

The Orchid House

THE ORCHID HOUSE

A Novel



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For my father, Donald, who inspired me in every way

Siam, Many Moons Past . . .

It is said in Siam that when a man falls in love with a woman—deeply, passionately, irrevocably—he will be capable of doing anything to keep her, please her, to make her value him above all others.

And once there was a Prince of Siam who fell in love this way with a woman of rare beauty. He pursued and won her, but yet, only nights before their wedding, a celebration that would include a nation feasting, dancing, and rejoicing, the Prince felt uneasy.

He knew he must somehow prove his love to her with an act of such heroism and power that it would bind her to him for all time.

He must find something that was as rare and beautiful as she was.

After much thought, he called his three most trusted servants to his side and told them what they must do.

“I’ve heard tales of the Black Orchid that grows in our kingdom, high up in the mountains of the North. I want you to find it for me and bring it here to my palace so I may give it to my Princess on our wedding day. Whichever one of you brings the orchid to me first, I will reward with the kind of treasure that will make you a rich man. The two who fail will not live to see my marriage.”

The hearts of the three men, bowing in front of their Prince, were filled with terror. For they knew they were staring at death. The Black Orchid was a mythical flower. Just like the bejeweled golden dragons that adorned the prows of the royal barges, which would carry their Prince to the temple where he would take his vows to his new Princess, it was the stuff of legend.

That night, all three of the men made their way home to their families and said their good-byes. Yet one of them, lying in the arms of his weeping wife, was cleverer than the others and wished to die less than they did.

By morning, he had hatched a plan. He set off to the floating market, which sold spices, silks . . . and flowers.

There, he used coins to purchase an exquisite orchid of deepest magenta and pink, fulsome with dark, velvety petals. Then he walked with his plant along the narrow klongs of Bangkok until he found the Scribe, sitting among his scrolls in his dark, humid workroom at the back of his shop.

The Scribe had once worked at the palace, which was how the Servant knew him, but his work had been deemed unworthy due to the imperfections in his lettering.

“Sawadee krup, Scribe.” The Servant placed the orchid on the desk. “I have a task for you, and if you help me, I can offer you riches you can only have dreamed of.”

The Scribe, who had been forced to scratch a living since his days at the palace, looked up at the Servant with interest. “And how might that be?”

The Servant indicated the flower. “I wish you to use your skill with ink and color the petals of this orchid black.”

The Scribe frowned as he stared at the Servant, then studied the plant. “Yes, it is possible, but when new flowers grow, they will not be black and you will be discovered.”

“When new flowers grow, you and I will be many miles away, living like the Prince I serve,” answered the Servant.

The Scribe nodded slowly as he thought about it. “Come back to me at nightfall and you will have your Black Orchid.”

The Servant returned home and told his wife to pack their meager belongings, promising that she would be able to buy whatever her heart desired and that he would build her a beautiful palace of her own far, far away.

That night he returned to the Scribe’s shop. And gasped in delight as he saw the Black Orchid sitting on the desk.

He studied the petals and saw that the Scribe had performed an excellent job.

“It is dry,” commented the Scribe, “and the ink will not rub off onto a pair of inquiring fingers. I have tested it myself. You try.”

The Servant did so and saw his fingers were clean of ink.

“But I cannot say how long it will last. Moisture from the plant itself will dampen the ink. And, of course, it must never be subjected to rain.”

“It is good enough,” said the Servant, nodding, picking the plant up. “I am off to the palace. Meet me down by the river at midnight and I will give you your share.”

On the night of the Prince’s wedding to his Princess, and after he had shared his day of joy with his kingdom, he stepped inside their private quarters.

The Princess was standing on the terrace outside, looking down on the Chao Phraya River, which was still alight with the reflections of fireworks set off to celebrate her union to the Prince. He came to stand beside her.

“My only love, I have something for you; something that signifies your uniqueness and perfection.”

He handed her the Black Orchid, set in a pot of solid gold, bedecked with jewels.

The Princess looked down at it, at its black-as-night petals, which seemed to be struggling under the heavy color its species had produced. It looked weary, wilted, and malevolent in its unnatural darkness.

However, she knew what she was holding . . . what it meant and what he had done for her.

“My Prince, it is exquisite! Where did you find it?” she asked.

“I searched the kingdom, high and low. I am assured there is no other, as there is no other of you.” He looked at her, with all the passion he felt alive in his eyes.

She saw the love and stroked his face gently, hoping he knew it was returned by her and always would be.

“Thank you, it is so very beautiful.”

He grasped her hand from his cheek and, as he kissed her fingers, was overcome with a need to possess all of her. This was his wedding night and

he had waited a long time. He took the orchid from her, set it down on the terrace, then took her in his arms and kissed her.

“Come inside, my Princess,” he murmured into her ear.

She left the Black Orchid on the terrace and followed him into their bedchamber.

Just before dawn, the Princess arose from their bed and went outside to greet the first morning of their new life together. She saw from the shallow puddles that it had rained during the night. The new day was stirring into life, the sun still partially hidden by the trees on the other side of the river.

On the terrace stood an orchid of pink and magenta, in the same solid-gold pot that her Prince had presented to her.

She smiled as she touched its petals, now cleansed and healthy from the rain, and so very much more beautiful than the same Black Orchid he had given her the night before. The faintest hint of gray tinged the puddle of water surrounding it.

Finally, understanding everything, she picked it up, smelling its heavenly scent as she mused on what to do: was it better to tell the truth to wound, or a lie to protect?

A few minutes later, she wandered back into the bedchamber and curled herself back into her Prince’s arms.

“My Prince,” she murmured as he awoke, “my Black Orchid has been stolen away from us in the night.”

He sat up abruptly, horrified, ready to call his guards. She calmed him with a smile.

“No, my darling, I believe it was given to us only for one night, the night we became one, when our love blossomed and we became part of nature too. We could not presume to keep something so magical only to us . . . and, besides, it would wilt, then die . . . and I could not bear it.” She took his hand and kissed it. “Let us believe in its power and know that its beauty blessed us on the first night of our lives together.”

The Prince thought for a while. Then, because he loved her with all his heart and because he was so very happy she was now completely his, the Prince did not call his guards.

