"Did you."

His mouth brushed hers, softly, quickly, and any doubt, however fleeting, perished. She shivered the length of her body in the boiling sunset.

"How do you do, Vivien Gray. I'm sorry," he said, "for that business in there. Scavengers is a kind of family. And families fight."

"It doesn't matter."

A fanfare volleyed across the hospitality suite.

"Our summons. I hope you'll like the film."

She thought, Even if I hate the film, I'll still love every moment.

Chapter 7



"Luckily we're safe now. If we meet any werewolves, we can force these silver bullets down their throats."

"But, Connor, they're made of chocolate."

"*Really*? Better eat them, then, Vivien, do you think?"

"Both?"

They set the two bullets, an example of which had been offered to every person entering the movie theater, side by side on the table.

"Silver foil over candy coating," said Connor. "They look almost real." He gazed up and away into nothingness for a moment. She saw it happen, the shadow rising behind his eyes. "Counterfeit. Funny how something can be a lie and still seem true." Then he pushed the shadow back inside himself. "Would you like some brandy with your coffee?"

Vivien shook her head.

"I will. I need it, after that scene with J.D."

The film, which had been two hours long and rather marvelous, had proved a success with the hoped-for distributor, and J.D. and tuxedoed Ronald Whiting, the film's makers, had broken out more champagne. J.D. had gone round to everyone who had worked in any capacity on the film, wringing their hands over and over. Reaching Connor, J.D. had gone overboard in his praises: "We couldn't have done it without him!"

"We only supplied and organized the expected stuff. For which they paid handsomely, despite a low budget," Connor had protested later.

"Oh, come on, Conn, don't sell us short," said Lewis. "Who ever heard of making a film set during the Napoleonic wars and not showing a single battle? Okay, it was rendered on the personal level, a family saga with a werewolf in the closet—but how we dressed those sets made the thing work."

"You've forgotten a few actors, Lewis. And a director and producer. And the design team."

"Yes, yes, okay—"

"Not to mention camera work that deserves an Oscar."

"Sure, but—"

Cinnamon had interrupted this discussion, which took place on the baking pavement of a now-nocturnal ten-thirty London, milling with rambling crowds. "I'm *hungry*."

"Let's go eat," said Angela.

"Where are we going?" demanded Cinnamon.

"Don't know where *you're* going, Cinn," said Lewis. "To hell on a bicycle?"

"I mean *dinner*, Lew."

"Wherever you like."

"Oh, then—"

"No," said Lewis firmly. "I mean Angela and I are eating at Goya's. And you are not fit to be seen there in that Kleenex of a dress you're wearing. Vivien, though, and just possibly Connor, if he can agree with me for once, would be welcome."

Cinnamon's face set in a mulish rage. So, after all, she *could* be wound up.

Connor said, "Thanks, Lewis, Angela. Vivien and I have a table booked elsewhere."

Vivien shook hands with Lewis, who kissed her on both cheeks. "Watch out for Connor—isn't it full moon tonight? If that long hair of his gets longer, *run!*"

Angela kissed Connor, hugged him with surprising warmth, and shook hands with Vivien without either hug or kiss.

"Terrific to meet you, Vivien." Then, turning to her husband, she said, like a schoolmarm, "Now, we can't leave poor little Cinnamon all on her own. Her dress is all right." And Lewis was saying something very odd that sounded like, "Hey, Ange, being a bit cattish, aren't you?" Perhaps he meant catty...

It all faded behind them as Vivien and Connor ran for the taxi he had hailed.

In the cab, they talked on about the movie. Anecdotes he now told her about the production, particularly one that involved a runaway cannon chasing a herd of cows, ended in laughter.

This second restaurant to which he brought her was quite large, like a luminous cavern lit by pearly spotlights. It stayed open until 2:00 a.m. Mozart and Beethoven sang through speakers.

All through the meal they talked, laughed.

Then, quite suddenly, the meal was over, the plates gone, the glasses dry, the coffeepot emptied. She thought, with an abrupt jolt, as if seeing the cliff's edge before her, *What now?* They were the very words he had said to her in the park behind the church.

For would he leave her now? Was there some new appointment he must keep? And after tonight, anyway—what?

"Vivien, maybe I should take you home."

"What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Nearly a quarter to one."

"And you haven't become a werewolf. How disappointing."

"And your clothes didn't fall off at midnight," he said, "like Cinderella's. Even more disappointing. At least, to me, and most of the men in here."

They stared at each other.

He said, softly, "I want to go back with you, Vivien. I want to be invited into your fascinating little flat, hung with mirrors and paintings. Not for coffee or a drink. I want to take you to bed, Vivien, my Vivien, and make love to you." His eyes were seas of darkness. She swam there, and to help her swim, he held both her hands. "Is that too soon?" he said. "Or am I assuming too much? Tell me. Either."

"Not too soon," she whispered. "Not asking too much. I want all that too."

"*Alors, ma belle,*" he said. He stood up. "*Allez-vous à moi.*"

Now, my lovely one, come you to me...

Her mind translating, the respectful formal French of *vous* not lost on her, Vivien rose in a kind of trance. He had already settled the bill. But she didn't afterwards quite know how they walked from the restaurant. Yet there they were on the pavement, pressed side to side, his arm about her, and from the London night came a taxi, ordered by angels, it seemed, just for them.

The taxi was traveling easily, the night's heavier traffic finished, when Connor's mobile phone sounded.

He took the slender wafer from his jacket, scowling at it.

"I turned this off for the movie." He didn't attempt to answer the call. "Wait, I loaned it to Lewis afterwards. *He* left it on—" The twanging call, which had stopped, began again. "Vivien, sorry. I'd better see what this is."

Vivien sat mutely, lost in him.

How could anything as ordinary as a phone call matter?

"Hi, Lewis. What the hell's up? No. No, she isn't. You'd better ask *her*. Okay." A long gap. "Right. Yes, you're right, I'm the one with the keys. Fine. I'll let you know—Not tonight, then." Connor broke the connection. "Vivien, we need to make a detour."

"What is it?" she asked, as Connor leaned back from redirecting the irked taxi driver, who now spun the cab squealing around on the empty road. "May I know?"

"I think you'd *better* know. Lewis had some business of his own after dinner, it seems. En route he drove past Adelaide's flat."

Vivien sat bolt upright. "What is it?"

"There are lights on, apparently."

"Oh no."

"You didn't leave any lamps switched on, did you?"

"No. *No*, I'm sure I didn't—"

"He asked if you were living there, because he said he had the impression, from a couple of things you said tonight, that you were back in Camden. Look, Vivien, it's probably nothing. Maybe there's some automatic master switch she forgot to tell you about."

"I'm sure there isn't. Addie's—She'd never bother to install anything like that. And I'd have seen it happen when I was there."

"Look. I'm going to stop off for the keys at the place I rent when I'm in London. It's a bare, uncomfortable hole, which is why I haven't asked you back there—good enough for working and sleeping, and that's all. But for now I suggest I drop you off there. While I deal with this."

"You think someone has broken into Addie's flat."

"No, I just think we need to be sure."

"If they have, it's my fault. I should have stayed—that was the whole idea. Oh God, I didn't even get round to calling her. I have to come with you."

Connor looked at her assessingly. She thought he would say no, and she would have to argue.

Instead, after a moment, he nodded. "All right."

It was after two by the time they reached Coronet Square. A pall of London silence and dark hung everywhere, only the fake Victorian street lamps offering their milky glow. In the park, disturbed by the taxi's engine, a bird woke and shrilled harshly.

The driver spoke. "Are you going to be long? I *have* got a home to go to, mate."

Connor handed him a couple of notes. "I'd appreciate it if you'd wait."

Taking the notes, the driver folded his arms resignedly.

"Vivien, maybe stay in the cab."

"No. I feel responsible. I'm coining with you."

"Okay. But I go first."

At the end of the tree-garnished terrace, where no lights otherwise showed, Addie's flat blared out like a lighted Christmas tree.

"If it's a thief, he's charmingly indiscreet," said Connor.

He put a key into the lock. The door swung back to display the fully illuminated hall.

There was no sound. No sense of movement. In the glare of light, nothing else seemed unusual or disturbed.

They advanced slowly, Connor keeping Vivien behind him. The octagonal room ahead was also lit, and the dining room to the left—but the cloakroom and cupboard doors, too, had been opened and their lights turned on.

They edged forward, at first cautious, and entered the main room, where every lamp, plus the overhead bulbs, blazed.

After they had checked there, finding nothing, they moved silently on to the other areas of the apartment.

Everything was the same. Rooms, hallways, bathrooms and cupboards opened and fully lit. And nothing, aside from that, seemed different.

Reaching the kitchen at last, after a painstaking search, they halted in perplexity.

"Nothing's been touched—has it?"

"I don't think so, Connor. Maybe I wouldn't know... little things—but nothing feels different. Only this sense someone was here. I've checked the clothes she left in her wardrobes—they don't look as if they've been touched. But then, I don't know what they were like to start with. All the dust sheets seem to be in place. What about the boxes?"

"They look fine. And the crates." Connor leaned back on a counter in the blindingly white world of the kitchen. "They did open the fridge, but you say it was empty."

"I think they opened the fridge like the cupboards—so the light would come on."

"Yeah. I think you're right, Vivien. Listen, I'm going out to check the statue."

Vivien's heart plummeted like a stone. She had been trying so hard *not* to think of the statue, all this while.

"Could that be what they were after?"

"Possibly. Although going over the garden walls might have been more simple. No one's tried to force the French doors. And look, the conservatory's locked up, and that padlock takes some shifting."

Vivien said nothing.

Connor said, "The obvious solution is they had keys. But there's only this one set we know of. And Adelaide's own, which she'll have with her in France. And no, I don't think she's suddenly come back. I know her schedule. France, then Barcelona. She wouldn't pass that up."

"Connor—"

"What is it?"

Faltering, instead she murmured, "Let's check the statue."

"Not us. This time you stay in here. Leave all the lights on. I've got the flashlight, too. Just in case. Frankly, this looks to me more some sort of imbecilic joke."

