

12. A THIEF IN THE GARDEN

What would it be like if Vanessa had graced Bessborough Gardens? The voluptuous redhead had few equals. Birds surrounded her and accompanied her with their glorious song. Her playful son Andrew filled her days with purpose. She was from a stock whose representatives had turned the heads of many a king. She was no exception.

With her assured steps, the place would blossom with the first kisses of summer. The sun would bring to life these burgeoning flowers. She would walk on air. Bessborough Gardens would resound with a celebration of life. Could she countenance such a bold tactic? It was in her blood. Anything less and her defeat would be permanent.

She always had suspicions about Tony. Even if Helena assumed her rightful place back in New York, there would be other temptations for Tony. There always had been. Helena assumed that the narrative revolved around her. Vanessa knew better. She did everything that she could to insure the future of her son. Her influence was radically different than Luisa. She realized that the boy Tony had been misdirected by Luisa's strict direction. Without gentle love, Andrew might risk the same shock as Tony. Whatever her husband might covet, he would never really possess his own son.

What consolation must she have taken while her son's father cavorted around New York with the supposed artist Helena. More than Luisa, Vanessa questioned the cultural foundations of her rival. Her steadfast demeanor did everything that it could to contradict the wayward fashions of Helena. The angelic soul knew that she needed intervention from the heavens to put aside the challenges from the she-devil.

Vanessa would have to make her pilgrimage to Bessborough Gardens if she was ever to subdue the supernatural influence of the place. Did she realize the seat of Helena's attractive powers? She would have to act forthwith.

She ignored any drama that might accompany Tony's return.

From Helena's perspective, she believed that Vanessa was this monster who was persecuting her husband and doing harm to her son. Vanessa was the *thief in the garden* trying to disrupt the harmonious lovers. Helena could not believe that it was any other way. Her mission was to first rescue Tony and deal with the other matters after that. Her guard was up due to the possibility that she may be wrong about Vanessa. But she did not want to give in to this suspicion. It was better that Helena do everything in her power to punish the intruder.

In fact, Helena hoped never to have to confront Vanessa. It was a terrible thing to take a husband from his wife. Helena could only take comfort from the fact that she was releasing him from a loveless marriage. Worse than that, Vanessa was crushing the man. This was why he looked so listless when she first met him. He had been one of the walking dead.

Helena again made herself at home in the Columbia Hotel. She would use her time here to resolve things with Tony. She hoped that it would be for the best. It just seemed so temporary.

He met her that evening. Helena wondered what he was telling Vanessa while he was away so much. Tony seemed so affectionate. He even brought her flowers, lilies. The pair lost little time expressing their love for each other. They needed to seal the deal before the magic wore off. She was waiting for a ethereal godmother to end the spell. She clung to his body as if

they faced the end of time.

She had never noticed him to be so aroused as this night. His ardor never cooled. The room felt like a furnace as he let her know that he would never let go. She rose and fell in these waves. She was breathless.

Their love-making seemed to be the assurance that she now needed. She felt satisfied that the trip had not been in vain.

“Helena, I have loads of things to take care of this week. But when you go back to New York on Thursday, I won’t be far behind.”

She wanted to do something to help. One false start, one forgotten detail, and the dream would crumble. She was hanging on to tenterhooks. This only made her affection more sustained.

“Don’t leave me!”

He could feel her naked body underneath her thin robe.

“I must go. I’ll see you at dinner.”

She felt that she couldn’t last the day. But she was also on the verge of her triumph. What could stand in her way? Vanessa’s days were numbered.

If Vanessa was to forestall the inevitable, she would need to make her move quickly. What trump card did she still have up her sleeve?

The times gave Helena cause to wonder. Why had Vanessa been so perseverant all these years. Was her fate what awaited Helena if she ran off with this man? Why would Helena’s powers be any more resistant to change than Vanessa? Worse, Vanessa may have been the victim of simple neglect on Tony’s part. A lifetime of disregard had a way of swallowing up a creature endowed with multiple charms and boundless love.