And as he grew older and their union was successful and blessed with a child conceived on that very night, and many more to follow, he believed for the rest of his life that the mystical Black Orchid had lent them its magic, but was not theirs to keep.

The morning after the Prince's wedding to his Princess, a poor fisherman sat on the banks of the Chao Phraya, a few hundred yards downriver from the royal palace. His line had been empty for the last two hours. He wondered whether the fireworks of the past night have sent the fish to the bottom of the river. He would not get a catch to sell and his large family would go hungry.

As the sun climbed above the trees on the opposite bank to shine its blessed light on the water, he saw something sparkling amid the detritus of green weeds that floated along the river. Leaving his rod, he waded into the water to retrieve it. Grabbing it in his hands before it floated past, he hauled the weed-covered object to the bank.

And when he had removed the weeds, what a sight met his eyes!

The pot was made of solid gold, inset with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies.

His fishing rod forgotten, he stowed the pot inside his basket and set off for the gem market in the city, knowing—with joy in his heart—that his family would never go hungry again.

PART ONE

Winter

I

Norfolk, England

I have the same dream every night. It's as if my life is thrown up into the air and all the pieces are sent down . . . back to front and inside out. All part of my life and yet in the wrong order, the view fragmented.

People say that dreams are important and they tell you something, something that you are hiding from yourself.

I am hiding nothing from myself; I only wish I could.

I go to sleep to forget. To find some peace, because I spend the whole day remembering.

I am not mad. Though recently, I've been thinking a lot about what madness actually is. Many millions of human beings, each one an individual, each with their own DNA profile, their own unique thoughts—their personal perception of the world from inside their heads. And each view is different.

I've come to the conclusion that all we humans can really share is the flesh and bones, the physical matter we were born with. For example, I've been told time and time again that everyone responds differently to grief and that no reaction is wrong. Some people cry for months, years even. They wear black and they mourn. Others seem untouched by their loss. They bury it. They carry on exactly as they had before. As if nothing had happened to them.

I'm not sure what my reaction has been. I haven't cried for months. In fact, I have barely cried at all.

But I haven't forgotten either. I never will.

I can hear someone downstairs. I must get up and pretend I am ready to face the day.



Alicia Howard pulled her Land Rover to the curb. She switched off the engine and walked up the shallow hill to the cottage. Knowing the front door was never locked, she opened it and stepped inside.

Alicia stood in the still-darkened sitting room and shivered. She moved toward the windows and drew back the curtains. Plumping up the cushions on the sofa, she swept up three empty coffee cups and took them into the kitchen.

She walked over to the fridge and opened it. A solitary, half-empty bottle of milk stood in the door. One out-of-date yogurt, some butter, and an aging tomato sat on the shelves. She closed the fridge and inspected the bread bin. As she had suspected, it was empty. Alicia sat down at the table and sighed. She thought of her own warm, well-stocked kitchen, the comforting smell of something cooking in the Aga for supper, the sound of children playing and their sweet, high-pitched laughter . . . the *heart* of her home and her life.

The contrast with this bleak little room was not lost on her. In fact, it was an apt metaphor for her younger sister's current existence: Julia's life, and her heart, were broken.

The sound of footsteps on the creaking wooden staircase told Alicia she was approaching. She watched as her sister appeared at the kitchen door and, as always, was struck by her beauty; while she was blonde and fair-skinned, Julia was dark and exotic. Her thick mane of mahogany hair framed her fine-featured face, the weight she had recently lost only serving to highlight her luminous, almond-shaped, amber eyes and high cheekbones.

Julia was inappropriately dressed for the January weather in one of the only outfits she currently possessed: a red caftan top, gaily embroidered in colorful silks, and a pair of loose, black cotton trousers, hiding the thinness of her legs. Alicia could already see the goose bumps on Julia's bare arms. She stood up from the table and pulled her reticent sister to her in an affectionate hug.

"Darling," she said, "you look freezing. You should go and buy yourself some warmer clothes, or do you want me to bring you over a couple of my sweaters?"

"I'm fine," Julia replied, shrugging her sister off. "Coffee?"

“There’s not much milk, I just looked in your fridge.”

“That’s okay, I’ll have it black.” Julia walked to the sink, filled the kettle, and switched it on.

“So, how have you been?” asked Alicia.

“Fine,” replied Julia, pulling two coffee mugs down from the shelf.

Alicia grimaced. “Fine” was Julia’s stock reply. She used it to swat away probing questions.

“Seen anyone this week?”

“No, not really,” said Julia.

“Darling, are you sure you don’t want to come and stay with us for a while again? I hate thinking of you here by yourself.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve told you, I’m fine,” Julia replied distantly.

Alicia sighed in frustration. “Julia, you don’t look fine. You’ve lost even more weight. Are you eating at all?”

“Of course I am. Do you want coffee or not?”

“No, thanks.”

“*Fine.*” Julia slammed the milk bottle back into the fridge. As she turned round, her amber eyes glistened with anger. “Look, I know you’re only doing this because you care. But, really, Alicia, I’m not one of your children. I *like* being by myself.”

“Nonetheless,” Alicia said brightly, trying to stem her rising impatience, “you’d better go and get your coat. I’m taking you out.”

“Actually, I’ve got plans for today.”

“Then you’d better cancel them. I need your help.”

“How?”

“It’s Dad’s birthday next week, in case you’d forgotten, and I want to buy him a birthday present.”

“And you need my help to do that, Alicia?”

“It’s his sixty-fifth, the day he becomes a pensioner.”

“I’m aware of that. He is my father too.”

Alicia struggled to keep her composure. “There’s a Sale of Contents at Wharton Park at noon today. I thought we might go and see if we could both find something for Dad.” She saw a flicker of interest in Julia’s eyes.

“Wharton Park is being sold?”

“Yes, didn’t you know?”

Julia's shoulders slumped. "No, I didn't. Why is it?"

"I presume it's the usual story: inheritance taxes. I've heard the current owner is selling it to a man with more money than sense. No family can afford to keep up a place like that. And the last Lord Crawford let it fall into a dreadful state of disrepair. Apparently, it requires a fortune to fix up."

"How sad," Julia murmured.