"Joke."

He undid the awkward padlock of the conservatory door.

Vivien watched him go out. She thought of the rose, now crumbled and invisible, and the other roses, decapitated in the octagonal room, and the wine drunk. She wanted to follow him along the path, but common sense told her he needed to concentrate out there, not be looking out for her.

She poised on the brink of the garden, between dark and light.

The pleasure of desire and anticipation had drained from her, leaving her cold and trembling.

Connor had vanished into darkness.

And what did the darkness hold? Only something so bizarre as a jokey burglar? Or something far worse...

The garden was so quiet, all she could hear now was her heart. London seemed to have gone away.

And Connor didn't come back. And didn't.

Vivien took two steps forward, her movements about to tilt into a run.

A man's figure came from the tangled lilacs. For a second it was only white—then the flashlight beam speared ahead of him. Connor.

"Hey, Vivien, it's okay. Darling, you're shaking. Come on. We'll go back inside."

"Is it there?"

"The statue? Oh, Patrick's just fine. Still a bit skewed on the plinth, but no worse than before. I didn't know you cared about him so much—" He was half laughing, holding her to him, kissing her hair. "Should I be jealous?" he said. And then a kind of iron stillness seemed to fill him. She felt it through his clothes, his skin. "No," he said softly, "I'm not the jealous type, *ami*."

"Connor?" She raised her head to tell him everything that had already happened here—sinister, uncanny events that must have some rational explanation. But in that instant, she saw his expression. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

But his face seemed itself carved and soulless. His eyes black gems, impenetrable—without life.

"Connor," she said again. "*Connor*."

She felt him take a breath.

The terrible, beautiful mask his face had become slowly grew human again. The eyes, alive once more, stared harshly into hers.

His voice rang cold, searing her with ice. "But that I am forbid, I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood—" Suddenly his head tipped back. Connor bellowed with laughter. Astounded she gazed at him—until he looked down at her again, his face the face she knew. "Sorry, Vivien. And yes, I have acted the ghost of Hamlet's dad. Direct quote."

"I know the quote. You'd have gone on to tell me the tale would knot up my hair like quills on the fretful porpentine."

"Yes, my lovely girl, how could I ever think you wouldn't know every play I've ever acted in, let alone hammed up."

With relief, she was now laughing a little, too, but also shivering. She pressed into the warmth of his body, and his arms held her close. While somewhere, unheeded, the inner voice warned on and on that the dark was not separate from him. It lived *within* him.

What did any of that matter?

His mouth sought hers. He had put the flashlight down on the ground, where its light splashed up at them. Light blazed everywhere, but darkness was *here* in the circle of his arms, and she loved this darkness.

She had lived, she confusedly thought, for these kisses, waiting and waiting for them, and for this pressure of their two bodies one on the other—like the relief from hunger or thirst.

Arousal had fooled her. Rather than leave her, it had only lain in wait.

His tongue moved in her mouth. Her tongue encircled, played with his, a duel of delight. Pure energy coursed down her spine. She was filled with an electric current, as if her blood altered to lightning.

The brick wall of the house pushed roughly into her back. So what.

Connor's mouth had moved from hers, traveled to her neck, melting her flesh—his hands slid over her breasts, and liquid shudders rushed through her. Through both their clothing his own hunger for her, swollen hard against her, signaled its intention impressively. Her legs were weak.

Nothing mattered—it was true—nothing but this.

"Vivien." He spoke hoarsely into her skin. "Listen to me. This flat—Will you mind if—"

"If...?"

"Do we have to wait? I heard that idiot's taxi drive off a minute ago. There's a bed here—the bed you slept in, yes? But not if you don't want to..."

His fingers, skillful, glorious, woke buds of starry sweetness on her breasts. Her belly was molten. Her whole body thrummed like the struck strings of guitar.

"Yes," she said. "Here. Anywhere."

Any where... against this wall... a tree... on the paving in the utter dark...

She didn't care, so long as they possessed each other now. Nothing was real but this.

He paused to lock the conservatory door, but all the while he gripped her against him, kissing her deeply even as he coaxed the key to operate the lock. Then, without apparent effort, he swung her up off the floor and into his arms. He held her in the air, kissing her body through the dress, and her arms and the tops of her breasts that the dress left bare.

They kept every light on. Or forgot every light. In the bedroom, the bed, stripped of everything but its mattress, received their bodies.

Here he peeled the dress from her. Vivien fought the urge to rip the shirt off his back. Together they undid the buttons. He pulled it off and threw it away.

Vivien filled her hands with his upper body, his back, so hard and smoothly made, the evenly tanned skin, the lean athlete's muscles. High in the dark hair that fanned across his chest, her fingers found a narrow ridging scar, but in those moments, it was only one with his intoxicating flesh. His pants and shorts had been added to the heap of clothes slung on the carpet. They lay across Vivien's undergarments... possessively.

Now the central hardness of his body, let free in its arrogant power, became Vivien's plaything, for a while subservient to her stroking fingers, the teasing of her tongue and lips. He lay back, holding her to him, his hands tangling and working in her cascading hair, groaning as she toyed with and savored the promise of his dominance over her.

Ripples of pleasure, that she could clearly feel, pulsed through the flat, hard belly under her hands. His long, sculptured body had tensed to an immeasurable tautness. He was rigid now as any marble, with desire—but each sound of pleasure he gave, every tiny spasm that crossed through his bowstring tension, scored its resonant echo over and over, deep within Vivien's core. With every caress she offered him now, her own trembling, dizzying need increased. Finally, having enslaved him, she herself was helpless, weak and moaning with her longing. Then he drew her away, folded her body closely down again upon his own, her thighs now lying over his, her feet on his ankles, her breasts on his chest, her face on his face. He kissed her with a total and wonderful invasion, sparing no infinitesimal area of her lips or mouth. Immobilized, blended into his body, Vivien lay there, his subject now, *his*.

When he had had his fill, for the moment, of this, he turned her, as if she were light herself as a piece of silk. He pinned her beneath him, lying down on and over her, heavy, remorselessly in charge, then lifted away again, letting her see all she wanted of him, and of the peak of desire to which she had brought him.

This man—breathless she ran her hands around his hips, upward to his ribs—against the light, his face was partly shadowed—a leopard's face with eclipse-dark eyes, and the fine pelt of his hair sketched over his body, and falling like wings of dense black fire from his head, across his back... A black wave of this hair came gliding forward as he dipped his hands, his mouth, to her breasts, fluttering them, scorching them, bringing her such piercing tremors and starts of sensation, she felt she must turn inside out.

She arched upward, catching his hair, his neck. He held her back, shook his head, accepting only her surrender, forcing her to endure once more the exquisite torture of his tongue and lips. She could not have said which of them breathed the fastest or more desperately.

The leopard raised his head. Again he leaned above her, his eyes narrowed and blazing.

"Connor—"

"Now, Vivien?"

She thought she could not speak again—

"I should make you wait," he said. "After the struggle I've had to keep myself on leash since I met you."

But his breathing was still as ragged and rapid as her own. Vivien, confident suddenly in her own powers, stretched herself for him, like a cat. She raised her arms to display for him her breasts, swollen and themselves erect from his kisses. She offered her body like a feast for his starvation.

"Make me wait, then, Connor. If you can."

"Oh, I can make you wait, my love. You and I, I think, we both know how to do that."

Through the golden delirium, a shadow seemed to scud across the light—she let it go, had no time for it. Instead she idled her hand on him, on that carven belly, that arrogant maleness that was both her slave and her master. Connor laughed deep in his throat. He leaned down to her body, and his smolder of hair poured across her stomach like a curtain.

Within the secrecy of her thighs now, points of irresistible and kissing flame. Primal music flowered inside her. She flung out her arms and gripped the sides of the bed to keep herself afloat on this leaping sea of ecstasy.

He lifted away only twice more. The first time, through dazzled, swimming eyes, Vivien watched as he flaunted himself, adeptly dressing himself for her protection—she had never before seen a man perform this necessary act as such an elegant and provocative type of theater.

Then he lay back flat on her, his face against her thighs, going on with the scarcely endurable intimacy of his kisses—while his arms slid up her body, the fingers fastening again, with a madness of tickling sweetness, circling on her breasts.

From far off, Vivien felt herself begin to dissolve—but he had judged her reactions to a hairsbreadth.

There came a surge, a heat of connection and longed-for impact. He caught her to him, his eyes now pitiless and black, finding her core, but this time neither with mouth or fingers, his body at last sheathed within her.

He had filled her, the force and strength of him, an anchor in the tempest.

Together, one creature, they thrust and strove, blinded and calling to each other under the crash of the approaching tidal wave.

Only Connor now could hold her through the cataclysm. Frenzied, her hands slid down his back, tightening on his buttocks, as she crushed herself against and against the shield of his body.

The wave broke. She felt the steel of his control shatter at her singing cries. As all final barriers gave way, in the tumbling agony of joy, she heard his voice join with hers—wordless, a sound like pain—and held him—to protect, to love, to cherish and adore, even if the sky should fall, till death, and beyond.

The room still murmured—inadvisibly but unmistakably—with the aftershocks of fulfilled sexual love. Under her skin, Vivien's body sparkled.

She found she was not afraid that he would now change towards her—not afraid either of shadows or statues or anything at all.

They lay side by side, looking at each other, their hands lightly clasped.

They said nothing. Nothing needed to be said.

After a while, he raised himself on his elbow, leaned over her and kissed her, chastely and intently, almost thoughtfully.

"What shall we do now?" he said.

"Climb Everest?"

"Why not, my sorceress. But why anything so ordinary?"

"True, it's very banal. Perhaps swim the Atlantic."

"Without backup, right? No support vessels."

"Absolutely none."

"Vivien," he said, "you are the most beautiful woman I have ever known. Everything about you, Vivien. I think you are *the* Vivien, Merlin's downfall, the woman who shut him in the crystal cliff, or whatever it was." He lay back. "Thank you for this. Thank you for letting this happen—here. I believe we just performed the perfect exorcism."