Helena felt that her Garden had been transformed a thousand fold. She enacted the curse again. How could she take Vanessa’s warning to heart? A new phantom now walked the ground of Bessborough Gardens. Her cries were of a more recent nature. They augured an uncertain future full of heartache.

Helena did not want to submit. She was ready to do battle with the heavens for her love. She felt that love was on her side. She was willing to endure her own delusions about Tony so that their passions might never subside. Perhaps this was Vanessa’s mistake. She had sought a truth where none existed. She needed to enjoy the fairy tale.

Helena felt no mercy for Vanessa. Bertie and Luisa had conspired to protect Tony for Vanessa. Her guilt was the price to pay for benefitting from the scheme. Tony had rushed to her side after he suffered the effects of his family’s betrayal. The past month had absolved Tony of any offense. But Vanessa still had a debt to pay. Helena was simply extracting that price. Love would only ask as much.

Helena realized that their physical attraction could not sustain them forever. The bitter realities of daily life threatened to engulf them in its myriad of contradictions. Tony claimed that he could conduct his business from New York. But he would continue to have business to take care of in London. And he would have to return to see Andrew. He could never obtain permission to take him out of the country. So he would be forced to come back.

She wanted to hold on to what they had as long as possible. She could sustain herself with the conviction that this could last. As he held her hand at dinner, she told herself that this

would be the hallmark of their life together. Deep inside she knew different. She would be passing her time of lonely nights. In her solitude the doubts would add up. If he could trick Vanessa, why wouldn't he attempt the same ruse with her. She moved her hand away.

"Nothing's wrong?" he asked.

"I just need to cut my sole."

The tasty white fish melted in her mouth. This was a pleasant compensation. She knew that their time together would remind her why she had come all this way. She only wished that there was some restraint on her feelings. She felt completely defenseless. Years ago London had been her home. She could always hide in her work. Now all her work was in New York. The only thing, supporting her in London, was this hapless romance.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested. The restaurant was on a secluded street. There was hardly anyone else around. They were silent as they walked along. It was as if they had finally come to an understanding.

The love-making attained a similar automatic quality. She didn't want to think they were drifting apart. But those torrid nights in New York had been filled with more excitement. She pulled him closer. She didn't want to let go.

He had to leave afterwards. She slept alone. She tossed and turned in her yearning for his touch. In that hollow she burrowed herself until the fatigue became so great that she passed out.

The next day she was full of the same lethargy. The rest had not subdued her fears. She could feel the tension in her muscles, an ache that seemed to reach deep into the bones.

Tony wouldn't be able to get away that day. But it was to be eventful nevertheless. Tomorrow would be their final meeting where they would resolve all her plans.

"I want to meet you at Bessborough again. I know that I messed up the first time. This is the only way to set things right."

She hesitated. Not only did she sense the curse, but she now felt Vanessa had somehow taken over the Gardens. What could Helena do to make the spirits act in her favor?

She needed to reinvigorate her magic. She thought that she would make her way to the Tate and see if the Ophelia might give new life to her fortunes. It had been a long time. She had turned her back on her supernatural influences. Now she need them to again take flight.

A new enthusiasm flowed through her body. Her experiences with Tony had created a new physical awareness. This only made her metaphysical aspirations more potent. She was able to attain a higher level of consciousness due to the new inspiration. These flowing waters offered another hope for her. She would not die with the drowning Ophelia. She would be reborn.

She left the gallery as a changed person. Even if Tony rejected her, she would still be able to overcome her dejection. With that new feeling, she felt the need to exorcize the demons from Bessborough. The summer gave new expression to the flora of the park. The lilies were in bloom. This had been the same inspiration that had caught Tony when he made her the present of the lilies the day before. The Gardens were again her habitat. When she returned that evening, she was convince that nothing could go wrong.

She took the underground to her hotel room. She needed to save her energy for the remaining challenge. She didn't want to return to Bessborough without the utter confidence that

she would need to preserve her love for its eternity.

The room felt a little muggy. The cleaning staff had left the window opened. Helena took off her dress and lay on the bed. The serenity was what she valued more than anything. A return to the Gardens would only bring about some further heartache. It would be better to remain where she was with her.