"I know," agreed Alicia, glad to see that at least Julia seemed engaged. "It was a big part of our childhood, especially yours. That's why I thought we should see if we could pick up something from the sale, some kind of keepsake or memento for Dad. It will probably be all the rubbish, with the good stuff going off to Sotheby's, but one never knows."

Surprisingly, without need of further persuasion, Julia nodded. "Okay, I'll go and get my coat."

Five minutes later, Alicia was maneuvering the car along the narrow high street of the pretty coastal village of Blakeney. Turning left, she headed east for the fifteen-minute journey to Wharton Park.

"Wharton Park . . . ?" muttered Julia to herself.

It was her most vivid childhood memory, visiting Grandfather Bill in his hothouse: the overpowering smell of the exotic flowers he grew in there, and his patience as he explained their genus and where in the world they had originally come from. His own father, and his father's father before him, had all worked as gardeners to the Crawford family, who owned Wharton Park, a vast estate comprising a thousand acres of fertile farmland.

Her grandparents had lived in a comfortable cottage in a cozy, bustling corner of the estate, surrounded by the many other staff who serviced the land, the house, and the Crawford family itself. Julia and Alicia's mother, Jasmine, had been born and brought up there in the cottage.

Elsie, Julia's grandmother, had been exactly as a grandmother should be, if slightly eccentric. Her welcoming arms were open, and something delicious was always cooking in the oven for supper.

Whenever Julia thought back on the time she had spent at Wharton Park, she remembered the blue sky and the lush colors of the flowers

blossoming under the summer sun. And Wharton Park had once been famous for its collection of orchids. It was strange to think that the small, fragile flowers had originally grown in tropical climes, and yet there they had been, flourishing in the cool Northern Hemisphere, amid the flatlands of Norfolk.

When she was a child, Julia had spent all year looking forward to her summer visits to Wharton Park. The tranquility and warmth of the hothouses—sitting snugly in the corner of the kitchen garden, sheltered against the cruel winds that blew in from the North Sea during the winter—stayed in her memory all year. This, combined with the domestic certainty of her grandparents' cottage, had made it a place of peace for her. At Wharton Park, nothing changed. Alarms and timetables weren't in charge, it was nature dictating the rhythm.

She could still remember, in a corner of the hothouse, her grandfather's old Bakelite radio playing classical music from dawn until dusk.

"Flowers love music," Grandfather Bill would tell her as he tended his precious plants. Julia would sit on a stool in the corner by the radio and watch him, listening to the music. She was learning to play the piano and had a natural ability for it. An ancient upright piano was in the small sitting room of the cottage. Often, after supper, she would be asked to play. Her grandparents had watched appreciatively, and with awe, as Julia's delicate young fingers sped across the keys.

"You have a God-given gift, Julia," Grandfather Bill had said one night, his eyes misty as he smiled at her. "Never waste it, will you?"

The day on which she turned eleven, Grandfather Bill had presented her with her very own orchid.

"This is especially for you, Julia. Its name is *Aerides odoratum*, which means 'children of the air.'"

Julia studied the delicate ivory and pink petals of the flower sitting in its pot. They felt velvety beneath her touch.

"Where does this one come from, Grandfather Bill?" she had asked.

“From the Orient, in the jungles of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand.”

“Oh. What kind of music do you think it likes?”

“It seems particularly partial to a touch of Mozart,” chuckled her grandfather. “Or if it looks like it’s wilting, perhaps you could try some Chopin!”

Julia had nurtured both her orchid and her gift for the piano, sitting in the drawing room of her drafty Victorian home on the outskirts of Norwich—she had played to it, and it blossomed for her time and again.

And she had dreamed of the exotic place from which her orchid had come. No longer was she in a suburban drawing room, but in the vast jungles of the Far East . . . the sounds of geckos, birds, and the intoxicating perfumes of the orchids growing all over the trees and in the undergrowth beneath.

One day she knew she would go to see it for herself. But, for now, her grandfather’s colorful description of Far-Away Lands fired her imagination and her playing.

When she was fourteen, Grandfather Bill had died. Julia remembered the feeling of loss vividly. He and the hothouses had been the one certainty in her young and already difficult life—a wise, kind influence with a listening ear—perhaps more of a father to her than her own had been. At eighteen, she had won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. Grandmother Elsie had moved to live in Southwold with her sister for company, and Julia had visited Wharton Park no more.

Now here she was, at thirty-one, returning to it. As Alicia chattered about her four children and their various activities, Julia relived the anticipation she had felt every time she’d driven in her parents’ car down this road; staring out of the rear window, waiting for the Gate Lodge to appear as they reached the familiar bend in the road.

“There’s the turning!” Julia said, as Alicia almost overshot it.

“Gosh, yes, you’re right. It’s such a long time since I’ve been here, I’d forgotten.”

As they turned into the drive, Alicia glanced at her sister. She could see a glimmer of expectation in Julia’s eyes.

“You always loved it here, didn’t you?” Alicia said softly.

“Yes, didn’t you?”

“To be honest, I was bored when we came to stay. I couldn’t wait to get back to town to see all my friends.”

“You always were more of a city girl,” offered Julia.

“Yes, and look at me now: thirty-four, with a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, a brood of children, three cats, two dogs, and an Aga. What the hell happened to the bright lights?” Alicia smiled ironically.

“You fell in love and had a family.”

“And it was *you* who got the bright lights,” Alicia added, without malice.

“Yes, once . . .” Julia’s voice trailed off as they drove down the drive. “There’s the house. It looks exactly the same.”

Alicia glanced at the building in front of her. “Actually, I think it looks rather better. I must have forgotten just how beautiful it is.”

“I’ve never forgotten,” murmured Julia.

They followed the line of cars slowly down the drive, both lost in their own thoughts. Wharton Park had been built in classic Georgian style for the nephew of the first prime minister of Great Britain, although he had died before the house was completed. Built almost entirely in Aislaby stone, the house had mellowed into a soft yellow over its three-hundred-year existence.

Its seven bays and double staircases, which rose in front of the basement to the piano nobile, forming a raised terrace overlooking the park at the back, added an air of French glamour. With a domed tower on each corner, its vast portico supported by four giant Ionic columns, a crumbling statue of Britannia perched jauntily atop the apex, it had a majestic but rather eccentric air.