She laughed. She didn't care as to the exorcism of *what*.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"Thirsty. Water, and some coffee?"

"Yes. Adelaide's coffee is quite good. She stores it like a squirrel. But we can replace it for her tomorrow."

Tomorrow, Vivien thought. There will be a tomorrow for us.

Naked, they walked together back to the kitchen. There, in the bright white light, they drank bottled water and constructed a wonderful pot of Addie's best roast Havana coffee. They took it back to bed, along with some sheets. But though the bed was made up, they next made the mistake of lying down on it. And soon the wonderful coffee set to cold gravy in the pot.

Chapter 8



Vivien's decision to move back into Addie's flat was dictated mostly by her sense of honor. But, she had to admit, she had taken on board Connor's remark about exorcism. It seemed to her their lovemaking had indeed cleansed and lightened the rooms. In the sunny morning, as they made fresh coffee from Addie's rified store, Vivien half wondered if her anxieties, or her hang-ups from the past, had even caused some kind of poltergeist activity.

There was no trace of the rose in the conservatory. She began to ask herself if she had imagined it. Imagined the other episode... Falling in love, she had heard, was like the onset of a dangerous fever. Even the photo of Emily...

"I wish you wouldn't stay here, Vivien."

"I'll be fine. I'm leaving soon after you do—and then I won't be back until about four. And this man I know, just a casual acquaintance, has promised to join me at six-thirty for iced tea in the garden."

"The man you know also said he ought to get the locks changed here."

She hadn't told him anything about the previous incidents, or her own tentative conclusions. Perhaps even now, she didn't quite trust him enough—No, it wasn't that. She didn't want to appear silly, or fey.

"You're worrying about Adelaide's reaction," he said. "Don't. I'll deal with her."

"Connor, it's just I feel so *guilty*—"

"So you should, you lascivious and greedy doxy."

Which ended the discussion in the way discussions between them, right now, seemed generally to end.

They tore apart from each other at 11:00 a.m. Connor left in a taxi, already late for an appointment. Vivien, after tidying the flat cursorily, left it an hour later, without a backward glance. She hadn't even remembered to glance out into the garden, let alone to enter it.

On the underground, slightly overdressed in last night's silk dress, she thought of Connor. Of his body and his mouth, his hands on her, her hands on him, the rhythm as he moved within her.

Nothing ghostly would get by her now. She was centered in the flesh, no longer a magnet for the supernatural or the merely creepy. She was alive again—alive as she hadn't been for three years.

It was at ten minutes to three that the doorbell sounded in Vivien's flat.

By then her bags, which she hadn't properly unpacked, were fully repacked, easel refolded, all standing ready in the hall. Now in her jeans and T-shirt, she was accumulating, in a sturdy plastic carrier, a selection of food and drink.

She opened the door and was surprised to find Lewis Blake smiling on her threshold. His eyes swerved knowingly over the bags.

"Like a lift, Vivien? Back to Adelaide's—yes?"

Had Connor told Lewis about her return to Addie's?

"Did Connor ask you to? That's kind of you—but it's really okay, Lewis."

"Well, he sort of suggested it. You know Connor. If he wants something, then 'I hear and obey, great chief!' is always best. But really, it's fine, Vivien."

Vivien wasn't displeased. Getting cabs in her area was often awkward, and she hadn't wanted another trip on the tube with all this baggage.

"If you're sure."

"Sure I'm sure."

"How's Angela?" Vivien asked, as, twenty minutes later, Lewis carried her bags downstairs to his vehicle, a ferocious-looking Jeep of some sort.

"Ange? Oh, she's off doing her accountancy."

"She's an accountant?"

"Well, yes. Couldn't you tell?"

"Not really."

"Scavengers has a lot to be grateful to her for. She got Connor's books straight, and they were a mess. I guess she felt she owed him that. But clever lady, my woman."

Vivien no longer felt envy at Lewis's praise of his wife. Oddly, now that she didn't, she thought she detected a slight mockery in his tone—but Lewis was easygoing, it was only his way. Though why Angie owed Connor anything was a mystery.

Once the bags were loaded, Lewis helped Vivien spring up into the Jeep.

They drove off along West Camden Road.

Lewis was Connor's friend—presumably part of that "chosen" family Connor had mentioned. Vivien had liked Lewis from the first. She liked him now... only—

There was something she couldn't put her finger on today. Something slightly brash, and strangely also too hesitant in his manner. Despite the chivalrous lift. Nor did he chat as they drove. But some people preferred silence when they were at the wheel, especially in the heart of London.

Vivien recollected that call he had made to her at Addie's: "*I didn't know whether to tell you or not...*" and then, "*I'd better spill the beans.*" She thought how he had also muttered, "*Two of a kind,*" enraging her by lumping her in with Connor.

How wise Lewis had been.

But what had he been going to say?

That question hadn't ever been answered. Now, did it matter less—or much, much more?

They trundled now fast, now sluggishly, by Kensington Gardens, absorbed an orange afternoon glow, and a Hyde Park green as if newly painted. There were detours to add to the congestion. The Jeep swung easily into and out of them, and down side streets, until, emerging to pass the statue of Eros, they crawled back into south-flowing traffic. Despite the herds of vehicles, only buses—or perhaps tanks—seemed fit to take on the Jeep; it was a mighty beast indeed.

Vivien had tried to enjoy the overground ride. But why was Lewis so edgy?

She scolded herself. Why start worrying now?

Oh, she was probably Connor-starved. After all, she had been five hours without him. Or perhaps Eros, since she had just passed by, had trickily fired one more invisible arrow of love into her breast.

Despite everything, when they reached Coronet Square, Vivien felt an unexpectedly sharp apprehension rise in her. She had thought she was through with all that.

As they went round to the door, Lewis's own jollity seemed repaired.

"Gather it wasn't a burglar or vandal, then, last night?" he said, as she undid the front door with the keys Connor had left in her keeping.

This was the first time Lewis had referred to the incident which he himself had reported.

"No break-in. Just weird."

"Yes, I guess it would be pretty weird."

"How much did Connor tell you?"

"Not much. But I was out last night. Went straight in to Scavengers this morning, and passed Connor heading out again. We hardly spoke—What's up?"

"I can't get the door to open."

"Let me try," said Lewis.

He took the key and jammed it back in the lock. As he did this he pushed at the door with his shoulder. It gave. "Heat," said Lewis, "makes the paint stick."

Vivien realized she hadn't been breathing again—why not? Had she thought *something* had got in, blocked the door against her?

The hallway looked normal: lights off, shafts of sun, the eight-sided room ahead, dining room to the left. No cupboard was open; nothing lay on a table or the floor.

Lewis went by, carrying the bags.

Don't be silly, Vivien. Yes, doors stick in the heat. Sometimes. Just calm down.

Lewis stood in the octagonal space as Vivien opened the French windows for some chance of air.

Green and graceful in its lush July neglect, the garden looked only appealing.

It was getting on for five. Just one and a half hours until Connor arrived.

This morning, this place had seemed innocuous, cleansed and ordinary. But now, the atmosphere had subtly changed. There even appeared to be a scuff mark on one wall—had it always been there?

Stop *being a fool*.

"Thanks, Lewis. That was really helpful. Would you like some tea?"

"I'd rather have a beer, Vivvy."

Vivien didn't let him see her aversion to the abrupt, unwieldy abbreviation of her name.

"Oh yes. I've got some for Connor. They won't be very cold."

"I like 'em hot, Viv. Cold beer—that's a U.S. taste."

Vivien took the bag of groceries along the hall to the kitchen. She hadn't liked the nicknames—never did. Nor the slight superiority in his voice at the comment on "U.S. taste." U.S. taste, Vivien thought, was often first-rate. And who wanted tepid beer, anyway, unless it was genuine real ale, or scrumpy.

As she undid the beer bottle she glanced into the conservatory. All was peaceful.

And down the path, hidden, Patrick Aspen Sinclair would be standing, handsome as a god. Like Eros—just a statue.

Lewis ambled into the kitchen, which suddenly seemed, like that famous Western town, not big enough for both of them.

He took the beer from her, gulped.

Vivien put the kettle on for herself.

"Yucko—do you drink *that*?"

"Mint tea? Oh yes. Or there's lemon and ginger, apple—"

"No more! Please don't tell me. You're worse than Ange. At least she sticks to Ty-phoo."

"I like Ty-phoo as well."

Vivien put the tea bag into the mug and stood studying the kettle, which, of course, through being watched, would take twice as long to boil. Sympathetic magic did exist, everyone knew.

She was realizing that Lewis, though she had partly wanted to detain him to keep her company here, was making her very uncomfortable.

When he touched her bare arm, she nearly jumped across the stove.

"Whoa, lady! Hey, you're nervy today."

"Sorry. I just—"

"Nervy, but never less than attractive."

"Thank you."

"Yes, I'm impressed, Vivvy. You impress me. Conn, too? Well that's okay. I tell you what, forget tea, come and have a drink. There's a great pub just—"

Something cold filled Vivien's solar plexus.

"No, thank you."

"Yes, go on. Loosen up a bit." His hands came unwanted and unplanned for, to the back of her neck. "You're like a rock, here, lady. Is that what Connor does to you? Tightens up your neck like this?" He began to knead her shoulders.

Revulsion shot through her. She moved away from him. "Lewis, I think—"

"What? You don't want to play? But you do. You like me, I'm likable."

"Yes, and you're also married. I've met your wife."

"Angie doesn't mind. She's used to me and my girls."

"I'm not your girl."

"Too hooked on the great god Connor? I tell you, he ain't such a bargain. All right, tell you what—even though you've been flirting and leading me on, I'll let you off. I'll settle for one kiss. How's that?"

Vivien, appalled, asked herself how she hadn't seen this coming.

"I won't kiss you. You'd better leave, Lewis."

"Ah, she's all angry now. Look, babe, that's really all. One kiss. You won't miss it—"

In a horrible parody of Connor in the garden last night, Lewis was backing her against the wall.