She was the wild flower that had spread among the regularity of the garden. The surrounding hyacinth had only offered an occasion to announce her coming. On this glorious summer day, she asserted her gay colors. Nothing could contain her excitement. So she kept it to herself. The Gardens of her mind was in full bloom. All along she had nurtured its joy. And here in the fading hours of the afternoon, she murmured her blessed melody.

She started to feel that she was substituting physical intensity for emotional intimacy. She doubted that there was anything more to their connection. He had been very good at disguising his intentions. He had given her just enough encouragement to believe there was something more. But her mistake was easy to make. She felt so free when she was with him. There seemed no limits to the physical exertion that they could bear. The ease with which they could respond physically to each other really gave the illusion that they were deeply attuned to each other. When the interaction seemed particularly involving, it sustained the sense that she was giving her all to him. That there was no reserve on her part. And that he was going along equally with his commitment.

They would even adjust to the subtle pressures on the skin, the alterations in touch. They seemed to become one body. This left no ability to question their direction. They both were carried along by the same forces. From a prolonged kiss to a yearning caress, the body of one gave immediately into the other. The hoped-for unity became completely real for both of them.

She thought about his kiss on the back of the neck and how it would make her melt. How she would feel weak in the knees. She would surrender to him. It made her feel like she was going nowhere. But when she was with him, she could think about nothing else. She longed for their time together.

Helena was more vulnerable since she was alone in London. She didn't have Stephanie here to test out her feelings. She just had to run with them. It was too overwhelming. She didn't want to depend on him. She needed to quit worrying how Tony's son might affect his decision. If it was really love, they would be together. She sounded like a high school girl experiencing her first crush.

With these extremes, she saw that she was not thinking clearly. She simply took pleasure in the physical experience. This was what had led her astray when she was younger. It was really worse now because she was more inhibited to explore her sexuality. And it was proving to be her undoing. He could provoke these changes in her while all the while holding back his true feelings. He could run back to Vanessa as if nothing had happened. The stark reality could easily crush her. What defense could she put up. That was what she had been relinquishing to Tony. It was all part of the physical intensity that they shared.

Why was there no real intimacy? They were so drained by the love-making that they were often at a loss for words. Lying together in silence, they assumed that they were feeling the same things. And then there were these long waits between their meetings as he headed back to his family. It may have only been for a couple of hours, but it seemed like forever. How could

she survive?

What was Vanessa going through as all this was happening? Helena was lost in the night with Tony while Vanessa was home alone with Andrew. Even a house full of servants could not make up for the loss of her husband. She could accommodate these gaps in their relationship, but she would never tolerate his leaving her. Abandonment was a fate worse than any other.

Even though Tony was still at work, Helena could imagine how separate the two of them were from each other. She started to feel sympathetic to Vanessa's plight. If she could open her heart to someone that she did not know, how would Vanessa's arguments appeal to Tony. Helena could make her heart hard, but this would only make Tony more susceptible to return to his wife. She needed to work her magic before it was too late.

It was only hours before their fateful meeting, but Helena's mind was working over time. She could still taste his sweat. The impressions of his touch were burned on her flesh. The fierce struggle of their passion still swayed within her muscles. He was with her now as forever.

For Helena her body had acquired a supple confidence from their time together. She could stretch herself out to capture all the drama of the two bodies wrestling together. She was a welcome player in the contest that pushed her to a limit without end. She could sense her hands dig deep into his flesh and work the muscles. Again she melted with him.

She could no longer imagine a place where she existed without him. Their love resounded in everything that she touched, everything that she looked at, in every sound. The universe reverberated back and forth with their rhythm. It was the earthquake that shook life at its foundation. It was creation. It was destruction.

She could not wait her allotted time. She wanted here right now. Any delay would offer a chance for him to escape. She wanted him glued to her flesh. She wanted all of him inside of her. She wanted him to become her. Their perfect union.