Wharton Park was not large enough to be termed a stately home. It did not have the perfect architecture to complement it either, having had a couple of odd additions from later generations of Crawfords,

which had compromised its purity. But for that very reason, neither did it have the daunting starkness associated with other great houses of the period.

“This is where we used to turn left,” indicated Julia, remembering the track she had taken around the lake to reach her grandparents’ cottage on the edge of the estate.

“After the sale, would you like to go to their old cottage and take a look at it?” asked Alicia.

Julia shrugged. “Let’s see, shall we?”

Yellow-coated stewards were marshaling the cars into parking spaces.

“Word must have got round,” commented Alicia as she swung the car into the space indicated and brought it to a halt. She turned to her sister and put her hand on her knee. “Ready to go?”

Julia felt dazed, suffused with so many memories. As she stepped out of the car and walked toward the house, even the smells were familiar: wet grass, freshly cut, and the faintest hint of a scent that she now knew to be jasmine in the borders that lined the front lawn. They followed the crowd of people slowly up the steps and inside the main entrance.

2

I am eleven again. I'm standing in an enormous room that I know is really an entrance hall, but looks to me like a cathedral. The ceiling is high above me, and as I study it, I see it is painted with clouds and fat little angels with no clothes on. This fascinates me and I'm staring so hard at them I don't notice that there's someone standing on the stairs watching me.

"Can I help you, young lady?"

I'm so startled that I nearly drop the precious pot that's in my hands and is the reason I'm here in the first place. My grandfather has sent me especially to deliver it to Lady Crawford. I'm not happy because I'm scared of her. When I've seen her from afar, she looks old and thin and cross. But Grandfather Bill has insisted.

"She's very sad, Julia. The orchid might cheer her up. Now run along, there's a good girl."

The person on the stairs is definitely not Lady Crawford. It's a young man, maybe four or five years older than I am, with lots of curly, chestnut hair worn, I think, far too long for a boy. He's very tall, but painfully thin; his arms look like sticks, hanging out of his rolled-up shirtsleeves.

"Yes, I'm looking for Lady Crawford. I brought this for her from the bothouses," I manage to stammer.

He saunters down the rest of the steps and comes to stand opposite me, his hands outstretched.

"I'll take it to her, if you'd like."

"My grandfather said I was to give it straight to her," I answer nervously.

"Unfortunately, she's having a rest just now. She's not terribly well, you know."

"I didn't know," I reply. I want to ask who he is, but I don't dare. He must be reading my mind, for he says:

"Lady Crawford is my relation, so I think you can trust me, don't you?"

"Yes, here." I proffer the orchid, secretly relieved I don't have to deliver it myself. "Can you tell Lady Crawford that my grandfather says

this is a new”—I struggle to remember the word—“hybrid, and just flowered?”

“Yes, I will.”

I stand there, not quite sure what to do next. Neither does he.

Finally he says, “So, what’s your name?”

“Julia Forrester. I’m Mr. Stafford’s granddaughter.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Of course you are. Well, I’m Christopher Crawford. Kit, to my friends.”

He extends the hand that isn’t holding the plant and I shake it.

“Good to meet you, Julia. I hear that you play the piano rather well.”

I blush. “I don’t think so.”

“No need to be modest,” he chides me. “I heard Cook and your grandmother talking about you this morning. Follow me.”

He’s still holding my hand from shaking it, and suddenly he pulls me with it, across the hall, and through a series of vast rooms filled with the kind of formal furniture that makes the house feel as if it is a life-size dollhouse. I can’t help wondering where they sit and watch television in the evenings. Finally, we enter a room that is bathed in golden light, coming through the three floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the terrace leading to the gardens. Large sofas are arranged around a huge marble fireplace, and in the far corner, in front of one of the windows, is a grand piano. Kit Crawford leads me to it, pulls out the stool, and pushes me down.

“Come on then. Let’s hear you play something.”

He pulls up the lid and a shower of dust mites fly into the air, sparkling in the afternoon sun.

“Are . . . are you sure I’m allowed?” I ask.

“Aunt Crawford sleeps at the other end of the house. She’s not likely to hear. Come on!” He looks at me expectantly.

Tentatively, I place my hand above the keys. They are unlike any that my fingers have ever touched. I don’t know it then, but they are finished in the finest ivory and I’m playing a 150-year-old Bechstein piano. I strike a note lightly and yet the echo of it resonates through the strings, amplifying the sound.

He’s standing waiting by me, arms crossed. I realize I have no choice. I begin to play “Clair de Lune,” a piece I’ve only recently learned. It’s my current favorite and I’ve spent hours practicing it. As the notes appear under my fingers, I forget about Kit. I’m carried away by the beautiful sound this wonderful instrument makes. I go, as I always do, to another

place far, far away from here. The sun shines across my fingers, it warms my face with its glow. I play perhaps better than I ever have and am surprised when my fingers touch the last keys and the piece is ended.

I hear the sound of clapping somewhere in the background and I bring myself back to this enormous room and to Kit, who is standing with a look of awe on his face.

“Wow!” he says. “That was brilliant!”

“Thank you.”

“You’re so young. Your fingers are so small, how can they move across the keys so quickly?”

“I don’t know, they just . . . do.”

“You know, Aunt Cranford’s husband, Harry, Lord Cranford, was apparently an accomplished pianist?”

“Oh, no, I . . . I didn’t.”

“Well, he was. This was his piano. He died when I was a baby so I never heard him play. Can you play something else?”

This time he looks genuinely enthusiastic.

“I . . . I really think I should be going.”

“Just one more, please?”

“All right.”

And I begin to play “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.” Once again, I am lost in the music and I’m halfway through when I suddenly hear a voice, shouting.

“STOP! Stop that now!”

I do as I’m asked and look across to the entrance of the drawing room. A tall, thin, gray-haired woman is standing there. The look on her face is one of fury. My heart begins to beat fast.

Kit goes over to her. “Sorry, Aunt Cranford, it was me that asked Julia to play. You were asleep so I couldn’t ask your permission. Did we wake you?”

A pair of cold eyes stare back at him. “No. You did not wake me. But, Kit, that is hardly the point. Surely you know I forbid anyone to play that piano?”