Vivien spoke quietly, intensely. "Move away. I mean it. *Move away*." She thought of the kettle, boiling close by.

Lewis hesitated, as if mind-reading the threat. He loomed over her. "Viv, I reckon, whatever else, you should know. Yeah, Connor is pretty, but he is bad news. I should have said all this before, insisted—but you're going to hear me out

now. He hasn't told you what went on here. The woman he lived with in this flat, an actress. Ever hear of Kate Mortimer? Big on TV quite a while. Ever see a scar on his chest?"

Panic slammed through Vivien's body. Somehow she didn't externally respond.

"Well," said Lewis, "put it this way, *he* got the scar, and poor old Kate—Well, Kate just vanished from our lives. Didn't know that, did you. Didn't know the police were very interested for a while in His Lordship Connor Sinclair?"

Vivien stared at Lewis. She couldn't see him through a mist—

The kettle was boiling. Steam filled the kitchen.

Someone spoke from the doorway.

"Get away from her, Lewis."

Lewis lumbered round. "Ho! Connor. Connor saves the day. Again. Just been telling her about Katie."

"I heard you. The front door's that way."

Lewis lurched back to Vivien again, his face all concern. It seemed he was the true actor. "Vivien, I tell you—watch out for yourself."

Connor spun Lewis around as if he were a doll. He slapped Lewis hard across the face, a contemptuous backhanded blow. "Get out."

Even more repulsive than the harassment and the violence was Lewis crumpling there, teary-eyed and cringing. "Sorry, Conn. Sorry. Bit of lunchtime boozing... Never suits me—"

"Get the hell out."

"Maybe I shouldn't drive—"

Connor said nothing. Lewis slunk across the room.

Only then did Connor follow him out.

Distantly, in a while, Vivien heard the front door slam.

She leaned on the counter. She felt sick to her stomach. After a minute, she turned out the kettle.

When Connor walked back in, she raised her eyes and said, almost wildly, "How did you—"

"Get in? Nothing mind-blowing. There was another set of keys all the time." His face, in its tan, was still very pale. He threw the second bunch up in the air, caught them with a jangle. "Someone, it seems, requested an extra set from Adelaide. They've been in the office all the time, cleverly filed in an unmarked drawer. Only, I didn't know till this afternoon."

"Is Lewis all right?"

"Don't tell me you're concerned?"

"He just made an idiot of himself, that's all."

"*Did* he? I thought it was a bit more serious than that."

"I'm trying to be fair. Why are you so angry?"

"Why do you think?"

"I don't mean with Lewis. I mean angry with me."

"Again. Why do you think?"

Vivien straightened. "I don't know," she said coldly. "Perhaps you should tell me. Or is that one more thing you'd prefer to keep to yourself?"

As soon as the words were out she could have bitten off her tongue. Why had she said such a thing to him?

The inner voice scabbled in her brain, hissing: *Because he keeps secrets from you. Because you know, in your innermost heart, you can't trust him, however much you may wish you could.*

Vivien tried to steady her breathing. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"But you did."

"Connor, I didn't know Lewis was going to behave like that... not any of it—"

"No. Anyone else can always tell he will, but little Vivien, so naive, misses all the clues."

"*Connor!* You don't think I encouraged him?"

"Anyone's guess what you did. He plays the field, but he doesn't usually force himself on someone who's unwilling. After all, you called up and asked him for a lift, apparently."

Vivien said, "I didn't. He told me *you'd* suggested that—"

"I hadn't even told him you were going anywhere."

"Then, he must simply have found me in the phone book—I'd said I lived in Camden. He called round and guessed—" Vivien's eyes widened "—yes, he *did*, he *guessed* when he saw the bags—" Connor looked at her. She remembered this look. "Connor," she said, trying to keep a pleading note out of her voice, "why on earth would I be interested in Lewis?"

"I have no idea."

"Stop it."

"I didn't start it. I turned up here early to surprise you. Well, we were all surprised."

Silence filled the kitchen, where the remnants of the steam still hung, wet as tears along the surfaces.

"I suppose," he said, "I have to tell you about Kate."

He didn't now look at her, but through the conservatory glass at the garden. On the paths the shadows of birds rushed over, and were gone. So swiftly things could pass—could love fly away so quickly?

"If you don't want to talk about it, Connor... "

"No, I don't. But it seems, after he's put so much poison about, I have to. My God, I've wondered in the past—It's been him. He can't keep his mouth shut. Painting me in the worst possible light—"

"He said she—vanished."

"In a way she did."

"I don't understand."

"She's dead. She died."

Vivien felt the kitchen, and the world, drop away. She hung in space, void and without words.

"Yes, Vivien. She died, and she died *here*. And it was because of me. Is that enough for you? No? It's all I'll give you."

He turned. He cast the spare keys down on a counter. "I suggest if you stay here tonight, you lock up carefully. No one else will be trying to get in. You're safe. Just don't answer the door. Because it might just be Lewis, and then you might make another mistake."

Chapter 9



After all, it was obvious, wasn't it? Bury her head in the sand as much as she liked—and she *had* liked, hadn't she? Connor Sinclair was not the lover of Vivien's dreams. Maybe only of a woman's nightmares.

He had admitted it. Arrogant, because for some unknown reason, the law hadn't been able to pin anything on him.

Kate Mortimer was an actress Vivien had indeed seen once or twice in a TV drama. A good actress, with shiny blond hair and a delicate, serious face—almost a childish look, but a woman's intense slate-blue eyes.

Kate—*K*.

To C with love from K.

Emily had had an affair with the sculptor, Nevins. With whom had humorous, lighthearted Kate "betrayed" Connor? It wasn't noble, but who knew how it had happened—maybe Connor, moody, sarcastic, difficult, had driven her to seek solace elsewhere.

And Connor, like Patrick, had found out.

As Patrick had killed Emily, Connor had killed Kate.

K for Kate. K for killed.

"Something bad happened to me when I lived here... and to someone else... "

Yes, Connor, that would be quite bad, wouldn't it. To find your lover preferred another man, and then to murder her.

How had he escaped arrest? Presumably there hadn't been enough evidence—it was impossible, without more of the facts, to decide. And why had Vivien never heard of this case? Oh, she didn't bother with newspapers, or news items of this sort. Unworldly Vivien.

Certainly Kate must have tried to defend herself. Somehow she had cut him, there across the upper-right pectoral, with a serrated knife whose purpose was probably to slice bread or fruit...

And so, whatever else she could delay or conceal from herself, Vivien had seen—and felt—that ridged scar, where the jagged knife had gone in, where the subsequent stitches had held the wound together as it healed.

But was it believable? Connor, so handsome, so self-assured, an amusing and kind companion, a wonderful and generous lover—?

Yes. It was believable.

Vivien saw before her his face, as she had first seen it. When he was in that mood, he was cold, cruel, indifferent—dangerous.

Perhaps insane.

She wouldn't cry. There had been enough of that in her past.

She wandered about the apartment for a formless while, picking things up and replacing them distractedly. When she unpacked one of her bags, looking for the extra bottle of water she had shoved in there, she noticed the absence of a shirt she had packed. It was one of the pet shirts she worked in—the black one. She had worn it when she was here that very first morning—

An absurd new panic seized her. She began to throw her belongings out of both bags, searching—terrified by the loss of this piece of cotton.

But it was the loss of Connor, she knew, that she was trying to understand—to refute.

In the end, the shirt still unfound, Vivien sat down on the floor of the eight-sided room. The French windows remained wide open on the garden, where the hot coppery shadows of sunfall were beginning. In here, darkness gathered prematurely in knots of plasterwork above.

Birds called. There seemed, as before, very little other sound. Only the unfamiliar creaking of Addie's walls and floors, like the timbers of an anchored ship.

Vivien put her head in her hands.

You'll get over this.

She knew she wouldn't. She was no good at "getting over" things. The very awareness and intensity that fueled her art worked havoc with her emotions.

And she loved him. She always would love him, even though, now, she must teach herself to despise and fear him.

She tried to visualize him killing Kate Mortimer. But it was an image of shadows. She couldn't make him out—Not Connor. Never him.

And if he *were* this madman, it was as if she still wished she could protect Connor from the very thing he had become—protect him from *himself*.

Perhaps her judgment was wrong.

No. Why else had he engineered the argument with her, walked out and left her? Once he had seen she must know, or that she could soon work it out, he had admitted it to her—and then he hadn't dared remain.

The *Fatal Man*. In some movies, and in books, so very attractive. But heaven help the real-life woman who trusted such a creature.

Kate had done so.

Kate was dead.

Outside, in the hall, the telephone rang. On and on. How many times had it done that? About twenty.

Wearily, at last, Vivien got up and went to answer. She knew it wouldn't be him.

Nor was it. When she lifted the receiver, no one spoke. There was no breathing—no sound at all.

Vivien cut the connection drearily and dialed 1471—but the caller had withheld his or her number.

This was all crazy.

She must get out now and stay out.

She walked back into the octagonal room, to the mess of her scattered clothes. She was so sick of packing, partly unpacking, repacking and lugging them about.

Away down the garden, a flock of birds rose clattering, as if frightened, from the lilacs.

From that spot too, around the corner of the path where the statue was, and hidden from her, came a single metallic *clank*.

Vivien froze.

She hung there, waiting for other noises—for the birds to come back. Neither happened.

It was nothing.

Face it, Vivien, she thought. You're always wrong, aren't you. Dead men don't return to haunt you. It's the live ones you love who turn out to be demons.

She walked straight out of the French doors and down the path, quickly, her fists clenched.

Warmth, and fast-ebbing day, caused her to relax. The mosaic shade of foliage dappled the path. She could smell the roses, the leaves of the lilac trees, the sooty electric backdrop of London. The unseen sun was nearly down. Shadows... Anything could lurk in those bushes, but nothing—*listen, Vivien*—nothing did.

She turned the corner.

The statue stood there, melancholy and glimmering white. Unreadable.

Of course it hadn't moved. Only that one foot still with its toes slightly off the plinth. Otherwise it was unchanged.