If she stayed with him, her days would constantly be like this. These immense highs and lows. Without him she felt like a shade making her way through the afterworld. She had felt like this after the Bessborough incident. Now she realized that his feeling was bound up with the whole interaction with him. She cried out for him. And he stayed away. Could her feelings make some kind of leap so that she could perceive their connection even while he was not there? The harder that they explored the physical, the more that she felt the longing. She didn't want to do anything while she waited for his return.

She realized that there was no humor between them. Sure, they had the same sense of irony. And they could laugh now and then. But she could never get really silly with him. She could never talk about the time when she was a kid, and she ate the dog's biscuit to see how it would taste.

"I'd try it again if I was really hungry."

No, she had to be on her best behavior. That was Vanessa's province. She could be herself. Helena needed to remain the super lover. Anything less and he could run back to his wife.

She could hear the bird cries from her room. She wanted to call out to Tony. To have him rush to her side. This was what waiting was all about. She'd play the same game back to herself again and again. But something still remained hidden to her. Love remained beyond her grasp. She had already considered that she was just hiring herself out to him when he needed

that boost. Then he could head back to Vanessa for real comfort. Just as he was part of her, Vanessa had also invaded the Bessborough Gardens of the mind. As one spirit made his presence known, the other would not be far behind with her admonition for her wayward husband. Helena was just being groomed to play Vanessa's role until a suitable replacement lover could be found.

She saw that she was playing the intrigue of palaces and kings. Sovereigns would fall and their sacred obelisks would crumble into dust. A new goddess would replace the old as the ascendent regime would have to assert its sacred right. Bessborough would be raided by a triumphant Vanessa so that she could again claim Tony. Further down the line, some other Cleopatra would invade the same territory and attempt to impose her will on her new lover. The power plays would never stop. The nobility had made themselves accustomed to these petty battles. Helena was getting pulled into the middle of it all. She did not want to be a spectacle!

Once she had felt Tony's body close to her, her fears would dissipate. Their time together had offered an enlightenment about herself that she had never known. She had tasted that fire in Greece, but she was too hesitant to expand her awareness of the physical body. Now, her body electric was truly harmonized with all its sensations. For her, this was almost a form of mysticism. From the moment that he touched her, she would start to drift into another realm of existence. She would close her eyes as he kissed her. The rest would be automatic. They were guided by kisses and caresses. Little pecks on the cheek. The more absorbed deep kisses. She drew life from him. She could extract more and more from this infinite well.

She no longer walked the earth. She was assumed into the nether regions of the heavens. The body had been a launching platform to get out to these far regions of space. They made contact in an almost telepathic way. She touched and was touched. He expressed himself as idea. She would float on and on in this realization.

The more that she accustomed herself to this feeling, the harder it was to return to the everyday world. How would this affect her creativity? Everything that she did would seem so faded and weak in comparison to the raging sun that shone between them. What could follow such love?

Her overwhelming need shook her all over. She could almost perceive a withdrawal that accompanied his absence for long periods of time. Her body would shake all over. She would feel chills. She would try to imitate the throes of their passion just to put things back in balance. It would not stay that way. She thirsted for her release. She needed to be put back right. Just as she felt on the verge of collapse, his kiss would wake her up. She would again attain the strength of the mighty. Her endurance would know no limit.

Her desire was becoming this animalistic expression. She wanted to push harder and harder and harder. She was gasping to drain the body of another ounce of pleasure. She knew what was possible. She wanted more of the same. She would break down any resistance. She submitted to the call of the wild. Every bit of the flesh cried out for its satisfaction. More, more, more, more, more.

And he would be pushed to exhaustion as he tried to give her the ultimate sacrifice. Again breathless. That would not be enough. He needed to drive his body. To realize at the point of breakdown that there was a power beyond. And he would reach for it. Fierce again. Nothing would stand in his way. She loved his relentlessness. His ambition for the utmost

enjoyment. The richness of their time together.

Spent, they would collapse on the bed. There was a certain anonymity in their coupling. They had put aside their identities to become pure flesh. Nothing else would do for them. But once they had gone so far out together, it became virtually impossible to return.