“I’m truly sorry, Aunt Cranford. I didn’t realize. But Julia is so wonderful. She’s only eleven years old, yet she plays like a concert pianist already.”

“Enough!” snaps his aunt.

*Kit hangs his head and beckons me to follow him.
 "Sorry again," he says, as I skulk out behind him.
 As I pass Lady Cranford, she stops me. "Are you Stafford's
 granddaughter?" Her cold, blue, gimlet eyes bore into me.
 "Yes, Lady Cranford."
 I see her eyes soften slightly and it looks almost as if she might cry.
 She nods and appears to be struggling to speak. "I . . . was sorry to hear
 about your mother."
 Kit interrupts, sensing the tension. "Julia brought you an orchid. It's a
 new one from her grandfather's bothouse, isn't it, Julia?" he encourages.
 "Yes," I say, also trying hard not to cry. "I hope you like it."
 She nods. "I'm sure I will. Tell your grandfather I said thank you."*

Alicia was patiently waiting in the line for a sales catalog.

"Did you ever come into this house when you were a child?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Julia, "once."

Alicia indicated the ceiling. "Rather tacky, those cherubim, aren't they?"

"I've always rather liked them."

"Funny old house this," Alicia continued, taking the proffered catalog and following the crowd through the hall, along the corridor, and into a large, oak-paneled room where all the sales items were on display. She handed the catalog to Julia. "Sad it's being sold, really. It's been the Crawford family seat for over three hundred years," she mused. "End of an era and all that. Shall we wander?" Alicia took Julia's elbow and steered her toward an elegant but cracked Grecian urn—from the telltale moss lines around the inside edge, obviously used as a planter for summer flowers. "What about this for Dad?"

Julia shrugged. "Maybe. It's up to you."

Sensing Julia's fading interest, and her own irritation, Alicia said, "Well, why don't we separate, and that way we can cover what's available faster? You start this side, I'll start that, and we'll meet in ten minutes by the door."

Julia nodded and watched as Alicia made her way over to the other side of the room. Unused to crowds recently, Julia felt uncomfortably claustrophobic. She made her way toward the emptier end of the

room. In a corner was a trestle table, with a woman standing behind it. Julia approached it because she had nowhere else to go.

“These items aren’t included in the actual sale,” said the woman. “It’s general bric-a-brac, really. You can buy them now, they’re all individually priced.”

Julia picked up a dog-eared copy of *The Children’s Own Wonder Book*. She opened it and saw the date inside was 1926.

To Hugo, from Grandmother, with love.

There was also a 1932 copy of *Wilfred’s Annual* and a copy of *Mari-gold Garden* by Kate Greenaway.

These books had a poignancy: over eighty years of Crawford children reading the stories inside as they grew up in the nursery somewhere above her. Julia decided to buy them for herself, preserve them for the lost children of Wharton Park.

A battered cardboard box full of prints was to the left of the table. Julia leafed through them listlessly. Most were pen-and-ink lithographs, depicting the Fire of London, old ships, and ugly houses. In among them was a worn brown envelope. She removed it from the box.

Inside the envelope was a set of watercolor paintings, each one depicting a different type of orchid.

The cream vellum on which they were painted was spotted with brown marks, and she surmised that the paintings were by an enthusiastic amateur, rather than a professional. Nevertheless, she thought, framed and mounted, they might look rather special. Each one had the Latin name of the orchid penciled in below the stem.

“How much are these?” she asked the woman.

The woman took the envelope from her. “I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be a price marked on them.”

“Well, what if I gave you twenty pounds, five pounds for each of them?”

The woman looked at the tatty paintings. She shrugged. “I think we should say ten pounds for the lot, don’t you?”

“Thank you.” Julia took the money out of her purse, paid, then walked back through the room to rendezvous with Alicia, who was already waiting for her.

Alicia’s eyes alighted on the envelope and the books under Julia’s arm. “Find something?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Let me see?”

“I’ll show you when we get home.”

“Okay,” agreed Alicia. “I’m going to bid for the urn we saw earlier. It’s Lot Number Six, so hopefully we shouldn’t be here too long. The auction’s starting any minute.”

Julia nodded. “I’ll take a walk while I’m waiting for you. I need some fresh air.”

“Right.” Alicia dug in her handbag for her car keys and gave them to Julia. “Just in case I’m delayed. Otherwise, I’ll see you by the front door in half an hour. You might have to help me carry my trophy down the steps.”

“Thanks.” Julia took the keys. “See you later.”

She wandered out of the room, along the corridor, and into the entrance hall, which was now deserted. She stood and looked up at the cherubim on the ceiling. She glanced at the door that led toward the drawing room, housing the grand piano on which she had once played. It was standing open on the other side of the hall.

On a whim, she walked toward it, hesitated for a few seconds, then stepped through it. The vast room was shrouded in dim January light. The unused furniture was still exactly as she remembered. She walked on through other rooms until eventually she arrived at the door to the drawing room.

No sun was shining today through the long windows. The room was bitterly cold. She walked past the fireplace and the sofas, an unpleasant smell of mildew emanating from them, and toward the grand piano.

Only then did she notice the tall figure, standing with his back to her, staring out of the window beyond the piano. Half of him was shrouded by the damask curtain—the outer fabric of which was now so delicate it was reminiscent of innards through paper-thin skin.

She froze where she stood, knowing immediately that she recognized him. He didn’t move; standing, statuelike, in repose. Obviously he hadn’t heard her.

Understanding she was trespassing on a moment of private contemplation, Julia turned round and attempted to leave the room as quietly as she could.

She had reached the door when she heard him:

“Can I help you?”

She turned back. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be in here.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” He stared at her. Then his eyebrows furrowed into a frown. “Don’t I know you?”

A good thirty feet of drawing room was between them, but Julia remembered the thick, curly, chestnut hair, the slim body—which had filled out and grown by at least a foot since she had last seen it—and the same crooked mouth.

“Yes. I . . . that is, we met many years ago,” Julia stuttered. “I apologize. I’ll go.”

“Well, well, well.” His face melted into a smile of recognition. “It’s little Julia, the gardener’s granddaughter, now world-renowned concert pianist. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes, I’m Julia”—she nodded—“though I’m not sure about the ‘world-renowned’ bit . . .”