But she hated the statue—beautiful Patrick Aspen Sinclair, who shot his wife because his heart was stone. And then shot himself.

That, at least, Connor had failed to do. No suicide for *him*. She thought this bitterly, but tears tore from her eyes. She must learn to hate Connor. When she tried it, her heart—not stone at all—broke.

She stood there on the path below the statue, forcing herself not to cry, and indoors she heard the phone begin to ring again. Somehow the idea of Cinnamon, also jealous and maybe off her head, flashed through Vivien's brain—

Enough of all this! Vivien would pack and run. None of it was her concern, not even Addie's wretched flat.

Stingy Addie, with all her money, who wouldn't pay anyone to look after the property and was "holding out" for a better offer on the place...

As Vivien marched in again through the windows, something caught the fading light.

It must have been ejected from her bag, unnoticed until now. It—they—lay there, shining up at her—a group of eyes...

She bent over them, staring back.

Buttons. All the buttons off her black shirt, the shirt she hadn't been able to find.

The phone stopped ringing again, abruptly and with a sort of hiccup. No bird sang now in the garden. It was in that moment that Vivien heard, loud and clear, and unmistakably *real*, footsteps—pacing to and fro in the empty flat over her head.

Alone in the middle of the room, Vivien stood with her head tilted up, staring at the ceiling, blank between its cornices of plaster adornments, listening, listening.

What was up there?

Every flat in this building was supposed to be vacant. And next door the same—one of Addie's reasons for wanting a flat-sitter.

The footsteps paced slowly, slowly, and with a faint dragging undertone... They didn't sound quite... human.

Ridiculous. Of course they were human. Someone had got in and was illegally squatting in the apartment above—

How had they got in? There had been no signs of a break-in—did they too have keys? For someone at Scavengers had got hold of extra keys to Addie's flat, and used them—cutting the heads from roses, cutting buttons off a shirt...

Vivien shook herself. She crossed to the French doors and shut them quietly, next locking them and shooting home the bolts. So far as she knew, there were no other windows or doors undone in the flat, but she must check.

Whoever was up there, and it *was*—they *were*—human—might also be desperate, and accordingly dangerous.

The sun had gone. The garden beyond the doors plunged all at once into a brownish afterglow that glared like bronze on the edges of things but gave no real light.

Vivien stepped back from the doors abruptly.

Something had changed out there—not the coming of dusk—What was it?

With no warning, down past the windows something hurtled—huge and black and shapeless.

Vivien choked off her own scream. She stood in the grip of shock, staring out into the half-light, straining to see.

Oh God. The thing was rising up, billowing, bouncing against the glass.

Vivien felt a disbelieving wave of relief—false relief—as she realized suddenly the *thing* which had landed just outside was a cluster of balloons. All in the darkest colors, almost black in twilight, they wobbled there, drifting to the windows, bouncing off, turning now, impelled by their own volatility, like a strange alien entity, hobbling off along the garden path into the trees.

Above her, there in the upstairs flat, Vivien heard the weirdest laugh. It was cracked and unctuously *evil*—the perfect product of some 1930s horror movie starring Boris Karloff. Laughable in most situations, here it, like the balloons, was a harbinger of fear. The intention to unnerve—in conjunction with previous events, to *terrify*—was apparent. Which surely indicated madness in the perpetrator.

Vivien swallowed. She wasn't safe here, never had been.

Who was it that menaced her? She thought of Lewis—pushy, sulky and humiliated. Was he violent, too? What might he have done if Connor hadn't shown up when he did? Vivien recalled her own thought of defending herself with the boiling kettle—it demonstrated how alarmed she had been in those moments.

But then, Cinnamon kept coming back into Vivien's mind. Cinnamon fancied Connor, disliked Vivien. Was Cinnamon capable of using those spare keys to enter the flat and vandalize it just enough to make Vivien uncomfortable—roses, buttons, lights, balloons... and the laugh somehow carried that same childish and unstable taint.

After the laugh, silence lay heavy now in the apartment.

Vivien kept glancing up. But the ceiling couldn't tell her anything. She couldn't see through plaster, joists or floorboards.

They, whoever they were, were playing games now, making her wait for the next installment of fear.

Damn this flat. She was out of here.

Vivien grabbed her handbag. She would have to leave the rest. Retreat was the only sensible plan.

She moved quietly, crept out through the door, down the first hall, leaving the lights off though darkness was coming thick and fast. She thought it was the dark that made her awkward with the front door. Then it seemed to her that it was more than that.

The door would not open. Would *not*—

Vivien dispensed with quietness. She pulled and wrenched. Nothing would give. It had stuck again? No. Lewis had freed it up, and Connor had had no trouble coming in—they hadn't even heard him—or leaving. Something had happened to the door since its last closure.

On impulse, Vivien put the key into the lock. Or tried to. The key would not go in.

The keyhole had in some way been blocked up.

She could smell now just the faintest whiff of acetone—some resin or glue.

True fear caught at Vivien and sank in its claws. Whoever was doing this, sane or mad, man or woman, they meant business.

Holding herself in a firm mental grasp, Vivien went over to the phone. She picked up the receiver. She felt little astonishment, only a dull, deadly pang, when there was no dialing tone. She tried depressing the cradle a couple of times. Ritual only. She knew that, as in the best horror movies, the line had been cut. And—just like those helpless heroines of old—she had no mobile phone.

In desperation, Vivien turned then to switch on the lights in the hall. Only, she didn't, because the switches clicked and no light appeared.

Ah, yes. What else? Phone out. Lights out. Trapped by immovable door.

Slowly, softly, Vivien put down her bag. She took off her shoes. Barefoot, she walked back into the octagonal room.

No sound.

Then, the sound.

The voice called, muffled and gentle, almost wheedling, down through the ceiling. "Are you there, girlie? Are you *there*? How do you like it *now*? Is it *nice*? Is it *fun*? Are you *there*?"

And the voice, though distorted and still melodramatically actorish—*hamming*—was a man's.

Chapter 10



lie had told her—either a slip or a boast. It was his fault Kate Mortimer died: "... *because of me.*"

Connor.

And he had been the one to bring her the extra keys, and he had been the one to shut the front door last. Maybe he had shut it in a much more permanent way than was usual...

Vivien stared at her thoughts.

It isn't Connor.

But how can you be sure, Gray? He likes sleeping with you, fine. But now he's told you the truth. Now you're his enemy.

It isn't Connor. It isn't.

You were like this before. Wouldn't believe the other guy dumped you till he rubbed your face in it.

Above the ceiling, a new sound. A scraping and scratching.

It was like squirrels or birds in the roof—but there was no roof above, only the other flat.

This was the noise she had heard here before, that second night, after her first dream of the statue, just before the single rose appeared in the conservatory.

Scratching, like stone fingers.

Impelled by some instinct beyond mere flight, she stood in the eight-sided room, staring up.

It was now so dark, really only the French doors showed, two tree-interrupted oblongs of dim dusk. But her eyes were now dark-adjusted. From the windows, the vaguest light reflected up onto the ceiling.

So she saw it.

The ceiling was moving.

Up among the ornate plasterwork, a section was unhinging and slipping down—a slab of plaster fruits and flowers unfolding, dangling—while a slot of blackness opened behind, a void, as if into some other appalling dimension.

As Vivien stared, *something* came crawling through.

It was pale, shimmering—like a snake. *A rope.*

In dreams, sometimes you can't move. Awake, sometimes you can.

Vivien broke for the French doors, the keys still clutched in her hand. Somehow she shot back the bolts, too. Then she was outside, on the path, among dusk and shadows, where ghostly street lamps sent down the most insubstantial glow.

Vivien slammed the doors shut again, closing the flat. She locked them, her hands jumping from the judder of her heart. All the glass was bulletproof, Addie had said. The *thing*, too, would now have some difficulty breaking out.

She ran down the path, loose pebbles and flints stinging her bare soles. The garden walls were ten feet high, but she had climbed walls and trees as a kid—in jeans it shouldn't be so difficult, particularly given the alternative—

But what *was* the alternative? Vivien didn't know. What she clung to now was her blind faith that none of this was to do with Connor. No matter how the evidence looked.

He might be many things, perhaps, under great emotional duress, even a killer—but not like this. He wasn't mean of spirit.

Something stirred in a shrub, reaching out for her. No—No, only the stranded balloons.

She flung herself round the lilacs, tripping, stumbling on a root.

Before her now, amid massed darkness and against the aperture of the faintly lit London sky, Patrick Aspen Sinclair waited, in his shell of whitest marble. As if for an agreed appointment.

Vivien stopped.

Her instinct, now primitive and raw, warned her of some other element.

Behind her, back down the path, someone was thumping and rattling at the French doors. She heard what sounded like a chair crashing into presumably ungluing glass.

That threat was still escapable. But there... *here* was something else. Some kind of wall—unseen, unfelt, unreal, yet entirely present—barred her way.

"Let me by, Patrick Aspen," Vivien murmured. "You've got enough guilt to deal with. And *I'm not Emily.*"

The breathtaking face—*Connor's* face—stared down at her, cold-eyed, indifferent yet harsh.

Another crash sounded—more liquid, louder—as if, after all, progress was being made on smashing the glass.

To wait was stupid. She ran forward, straight by the statue and through some psychic barrier beyond her ability to understand, aiming for the leap and scramble upwards.

And sheer blackness erupted from the leaves in front of her, burst, flowed and rushed down.

Not balloons. It was hot and solid, animate, growling like a feral dog. It had her, seized her, and she smelled the alcohol on its breath.

Vivien fought. She scratched with her nails, with the keys, and jabbed upward with her knee at her male assailant's thighs and the vulnerable areas directly above and between them. But he was agile; he twisted, and twisted her and twisted her hair into a knot of shrieking pain.

Vivien screamed at the full pitch of her lungs.

"Shut up, you silly cow. Or I'll give you something to shout about." The cliché was horribly effective.