Part of her hated it all. She was being ravaged by this monster inside. She would not let up. She was driven and she knew it. What *unnatural* force moved in the garden. How did it express its vampiric lust. She wanted blood. She wanted to take his life from him so that it could be hers. This was her greatest affront to Vanessa. She had already robbed the wife of something so wild and inchoate, that Vanessa could never reclaim this place for herself. Vanessa would forever be a *thief* in this nether world.

Was Helena simply this brazen creature that would stop at nothing to get what she wanted? She had been hurt by Tony. Vanessa was the symbol of that pain. And in the present, Helena she had gone through her metamorphosis. She would stand her ground. Nothing would stand in her way.

She had prepared her mind for the coming event. She could taste the spoils of her conquest. But was this what she really wanted? She dressed like a knight readying for combat. Love had entered a new stage. Even the past was simply an altar where she had sacrificed the old Helena. The sword had fallen, and she had emerged from the remains.

It all seemed so cold. She needed to protect her gains against the envious. But could Tony even understand any of this. He was the child in the amusement park. She was taking him on the ride of his lifetime. But it was just a game for him. Somewhere else was his real life. Somewhere else was her real life. Their exercise was getting out of hand. She needed to get out before it was too late.

Why was she hesitant to cross the threshold? This was her final test. She would have to remain resolute. She observed her face as she did her makeup. Her face needed to express it all. Her fine nose still gave her face that regal air. Even Tony would have to pay her tribute. Other men had seen that same appeal in her. She was stunning. Enough to knock a man across the sidewalk. She shook her head so that her hair fell along her shoulders. It was her vanity. No other lover could offer him as much.

Her checked skirt was playful. Short and tight, it flattered her long legs and thin frame. She put on a black sweater. It might be too hot for the day, but there would be a night chill across the Millbank. She would need to prepare for it.

After dressing, she looked at herself in the small mirror on the armoire. She was pleased with herself. No Vanessa could slay her ambitions. She didn't want to seem to anxious. She took the stairs instead of the elevator. She even went to the ante-room off the lobby to check herself in the mirror.

She took a cab to her destination. No delays in the tube would make her feel unsettled. She would make sure that she arrived on time. When she was dropped off, she didn't immediately walk into the gardens. She was too nervous. Instead, she walked the other way. She pretended that she had casually happened upon this place and had something else to do.

She had arrived before him. She thought it was a bad sign. Sure, this was her place, but she wanted him to be waiting. Since he was not here, it made her feel as if he wasn't coming. Even though she was early, she believed him to be late. If he really cared, he would guard this

place until she arrived.

She needed something to settle her down. But she didn't want to leave her spot just in case that she might miss him. She would even call him. She didn't want to surprise him while he was with Vanessa. He needed to head home before the meeting.

All their history together had brought her back to the same place. She was again waiting as if she had made no progress. This time she could feel a sharp pain cut through her. She knew that she was risking herself again for a remote possibility.

When she was with him, it was all so real and physical. In Bessborough Gardens, it just seemed a memory. Something ethereal that she could never hold on to. The night chill hung deep. It penetrated her. It made her fear palpable. She was being abandoned again.

It had only been five minutes since the appointed hour. But if Tony really wanted this to happen, he would have been here early. This was the last step that he never could take. He could lead her to the altar. But then the temple would remain deserted. She would have to face her fate alone. What good was the passion? If she had felt a monster emerge earlier in the day, it started to assume full form in the darkness.

Times had changed. She was not going to spend her life in Bessborough waiting for Anthony Richmond. There was life outside these confines. Cabs stopped near her. Cars whizzed on by. She thought that she recognized him.

As her suspicions turned to reality, she knew that she would have to leave her place of refuge. What was she supposed to do with the rest of her time here? She headed down to the Thames. It was so damp tonight. The mist allowed her to hide from herself. She could not accept what she had become. All her will had not been enough to reshape the course of events. The resolution had remained in his hands. She needed to play her final card.

The walk had made her tired. She did not hurt. She just felt nothing. Back in her room, she slept a dreamless sleep.

"Miss Helena, you didn't get your message?"

"What message?"