Kit raised his eyebrows. “Don’t be modest, Julia. I’ve a couple of your recordings. You’re famous! A ‘celebrity’! What on earth are you doing here? You must spend most of your life living in five-star hotel suites across the globe.”

Julia realized he obviously hadn’t heard.

“I’m . . . visiting my father,” Julia lied.

“Well, we are honored.” Kit feigned a half bow. “You’re my claim to fame. I tell everyone that I was one of the first ever to hear you play ‘Clair de Lune.’ Rather fitting we should meet back in this room, at a time when this house is about to be sold.”

“Yes. I’m sorry about that,” she answered stiffly.

“Don’t be. It’s all for the best. Aunt Crawford let it go to rack and ruin while she was living here, and my father hadn’t the money or the interest to sort it out. To be honest, I’m lucky I’ve found someone prepared to take it off my hands. It’s going to cost a fortune to restore.”

“The Wharton Park estate is yours, then?”

“Yes, for my sins, I’m afraid so. With Aunt Crawford and then my father dying recently, I’m next in line. The trouble is, all I inherit is a shedload of debts and a shitload of hassle. Anyway”—he shrugged—“sorry to be so negative.”

“I’m sure there must be a part of you that’s sad?”

They were still standing thirty feet apart. Kit dug his hands into his

trouser pockets and walked over to her. “To be frank, on a personal level, no. I only came here for holidays when I was a kid so there’s no big emotional tie to the place. And playing lord of the manor isn’t really my thing. However, being the one who’s had to make the decision to sell three hundred years of family history has admittedly given me a few sleepless nights. But what choice do I have? The estate’s in serious debt and I have to sell it to pay the creditors off.”

“Are you selling the whole lot?”

Kit swept a hand through his unruly hair and sighed. “I’ve managed to negotiate the old stable quadrangle where some of the workers used to live, plus a few meager acres. There’s a separate path out to the road which I can make usable, so I won’t have to use the main entrance to get in and out. My new home is a rather shabby cottage that has no central heating and a bad damp problem.” He smiled. “But it’s better than nothing and I am renovating it. I think it’ll be okay when it’s finished.”

“That’s where my grandparents lived and my mother was born,” Julia said. “I never saw the cottages in the Quad as shabby or noticed the damp, but I suppose they were, really.”

Kit reddened. “Sorry to be patronizing about them. Actually, the reason I fought to keep the Quad out of the sale is because I think it’s a very beautiful spot. Really,” he emphasized, “I’m looking forward to living there. And hoping that, when I’ve finished renovating the rest of the barns and cottages around me, I can rent them out to provide some income.”

“Don’t you have anywhere else to live?”

“Like you, I’ve been abroad for a long time. I never quite got round to sorting out a home, somehow . . .” Kit’s voice trailed off and he averted his gaze to the view out the window. “And this neck of the woods doesn’t hold particularly good memories for me. I spent some pretty miserable summers here during my childhood.”

“I used to love it here at Wharton Park.”

“Well, it’s a fine old house, and the setting is magnificent,” Kit agreed with reticence.

Julia studied him. She could see he had a deep tan but looked drawn and exhausted. Not knowing what else to say, she replied, “Well, I hope you’ll be happy in your new home. I’d better be going.”

“And I suppose I must come and lurk at the back of the salesroom.”

They walked side by side through the darkened rooms toward the hall.

“So,” asked Kit companionably, “where are you living these days? Some vast penthouse overlooking Central Park, I shouldn’t doubt.”

“Hardly. I’m staying in Blakeney, in a small cottage I bought years ago, when everyone told me I had to put some money into property. I’ve been renting it out for the past eight years to vacationers.”

“Surely you must have another home somewhere else?” Kit frowned. “Celebrities don’t appear on the pages of glossy mags sitting in damp cottages in North Norfolk.”

“I don’t do ‘glossy mags,’” Julia countered defensively, “and it’s a . . . long story,” she added, realizing they were approaching the main entrance hall. She needed to ask an urgent question. “Are the hot-houses still here?”

“I don’t know.” Kit shrugged. “To be honest, I haven’t been into the kitchen garden yet. There’s been rather a lot to do elsewhere.”

As they entered the hall, Julia could see her sister standing by the door with her urn, looking impatient.

“There you are, Kit!” A large woman with chestnut hair and deep brown eyes just like his accosted them. “Where have you been? The auctioneer wants an urgent word with you about a vase. He thinks it might be Ming dynasty or some such, and you should pull it out of the sale and have it valued by Sotheby’s.”

Julia saw a hint of irritation appear on Kit’s face. “Julia, meet Bella Harper, my sister.”

Bella’s eyes swept Julia up and down without much interest. “Hi,” she said absently as she tucked her arm through Kit’s. “You need to speak to the auctioneer now,” she told him firmly, and pulled him off across the hall.

He turned back and gave Julia a fleeting smile. “Good to see you,” he called, and was gone.

Julia followed in his wake and walked across the hall to Alicia, who was staring at the departing figures.

“How do you know *her*?” Alicia asked curiously.

“Who?” questioned Julia as she took the other end of the proffered urn and they carted it down the steps toward the car.

“The ghastly Bella Harper, of course. I saw you talking to her just a few moments ago.”

“I don’t. I only know her brother, Kit.”

They had reached the car and Alicia opened the trunk to stow the urn inside. “You mean Lord Christopher Wharton, the heir to all this?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s who he is now. But I met him years ago in this house and bumped into him again just now.”

“You’re a dark horse, Julia; you never said you’d met him when we were kids.” Alicia frowned, moving an old mac to swaddle the urn and wedging it into the side. “Let’s hope this makes it home,” she said, slamming the lid. They both climbed in and Alicia started the engine.

“Fancy a quick drink and a sandwich at the pub?” Alicia asked. “You can tell me all about how you met the delectable Lord Kit. Hope he’s more pleasant than his sister. I’ve met her a couple of times at local dinner parties, and she treats me as though I’m still the gardener’s granddaughter. Thank heavens the closest male heir inherits the title. If Bella had been a man, there’d have been no stopping her!”