A man with a gruff London accent. A smell of stale tobacco smoke on his clothes. Not Connor. *Not* Connor. Something fell from him, out of a pocket, landed on the dimness of the path at her feet, and broke.

"Look now, you rotten little piece of muck. I haven't got *your* dosh. Cost me over fifty quid, they did. You owe me for that."

Jet-black sunglasses, in three pieces.

Vivien stopped struggling. She knew who this was. They had met before. The cabdriver, the one from Cwick Cabs whom she had turned away that night when Connor was there, gave Vivien's hair another vicious tug. She asked herself dazedly if a lost fare was sufficient grounds for this much assault and battery—and decided it wasn't.

"Well, darling," he said. "Like it better now, do you? I tell you, you've been a very bad girl, Adelaide."

"I'm not Adelaide," she said. The clearness of her own voice was strange to her.

"No? Don't give me that," he said. "I'm gonna have to teach you a bit of a lesson—"

Footsteps—lightly pounding, like the pads of some enormous cat—evolved from nowhere.

She thought the second man must have got himself out of the flat, shattering the French doors despite their bulletproofness. One more lie, one more meanness of Addie's. Now it would cost more than money...

With deathly rationality, Vivien thought, They're going to hurt me, whatever I say or do. For something I haven't done anyway—they think I'm Addie. Not much chance, then. I'll make sure I hurt them back as much as I can—

Then came a cascade of noises, like some huge engine driven right up and over the garden wall. That was where the other one—the second assailant—came from then, where she had planned to escape.

The Cwick Cabs man, trying to keep a firm hold on her, was also turning round. Something, like a ton of bricks, slammed into them both.

Her attacker was slung right over, letting her go as he fell. He smashed down by his broken shades on the path. A leopard was on his back, the great paw rose—Not a leopard. A man.

The thug gave a disapproving grunt as he was dragged over and clubbed in the midsection. Still staggering, Vivien leaned against the trunk of a tree. They were fighting now—the two men—into and out of shadows, roots, one noisy—her first attacker—and the other entirely silent.

It made no sense to her. The second man who had scaled the wall was tall and muscular and had very short black hair. That was all she could make out. Now was the time to get away. Something held her there.

From the depths of the dark, half a white face startlingly rose, as softly brilliant as a polished coin. A cloudy moon had topped the trees, the wall, and by its light Vivien saw Connor Sinclair, his hair tied back and clubbed like the mane of a fighting Roman gladiator, drive his fist home against the cabman's jaw.

Then, the other two came round the corner of the path.

She didn't know them. Both were big. One rubbed his arm ruefully, resentfully, perhaps having bruised it, either climbing down the ceiling rope or when destroying the French doors. He carried a chair leg off one of Addie's chairs. The other toted an unsheathed Buck knife. In the slender moonlight, its short, meaty blade shone with sharpening—and *use?*

Connor had stood up. He was positioned directly beneath the statue. At any other time, the irony of the likeness between them would have melted her heart. Now it was somehow hideous. The statue was stone. *It* couldn't be harmed.

Connor, even now, didn't glance at Vivien. She could see him evaluating the men, the chair leg, the lethal glistening knife. His hands were empty, and his cheek bled.

"All right," said the knife man. "It's stopped being a laugh now."

Oddly, the other one with the bit of chair *did* laugh at this. And Vivien realized that the absurd horror-film cackle she had heard through the ceiling must be natural to him.

The knife man concluded, weightily as a judge, "None of yuse'll do what you're told, will ya? So we'll have to make ya."

Connor shrugged. "You're welcome to try."

Vivien's eyes darted here, there. What could she do to assist—to protect him? She could see his danger. Only that. These two with their weapons, and the other one Connor had felled, who was even now surging up again. Yes, Connor could inflict some damage, but it was three to one. No, three against *two*. The only trouble was, *she* had never been trained to fight.

She hadn't expected it, what they did. Perhaps she should have done. Wild dogs fought in a pack—

Just as it happened, Connor nodded at her, a brusque careless nod. She knew it was his signal to her to run away.

Then the men from the house bounded right past her, pushing her aside. She tried to snatch at them. The knife man cut back at her, a high blow and only with his elbow, but it caught her shoulder and spun her. As she toppled into the left-hand bank of roses, she saw the pack land on Connor—two at the front of him, and one grappling at his arms. She screamed his name as she ripped herself from the talons of the roses, tearing her skin, tearing out her hair, fighting back to him. She heard the first thick blow crack down, saw the flash of the knife.

They had their priorities fixed now. Connor first.

He had given her the chance to get away. Perhaps at the cost of his life. She would never take it.

In that instant, her hands raised, unarmed, she started forward, and a shadow slanted across her. It had nothing to do with trees or cloud, or the figures struggling below the wall. It was the shadow of a tall man swiveling and pivoting, high in the air—

Vivien lifted her head.

The statue of Patrick Aspen reeled on its plinth. Its arms swung upward, stiff and jointless, like those of some mechanical doll or robot, its head veered on its neck. The foot that had skewed kicked stiffly free of the base.

The four fighters had dropped apart. They stood, gaping up at the statue, even the now red-knifed man, even Connor who sagged between them.

Time stopped. One moment stuck for an hour in stasis. Then another moment began—

The statue of Patrick Aspen Sinclair plunged headlong from the plinth. It dropped like a weightless thing of white paper. But where it struck their bodies, and the path below, it detonated into ten million fragments, flinders, splinters, shards, into dust clouds like steam and cannon smoke, into a noise like the end of the world.

Vivien crouched, hearing the noise, which would never be over.

But the noise *was* over. There was no noise at all. A kind of blank. And then she heard the gradual spattering of a thin hail—the final debris falling, settling.

The world had not ended. Only been adjusted.

Connor was now the only man standing. The other three were down, immobilized, two apparently struck by chunks of marble, and unconscious. Connor and Vivien were unique in that, beyond the injuries they had already received, nothing from the falling statue, impossibly, miraculously, had hit either of them. Not a scratch. Not even any grit in the eye.

She heard Connor's voice from far off, and marveled she could ever have mistaken any other voice for his, ever... He was talking into his mobile, asking coolly for the police. She ceased to listen to the words, listening only to his voice. And then she looked down at the path, and saw that something had rolled there, to her feet.

It was the head of the statue. Also impossibly, it, too, had mostly survived the impact. It lay there on the ground, one cheek blunted a little, staring up at her with such composed yet bitter sadness. Even when Connor took her in his arms, she stared on into its face, until her own tears blinded her.

Chapter 11



The hammock swung gently.

Vivien lay back on the cushions, looking up through half-closed eyes at a sky of deep August blue.

Somewhere there was the distant noise of a harvester in the fields, over the walls of the garden. From the old orchard, bees buzzed back and forth, and she could smell flowers... No roses. Not here. She was glad of that. It might take her some while, she thought, to like their perfume again.

Her mind turned back, flipping over its pages like a well-thumbed book. She let it. It was no good always running away from the past.

In the most bewildered way, Vivien hadn't wanted the necessary police to arrive at Addie's flat that July night. Eventually she saw she was irrationally trying to protect Connor from having to deal with them. Because, if they had previously suspected him of murder (she would have sworn, suspected him wrongly), surely this must be for him a grisly ordeal.

But Connor was only straightforward with the police, and they with him. It seemed they, too, must have concluded all former suspicions were unfounded.

When the turmoil of cars, uniforms, flaring lights, rounding up and questions were over, Connor and Vivien, on police advice, sought the casualty department of the nearest hospital. It was Thursday night, and "custom," as an orderly put it, slight; they didn't have to wait too long. Their injuries were minor. Even the knife slash along Connor's upper arm, though colorful, needed only two stitches. The doctor seemed as much concerned at Vivien's rosebush scratches. Filled with tetanus boosters, they left the hospital around 1:00 a.m.

A *non-Cwick* cab took them to Vivien's flat.

On edge, and high with adrenaline, they sat most of the night in her little front room, eating toast and drinking tea. Near sunrise they went to bed, crammed close together on the narrow mattress, not making love but burrowing into each other, despite the heat, like animals in winter.

When Vivien woke at 3:00 p.m. the following afternoon, she lay a long while, looking at Connor's sleeping face. Returning with mugs of coffee, she stroked his hair and kissed his mouth. One, then two coffee-matching black eyes unclosed, and two strong tanned arms—one bandaged—took hold of her.

"An unreasonable argument, an attack by villains, a ride in a police car to an A and E department, plus a night with absolutely no sex. Wow, Vivien. Don't ever say I don't know how to show you a good time."

"The only trouble is, however can we surpass such a wonderful date? Nothing could possibly equal it... could it?"

"Let's see... "

"Oh, you're so bruised, Connor—"

"Then, kiss it better."

Surely by then there were scarcely any restraints on them. They had talked it all through. Almost all. Vivien thought that finally she knew the majority of the facts, everything that was of an ordinary human origin. Most important, she didn't now believe that Connor had murdered Kate Mortimer. Though she had yet to hear Connor's version of events, the profile of psychopath didn't fit him. The evidence was against it now.

Even so, the plot *was* quite unnerving. A group of unscrupulous developers had been buying up part of Coronet Square, and Adelaide Preece, by refusing to shift and holding out for a better deal, had got in the way of their scheme.

The would-be purchasers had then conceived the idea of frightening Addie, an old and traditional method among their kind. But Addie was far too unaware to notice or reflect on any unusual pressure. And by the time the developers put their backup plan of coercion into effect, Addie was in France, and Vivien had been installed instead.

Armed with duplicate keys, three hired thugs let themselves into the flat above, which was already sold and empty. Cutting down through joists and ceiling, removing and replacing a piece from the plasterwork with a hinged facsimile, they had soon gained a way into the lower apartment. Connor had suggested Adelaide was so unobservant, this "building work" might well have gone on when she was off the premises.

The ceiling entry was an ingenious route. It enabled any of the men, whenever they wanted, to enter the lower flat by a rope, later pulled up with help from a companion above. Generally their excursions went undetected—except for the penultimate time, when one of them had evidently kicked the wall in transit, leaving a scuff mark.

The gang would arrive in the flat quietly, normally at night. Their mandate, as the police confirmed, was to stay within certain boundaries, stealing the occasional garment—unnoticed at first by Vivien, since the stolen clothes were Addie's own—removing food from the fridge and wine from the larder racks, also unnoted.

It seemed, too, that in avoiding Addie so scrupulously, they had never *seen* her and so did not grasp that Vivien, when she moved in, was someone else. But when Vivien—Addie, as they thought her—had visitors, of whom one way and another there had been quite a few, the villains cautiously lay low.

They had presently, noting the absence now of a car, put the card of an invented cab company under the phone for her. People sometimes forgot they had accumulated such items, and the appearance of the card wasn't meant to alarm. They hoped she would use it, and so end up in a car with two of them. No doubt threats would then have been offered, though again, probably not going too far. But when the driver arrived to take Vivien (Adelaide) off for this jaunt, Connor had been in the flat. Dismissed, the "taxi driver" had had to go.

The decapitated roses were also their work. And they had kindly finished the wine from bottle and glasses.

"But you frustrated them constantly, Vivien," Connor had said. "You didn't notice so many of the would-be worrying clues they were leaving for you. Not because you're a blockhead like Adelaide, but because the territory wasn't your own. So then, they needed to rev it all up."

Vivien said, "Was the business of switching on all the lights part of that?"

"No. *That* wasn't I'm afraid it was Cinnamon. She's been—how shall I put this?—*seeing* Lewis. When she saw he'd developed much more interest in you—as well as going off to dinner with his wife, Angela, and then to meet one of the wine waitresses from the premier—Cinnamon, who is scared of Angela actually, decided to try a little freak-out of her own on you. She used the spare keys she'd previously got from Addie for Scavengers use—and then, being Cinnamon, forgot to tell me about. She confessed all this to me the next afternoon. That was why I came over directly to Adelaide's flat, to explain about the lights. And there you were with Lewis, exactly as Cinnamon had sniveled you would be."

"You believed *her*?"

"No. I just—It was being there again. I was okay there with you, my darling. But that next day, the kitchen with all that steam... "

"So why did you come back later, just in time to save me so dramatically?"

"I'm an actor, remember. No, I'd regained my sanity. After which I'd called you. At Adelaide's, at Camden. I couldn't get any answer, and then, calling Adelaide's one last time, the line went. No fault. No excuse. I knew it had been cut."

"And you were right."

That last night, offended by Vivien's (Adelaide's) lack of response to terrorization, the versatile villains had opted to step up the campaign. They saw to the phone and the lights. The crowning touch had been the resin gum applied to the front door and keyhole.

"I got to the door and saw the resin—they hadn't made a neat job of it. I didn't waste any more time. The way in over the back gardens is comparatively easy. Remember, I'd lived there. Then I heard your scream. You have wonderful lungs, Vivien, fortunately. I never sprinted so fast in my life."

The villains had gone too far, further than they had been told to go. They had panicked. And so the only option left, out there in the wild garden, was to beat Connor up and "soften" Vivien to a state where neither she, nor Connor, would seek police help.

"They wanted the tenant—you, they thought—out, and the flat free. Otherwise they wouldn't get paid. Being brainless, they never thought any of it through."

During the following days, extra information filtered through from a helpful police superintendent. Vivien, it seemed, was not the only victim of this particular gang. The police thought it unlikely either she or Connor would need to be involved any further.

Almost every question was being answered. But not quite all.

Certain things stayed stubbornly unsolved.

Who had left the first rose in the conservatory—and how? No one, amid all the plethora of wrongdoing, would admit to that. As for the opened book thrown down on the table, the villains—who anyway stridently denied touching anything that might be valuable, such as an expensively bound book—seemed unlikely to have knowledge of the text or its aptness.

Pieces of the puzzle remained undone.

Pieces of both puzzles—the supernatural, if so it was, and the past.

Four days after the events at Addie's, Connor went back and rescued Vivien's stuff for her. By then there was an unobtrusive police presence in Coronet Square, and Connor had called Addie, "rampaging through Barcelona, trampling the Gaudis." He had told her, it seemed, in answer to her complaints, that she was lucky Vivien wasn't going to sue.

That night, too, he told Vivien he was through with Scavengers. "Lousy friends like Lewis betray their friends. It isn't just lousy lovers that do it. He can deal with the movie company as well, the ones who want the statue of poor old shattered Patrick. I hope they make him sweat."

It seemed there was a chance of a film role for Connor. It was to be shot in Italy. "I'd like it. Providing it won't get in the way of us."

He had left acting alone two years ago, for a reason, Connor said. He would tell her. But not here, not in London.

At the thought of confronting the last piece of the real enigma, something made Vivien draw back, half-afraid.

But then he started to tell her about his house in Gloucester. "It's where I live when I'm out of London." A small, four-square stone building, with two acres of garden, a stream and apple orchard, situated among fields, and about one and a half miles outside Fairford. He added very seriously, "The church at Fairford has some of the oldest authentic fifteenth-century glass in England. The first window concerns the temptation of Eve. It involves apples—"

Lunch had been sumptuous. Connor had cooked it. After the strawberries and cream, he vanished into the house to make coffee, and Vivien lay back in the hammock, slowly swinging, watching distant blue sky and green gnarled apple boughs heavy with red fruit.

This was a dream house. And she was safe, safe with her lover, who loved her...

The light *clink* of coffee mugs brought her back.

"You were asleep. You look beautiful when you sleep. But then you wake up and you're even more beautiful. Clever Vivien." He kissed her. "Your mouth is beautiful. And this... and this... and these... "

But then he drew away. It was almost as if someone invisible had pushed him. He sat down on the wooden seat by the tray of coffee, staring at her. Silent.

Vivien's heart knocked against her breast.

"What is it?"

"I think, if you don't mind—I think I'd better tell you now. I mean, about Kate."

Vivien sat up—difficult in the swaying hammock. She said nothing. The strawberries seemed to turn to coils of iron in her stomach. What would he say? Until now—nothing. What had he *done*? She had almost been able to forget.

"I'm sorry. It's the wrong time, probably. Would there ever be a good one? But I need to do this. I need you to know. Oh, Vivien, I loved Kate, but she's gone. I don't want her in the garden here with us, or in the bed with us. I have to put her to rest."

Vivien found air, from somewhere.

"Go on."

"Kate and I—we met four years ago. What I have to say is that she was wonderful. That's all I want to say directly about Kate.

"Right after we got together, there was a lot of luck, suddenly a lot of work, and quite a bit of money. I—We hadn't expected it. I bought the flat in London—Adelaide's flat now—because it was pretty central, and opulent in a way neither of us had ever known. We should have been happy. We were. Then things changed.

"The first thing was the statue. Suddenly a solicitor landed me with it, due to some arrangement my deserting wastrel skunk of a father made. Perhaps he meant well. I just think he'd never found a buyer. But Kate and I liked the statue. To start with. We used to sit in the garden in the evening, reading or learning lines. Kate used to speak to Patrick. Yeah. I remember that.

"But then she started to talk *about* him a lot. She knew the whole thing, plenty of people do—Nevins, Emily, all that. She kept saying, 'Wouldn't it make a fantastic period drama, Connor, you could play Patrick, I could play Emily.' I used to say, 'Just be careful who you're going to cast as Nevins.' She even found a book—Shakespeare—with a picture of Emily in it.

"That July, I got the lead role in *The Crucible*—the role—John Proctor. It was quite an important production, in Leeds. Kate wanted Abigail. She auditioned for it, thought she'd done well. Then they decided she was too old for the part. She was only twenty-six. On a stage that wouldn't have mattered—but they'd made up their minds. We talked it

over. Kate was terrific about it. She said I must go ahead. She'd come down at weekends. We'd make a holiday of it. And she'd be there for the first night."

Connor paused. His face had no expression.

"A girl called Alex took the part of Abigail Williams. She *was* young enough, apparently, about seventeen, eighteen. But also she was an astonishingly good actress. She wasn't better than Kate—and certainly not so polished or skilled. Alex didn't know enough yet, but she had a kind of quality... a letting go. She'd come out on stage, even in rehearsal, in jeans, with her hair tied back in an elastic band—and she was... gone. Abigail was there instead. Alex had some special gift not all of us get.

"Vivien, I liked this girl, and I admired her ability. She was easy to work with, and ready to learn. And yes, she was attractive. But there was nothing else between us, except what's in the play. I need you to believe that, Vivien. Kate never did."

Vivien sat, still as he. She felt cold under the sun. She said nothing, nor did he prompt her.

"Maybe if I'd been on my own, I might have been interested. But I wasn't. And it was Kate I was in love with. Oh, I really was. I'd go crazy every Friday night, knowing she'd be there on Saturday. I used to hate saying goodbye on Monday morning. I kept saying to her, 'Come and stay for longer.' At first she said she couldn't. Then she wouldn't. Then, when she did come, it was different. She'd started to try to trap me—that's how she described it afterwards. To catch me out. I didn't notice how she kept on and on about Patrick and Emily and Nevins. Kate thought Alex and I were having sex. We weren't.

"Perhaps I praised Alex too much. I don't know. I've tried to know. I think for Kate it was being alone in London. No work. No me. In the beginning we'd speak on the telephone every night. Until the calls got weird. That was when she'd decided I was cheating on her, and she was trying to *trap* me. And I was too much of a klutz to realize what was going on. So I'd try to coax her into a better mood, and she'd start lamming into me down the phone—how I didn't care about her, wanted it all ways. Insane stuff. I'd get angry myself. Didn't figure it out. I had a lot on my mind with the play. Didn't think. I was a bloody fool.

"Then it was first night. Actors can be superstitious. Even if I hadn't been—I got a card from Kate, which I'd half expected, even though I was supposed to meet her off the train that day. I opened it—it was a plain postcard, and she'd written slantways across it. I still remember exactly. It said: *Shan't be there, sweetie. Because you don't need me. You've got your glorious Alex. Just like your rotten father had his gambling, and rotten Emily had her Nevins. So enjoy your rotten selves.*

"I called the flat. No one answered. I couldn't let everyone else down. So I thought. I got through that damned play somehow. About 2:00 a.m. I took a train down to London."