“No . . . I don’t think Kit’s like that at all,” said Julia softly. She turned to her sister. “Thanks for the offer, but if you don’t mind, I’d just like to go home now.”

Alicia read the exhaustion in her sister’s eyes. “Okay, but we’re stopping at the shop on the way back and I’m buying you some supplies.”

Julia acquiesced, too weak to argue.

Alicia insisted that Julia sit on the sofa while she lit the fire and stowed away the food she had bought from the local supermarket. For once, Julia didn’t mind being fussed around. The trip out—her first in weeks—had drained her. And returning to Wharton Park and seeing Kit had unsettled her.

Alicia appeared from the kitchen with a tray, which she placed in front of Julia. “I’ve made you some soup. Please drink it.” She picked up the brown envelope that Julia had placed on the coffee table. “May I?”

“Of course.”

Alicia drew the paintings out of the envelope, laid them on the

table, and studied them. “They’re lovely, and the perfect gift for Dad. Will you frame them?”

“If I can do it in time, yes.”

“You are coming to us for his birthday lunch next Sunday, aren’t you?”

Julia nodded reluctantly as she picked up her soup spoon.

“Darling, I understand it’ll be hard, that big family gatherings aren’t quite your thing at the moment, but I know that everyone’s looking forward to seeing you. And Dad would be devastated if you didn’t come.”

“I’ll be there. Of course I will.”

“Good.” Alicia looked at her watch. “I suppose I’d better be off, back to the madhouse.” She rolled her eyes, walked over to Julia, and squeezed her shoulder. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay.” Alicia planted a kiss on the top of Julia’s head. “And listen, please keep in touch and try and remember to keep your mobile switched on. I worry about you.”

“The signal’s almost nonexistent here, but I will.” Julia watched Alicia as she walked to the door. “And thanks. Thanks for taking me back to Wharton Park.”

“My pleasure, really. You just call and I’ll be here. Take care, Julia.” The door slammed behind Alicia.

Julia felt sleepy and lethargic. Leaving the half-drunk bowl of soup on the table, she walked wearily up the stairs and sat on her bed, hands folded in her lap.

I don't want to get better. I want to suffer the way that they suffered. Wherever they are, at least they're together, whereas I'm here alone. I want to know why I wasn't taken with them, because now I'm neither here nor there. I can't live and I can't die. Everyone wills me to choose life, but then, if I do that, I must let them go. And I can't do that. Not yet . . .

3

At two minutes to one the following Sunday, Alicia marshaled her family into the drawing room.

“Lissy, have some wine, darling.” Her husband, Max, pushed a glass into her hand and kissed her on the cheek.

“Grandpa’s here,” shouted James, her six-year-old, excitedly.

“Let’s go and get him,” shrieked Fred, the four-year-old, and he headed for the front door.

A few seconds later, George Forrester was pulled into the drawing room by his grandchildren. At sixty-five, he was still a handsome man—slim, with a full head of hair just graying at the temples. He had an air of authority and confidence, gleaned from years of addressing an audience.

George was a renowned botanist—professor of botany at the University of East Anglia—lecturing often at the Royal Horticultural Society. When he wasn’t sharing his knowledge, he was off to foreign parts, searching out new species of plant life across the world. Which was when, he readily admitted, he was at his most content.

George had always told his daughters that he had walked into the hothouses of Wharton Park expecting to be overwhelmed by the famous collection of orchids that grew there, but had instead instantly fallen in love with the young beauty—his future wife and mother of his two daughters—who was in the hothouse with them. They had been married only a few months later.

George advanced toward Alicia. “Hello, darling, you’re looking as beautiful as ever. How are you?”

“I’m well, thanks. Happy birthday, Dad,” she said as he hugged her. “Drink? We have some champagne in the fridge.”

“Why not?” His eyes creased into a smile. “Bizarre really, celebrating the fact I’m one step nearer the grave.”

“Oh, Dad!” Alicia chided. “Don’t be silly. All my girlfriends are still in love with you.”

“Well, that’s always nice for a chap to know, but it doesn’t change the facts. Today”—he turned around to face his grandchildren—“your grandfather is a pensioner.”

“I’ll go and get the champagne,” Max said, winking at Alicia.

“So”—George perched himself on the arm of the couch, stretching his long legs out in front of him—“how’s everything?”

“Hectic, as usual,” sighed Alicia. “What about you?”

“Same. Actually, I’m rather excited. Last week I had a call from an American colleague of mine who lectures at Yale. He’s planning a research trip to the Galápagos Islands in May and wants me to join them. It’s one place I’ve never been to and always intended to go—Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* and all that. I’ll be away for a good three months, mind you, as I’ve been asked to give a couple of lectures while I’m in the States.”

Max came back in with the champagne uncorked and poured it into three glasses.

“Well, cheers, everybody.” George lifted the glass of champagne to his lips. “Here’s to the next sixty-five.” Taking a sip, he asked, “Is Julia coming?”

“Yes, she said she would. She’s probably running a little late.”

“Such a terrible thing.” George sighed. “I feel so . . . helpless.”

“We all do, Dad,” said Alicia despairingly.

“First, losing your mother when she was eleven, and now . . .” George shrugged. “It seems so unfair.”

“It’s dreadful,” Alicia replied, “and very difficult to know what to do or say. Julia took Mum’s death so hard then, as you know, Dad. It’s like she’s lost the three people in the world that have meant the most to her.”

“Has she mentioned if she’s going to return to the South of France?” asked George. “I would have thought she’d be better off in her own home, rather than sitting in that depressing cottage all day.”

“No. Perhaps she can’t face the memories there. I know I’d struggle if this house was suddenly”—Alicia bit her lip—“empty.”

Alicia saw Julia’s car snaking slowly up the drive.

“She’s here, Dad. I’ll go and greet her, see how she is.”

“Right-ho, darling,” George agreed, sensing Alicia’s concern.

Alicia went to the front door and opened it. As she stood waiting

for Julia to climb out of the car, she mused on how, even though it was over twenty years since her mother had died, George had never done what most men did and looked for a replacement for his wife. Alicia remembered the eagle-eyed divorcées circling her still young and attractive father, yet he had never shown the least bit of need or interest.