Connor stood up. He turned from Vivien and looked out across the orchard to the fields in wavering sunlight. All Vivien wanted was to hold him, shield him from the edge of this awful memory—but she found she could not move.

"When I walked in through the door of the flat, Kate was sitting there in the room with eight sides we'd both liked so much. She hadn't showered or washed her hair—but she'd chopped it short, unevenly. She looked up and grinned at me. 'What kept you?' she said. 'Couldn't drag yourself off her?'

"Then it all came out. All she thought I'd done. I tried so hard to explain it away. You think that if you're not lying, you're going to be believed.

"She wasn't even shouting or being particularly spiteful, the way she'd got over the phone. She just brushed everything I said aside. Then she said, 'Let's have a cup of tea.' I let her go into the kitchen—I was trying to get myself together. Then I realized she'd been gone a long time.

"When I went into the kitchen, it was full of steam. It was like that time with you, when Lewis—Just like that. She was standing there over the teapot, crying, while the water boiled away. I put my arms round her and she threw me off. She made me stand across the room, and she refilled the kettle. I thought she'd scald herself—somehow she didn't. Then we just stood there, the kettle boiled, and she made the tea.

"She said to me 'I made this with love.' I drank the cup down. It was bitter—I didn't think. She stood looking at me, and then she said, 'My love for you comes in a little bottle marked Sleeping Pills. That's what I mixed in the tea. I reckon you've just swallowed about six.'

"I didn't believe her. Then the kitchen went round and I found myself flat on the floor. I blacked out before she used the knife on me. She could have finished me. I don't know what stopped her. It didn't stop her from—"

Connor's voice ended. It was like a theater, one actor alone on the stage. Vivien saw this. She saw she was the single audience. She thought, No, it isn't that.

Then his voice, steady and perfect with its training, resumed. "She swallowed the rest of the pills. By the time I came round, it was too late. The ambulance guys kept telling me that. Kate left a suicide note. Somehow I can't recall what that one said."

Chapter 12



When the doorbell went, Vivien crossed her tiny flat, neither quickly nor slowly, and opened the door. If she had had any feeling left in her, she might have been surprised to see Angela Blake, not the postman, standing there in a smart linen dress.

"Can I come in? Yes, I can. Thank you so much, Vivien." She slid straight by, passing Vivien with the slickness of a thin fish. In the front room Angela halted, waiting for Vivien to join her. "What do you want?"

"To know why you left Connor up in Gloucester." Vivien said, "That's none of your business."

"Yes, it is. But anyway, I've guessed. He told you about Kate, the whole disgusting saga two years ago. And I assume, from your prissy flight back to Camden, you didn't believe him. You thought he drove Kate to what she did by his unfaithfulness, lies and cruelty." Vivien felt something give way inside her. She hadn't let it do so until now. All through the journey back, all through these three days, the phone unplugged, her bed unslept in, she had been steel.

Even now, rationally, she said, "I didn't want to believe that. But he is an *actor*. And... it was a perfect performance."

Angela scowled at her with icy blue eyes. She looked abruptly familiar, as though Vivien had seen her many times in the past. Why confide in her, though?

Vivien heard herself say, softly, "Let's face it, Angela, anyone could say what he said to me. How can I ever know if it's true?"

"Couldn't you just have trusted him—after he told you so much?" Angela seemed angry. Well, she was Connor's friend apparently.

"I trusted someone before. No, it wasn't anything like this. But I know me, I get taken in—"

"For heaven's sake!" Angela, annoyed, was impressive. Hot, then cold once more. She said, "Sit down. I've heard you. Now you'll listen to me."

"Why should I?"

"Because Kate Mortimer was my sister, may the lord forgive my parents. I can prove it. Oh yes, *I* know you, too. I've brought the proper documents with me." She clapped the slim-line bag at her side. "I have them here, and my marriage lines, to show my maiden name of Mortimer. Oh, and something from a private detective Kate hired to investigate Connor. The man couldn't find anything against him. Made no difference to Kate."

"Her... sister?"

"That is what I said. I wish I hadn't been. She was an insecure and untrustworthy kid, who grew into an unbalanced and manipulative woman. And jealousy? Kate *invented* it. She was jealous of everyone. Of me. Of our brother. And worst of all, of every man she ever had. And she used to get back at us. Connor? She *adored* Connor, couldn't wait to get him. Then she got him. Then she started being jealous of him, following her usual timetable. He could never see it then. If he sees it now, he'll never say. He is *loyal*, Connor. Infuriatingly so. Even to Lewis for so long. And to Cinnamon, that idiotic little tramp—"

Astounded, Vivien stared.

"Kate resented every good acting role that Connor landed. That may sound odd, but it's completely true. When he went to Leeds, she said one thing to him and something else to everyone else she knew. She spent hours whining to me about the part she'd been cheated of, and how he'd left her alone with nothing. What she was really saying was, *I want what he has*. It was her only creed. Then she fed herself the idea he was two-timing her. *Connor*. I said he's loyal. And he loved her. That's the worst part. Loved her to bits."

"Then—"

"Then finally she managed to drive herself completely off her own head. Connor was cheating, had shamed her. And all he'd done, Vivien, was love her, and be too blind not to see what she really was. In the end she was mad enough with pills and drink to do what she did. To both of them. But I try to think it was some mangled remaining shred of decency that made her miss with that knife."

"You say—"

"I say Connor is blameless. I can give you a list of people who know all the facts. Who knew *Kate*—years before he did, which is more to the point. But maybe the word of a sister will do. God knows, it's partly why I put up with Lewis. And why he slings it all up at me when he has his little flings. 'Going to go mad like sis?' he says to me. 'Feeling a bit *Katish* today?'"

"I—" said Vivien.

"*You*. You should be ashamed. You left him. But here you are, look at this." And Angela put down on Vivien's lap the documents she had spoken of, all laid out in a folder with insulting neatness.

Vivien didn't look at them. She whispered something.

"What? If you want to know why I came here, it's because I don't enjoy lies. And I care about Connor. He's been hurt enough."

"Actually," Vivien answered, "I just asked if he was still in Gloucester."

"London. Here's the number. Go and call him. Pray that he answers or I may kill you myself."

Vivien went to the phone. She prayed Connor would answer. He did.

Connor's rented London flat was as dire as he had described. There was nothing to look at there but each other, nothing to do there but make love. It was heaven on earth.

Astride her lover, Vivien gazed down into his agonized face.

His bare chest rose and fell with his racer's breathing, skin like matt satin over muscles of bronze. Through the smoke of dark hair, the wicked scar, forgotten. She would erase his pain. Where another woman had harmed him, Vivien would make him whole.

"Wait—" he gasped.

"No."

"Darling, if you don't... I can't promise..."

Vivien smiled, shook her head.

Dominant and determined, she moved on him, drawing him in and in, holding him, taking away his reason.

"You're mine," she said.

His body arched, giving in to her desire and to his own. His hands gripped her. The torrent of his streaming hair, the golden body—bringing him to the summit of delight tipped Vivien also away among the stars.

They fell together back to the world. It wasn't, after all, such a bad place to be.

"Vivien, I brought a book with me from Fairford. I want you to see it."

Into her hands he gave an old, green-cloth-covered volume. She read the faded gilt of the title: *No Way But This: The Shakespearean Tragedy of Emily Rose and Patrick Aspen Sinclair*.

"Connor, I'm not sure I want to read this."

"Just one piece. I've marked the place."

Vivien opened the book slowly. She glanced at the publishing date, which was 1912. Then she turned to where the bookmark had been inserted.

"This is the last letter he wrote—"

"Before he shot himself. I know."

"Then, why—"

"You told me about the rose in the conservatory, and the quote from *Othello*. And the dreams. You told me about the photograph... My God, as if I needed to be told. You—You look so like her, like Emily. The moment you opened the door of the flat that morning... And Kate—She'd written that foul, joking, meaning-it *threat* on the book—how if I met Emily, Kate would be out of it. And Vivien, she *was*. And if you never knew why I behaved the way I did, well, there it is."

"Yes. Connor—"

"An explanation for the supernatural? I've never been that much into psychic stuff—but, *Vivien*. The way the statue moved—fell—three men disabled, you and me without a scratch. Please—read Patrick's last letter."

She read.

"O, Emily, my Rose. My Life. I killed my own self in those moments that I ended your existence. To follow you is nothing. But yet, I dreamed last night I lay unsleeping on my couch, and your ghost came to me, white, like a girl of stone. I knew you had come to summon me away to death and punishment, but I was not afraid. For on the wall, before ever you touched me, sweet, I saw our two shadows, yours and mine, locked in one holy kiss. In this I read a distant forgiveness, and a love reborn. I have damned myself. But God is all merciful, unlike his creation. Centuries I must suffer, and gladly will, but when I have served my time in Hell, I believe that I may find you once more. Our lips will meet again in Paradise."

Vivien raised her head. "It was what I dreamed—the other way round. What does it mean?"

Connor said slowly, "I don't know. Maybe what he says—forgiveness, redress... Maybe love doesn't make him angry anymore. Maybe we set him free."

"I hope so. Forgive me, then, for leaving you when you told me."

"Ah, Vivien. But you never left."

"That's true."

They sat leaning together.

"There is," he said at last, "one further thing you should do. Call your friend Ellie."

"I already have."

"Call her back. Ask her over for a wedding."

"Whose?"

"If I said ours, would that be too soon?"

Vivien looked into his face, his eyes. Further.

"Only if you'd prefer me to ask *you*."

"Ask me."

She knelt down, smiling and naked before him, on one knee.

"Mr. Connor Sinclair, will you do me the great honor of becoming my lawfully wedded husband?"

He drew her up again into his arms. "I accept, Vivien Gray. Now, seal it with a kiss."

Outside the windows, the moon rose on London, white as marble.