Perhaps having a passion as her father did had helped fill the hole of losing his beloved wife.

But then, surely, that should be true of Julia too?

Julia emerged from the car, shrouded in a cardigan several sizes too big, and walked up the path toward her.

“Hi, darling. Dad’s here already.”

“I know. I’m sorry I’m late. I lost track of time,” Julia answered defensively.

“Never mind, come in.” Alicia indicated the rectangular present under Julia’s right arm. “You managed to get the pictures framed, then?”

“Yes.”

“Julia!” Max walked toward her as she entered the room. “Lovely to see you.” He smiled as he put his arms around his sister-in-law’s painfully thin shoulders. “Can I take that from you?”

“Thanks.” She handed Max the package for her father.

“Hello, Dad. Happy birthday.” Julia bent down to kiss him.

“Darling, thank you so much for coming.” George reached for Julia’s hand and squeezed it.

“Right, now we’re all here, shall we open the presents?” suggested Alicia.

George started removing the wrapping paper, helped by a small pair of hands that had appeared, like magic, from under the coffee table.

“It’s a very big pot, Grandpa,” announced Fred as the urn was unveiled. “Do you like it?”

George smiled. “It’s wonderful. Thank you, Alicia, and thank you, kids.” He looked up at his daughter. “Did you say you got this from Wharton Park?”

“Yes.” She looked at Julia. “Are you going to give Dad your present now?”

“Of course.” Julia indicated the package on the coffee table. “Why don’t you open it?”

Julia couldn’t help but look expectantly as her father opened the present. The framers she had taken the paintings to had done an excellent job, mounting them with a fawn-colored border and advising Julia to use a simple black wooden frame around their edges.

“Well, well, well . . .” George’s voice trailed off as he looked at each one. Eventually he said, “These were from Wharton Park too?”

“Yes.”

He sat silently, trying to work out something that was puzzling him. The whole family was watching him. Finally Alicia broke the silence. “Don’t you like them?”

George looked up at Julia, not Alicia. “Julia, I . . . love them, because you see”—he smiled and surreptitiously wiped a tear from his eye—“I’m positive that these were painted by your mother.”

The conversation over the lunch table was full of ideas as to how Jasmine’s paintings could have ended up at the Wharton Park Sale of Contents.

“Are you absolutely sure they were Mummy’s paintings?” asked Alicia.

“Darling,” George said as he tucked into the perfect roast beef Alicia had cooked, “I’m convinced of it. The first time I clapped eyes on your mother, she was sitting in a corner of your grandfather’s hot-house with her sketchbook and her tin of watercolors. And later, when we traveled together, and we’d find a species of interest, I’d take down the notes and she would paint the flowers. I’d recognize her style anywhere. When I get home, I’ll study them again and compare them to some of your mother’s other paintings. But, Julia”—he smiled warmly at his daughter across the table—“you really couldn’t have given me anything better.”

After coffee back in the drawing room, Julia stood up.

“I’m off, Dad.”

George looked up. “So soon?”

Julia nodded. “Yes.”

George reached for her hand. “Come and visit me someday, will you? I’d love to see you and have a chat.”

“Okay,” agreed Julia, but they both knew that she wouldn’t.

“Thank you so much for those paintings, darling. They really do mean the world to me.”

“I think we’d better thank serendipity,” said Julia. “Bye, kids, see you soon.” She waved.

“Bye, Auntie Julia,” they chorused.

Alicia caught her hand just as she was walking out of the door. “Coffee next week?”

“I’ll give you a call. And thank you very much for lunch.” Julia kissed her sister on the cheek. “Bye.”

Alicia shut the door behind her sister and sighed. A pair of arms snaked round her waist from behind and held her tight.

“I know, Lissy. She’s still in a pretty bad way,” sighed Max.

“She is. But she doesn’t help herself, sitting in that miserable cottage alone all day long. It’s been over seven months now.”

“Well, you can’t force her,” Max sighed. “At least she uttered a few words today. Anyway, Grandpa’s staying on for tea and I’m in charge of the washing up. Go and put your feet up, darling, and talk to your father.”

Alicia went back into the drawing room and sat down.

When their mother had died, tragically young, of ovarian cancer, Alicia—being the elder of the two and, even at fourteen, already a nurturer—had done her best to “mother” her younger sibling. George was often away lecturing or specimen-collecting; it seemed to Alicia he spent as little time at home as he could. She understood it was her father’s way of dealing with the loss of his wife and never complained about his absence.

After Jasmine’s death, Julia had withdrawn into herself. Alicia had seen the pain of loss written on her face. Yet, try as she might to help and comfort, from the start Julia seemed to resent Alicia’s well-meaning protectiveness. As she grew through the difficult, teenage years, she had been unwilling to open up to Alicia about school, friends, or boyfriends, building a wall around her private thoughts and spending all her free time perfecting her technique on the piano.

Alicia had actually come to view the “set of teeth,” as she called the upright piano in the study, as her rival for Julia’s affections. Her sense of responsibility to take care of Julia—it was the last thing her mother had asked of her—overrode her own wants and needs. At eighteen, Alicia had won a place at Durham University to study psychology, but Julia was still at school. Even though a housekeeper took care of their domestic needs and stayed overnight when George was away, Alicia didn’t feel she could leave Julia alone. She’d gone to university in Norwich instead, and subsequently, in the year Julia had won a place at the Royal College of Music and moved to London, she’d met Max.

Her unnatural, often lonely childhood had made Alicia dream of a husband, a large family, and a comfortable home to put them in. Unlike her sister, who suffered from the same wanderlust as her father, Alicia craved security and love. Max proposed and they were married within six months. She was pregnant within the year with Rose and, since then, had concentrated on giving her children all the things she had never known during her own formative years.

If her horizons had been narrowed because of her past, Alicia accepted them. What she found harder to accept was her younger sister’s continued antipathy. As Julia’s career had taken off, and she’d become a celebrity in the classical music world, Alicia had rarely heard from her. Seven months ago, Julia had needed her again, and Alicia had been there for her immediately, to bring her home to Norfolk, to try to comfort her. Yet Alicia still felt the same distance and undercurrent of tension between them.

Just as twenty years ago, Alicia simply did not know how to reach her sister.