She had come in without seeing the door man. She didn't want to see anyone at that point.

It was from Tony.

Helena,

Sorry that I missed you. Tried to call but you had already left. Andrew got taken to the hospital. He's going to be OK. I'll make it up to you.

Tony

What could he do to make it up to her? She was getting her luggage together to head for Gatwick. He could have been here to see her off. Or even have met her at Victoria. It was the same. He had arranged events to work for his benefit.

In the airport she had that sinking feeling that this had all been for naught. She had thrown off her work schedule. She had lived these crazy days as if there was no tomorrow. And tomorrow had rolled around with a death sentence. She didn't want to hear any more of his excuses. Now her body felt like a hollow shell. It had lost its purpose. She wanted to crawl into

a hole. She wished all this time away.

He probably felt satisfied with himself. She gave him no countenance for his concern for his son. It was part of his game. He could use any crisis to withdraw from the scene. His convenience. It wasn't as if he was really going to leave London for her. Some other crisis would have come along to intervene. To make him seem like the moral guy. He would never abandon his wife and child. He was upstanding. He was nothing if it wasn't for his reputation.

She remembered the scoundrel that he had been as a young man. He always found someone else to blame. Why had he been such a giving lover? Because passion only enhanced his well being. He never really gave anything of himself. He was never really tender. He was just physically exhausted. His fatigue seemed like caring as he wrapped his tired limbs around her, and they lay together. He just had nothing else to take; he had drained her of dear life.

As the plane headed up in the sky, she could not look back. She wanted to make it home to her bed. The long flight back might sap her. That would only make it easier to head on to her apartment. She wouldn't stop at work when she arrived home. She would take care of all that later.

Helena needed to finally close the book on Tony. She pulled the blinds on the window. She had just eaten and now she gave in to her fatigue of a lifetime. He no longer had anything to do with her. She needed to keep it that way.

"Tell me about the time that you both locked yourselves in the hotel room."

"It wasn't all that, Stephanie. The room was cramped and stuffy."

"But all night, and all day."

The exaggeration only turned Stephanie on more. She didn't want to hear about his failure to keep their final rendez-vous.

"Girl, you were going there for fun. He was never going to come back with you."

"For a moment, I really thought that he could make it here. That New York would be his home."

"He's like royalty. He's not going to be satisfied with anything less."

"I feel really stupid!"

"You're still young. You look great. You've got a great job. The world is your oyster. You need a real vacation. Away from him for good."

"I've got so much work that I'll be locked in this office for a century."

"That's a pretty good balance after two centuries of out and out love-making."

They both laughed.

Helena was surprised that she could throw herself back into her work. She feared that she had lost her touch. But the love hangover was quickly fading. She had trained so long for her reward. She couldn't let Tony upset her plans.

The next morning was her second day back at the office. Things were backlogged but she was making progress. She almost felt superfluous.

Stephanie reassured her, "We were just following your instructions. The real work had to wait until you came back."

Later that morning she got the inevitable call from Tony. She tried to remain cool.

"Dear, I'm really sorry that happened. I really love Andy. But it showed me that Vanessa and I will never be able to make a life together."

“You’re going to leave her.”

“Eventually. I’ve got to put my move on hold.”

She didn’t seem surprised.

He added, “I want to visit soon.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. I’m working to keep the company going. To keep my place in it. I just can’t take off the afternoon for a roll in the sack.”

Her graphic description hit him hard.

“I, I…” He sputtered for words.

“Tony, I don’t want to say that I didn’t have fun.”

She held her breath. She couldn’t break down.

“But it’s always turned out the same. You just run back to your perfect life, and you leave me to pick up the pieces. You’re just not all that. Look at yourself. You’ve got a great wife, and you treat her as shit. It’s not me. It’s not me at all.”

“I can be in New York next week. I can make it up to you.”

She was silent.

At dinner, Stephanie tried to catch up with all the news.

“You told him to stay in London.”

“He can take that load of crap and just stuff it where the sun don’t shine.”

“Honey, you are learning.”

Had she really learned anything at all?

The next few weeks were very sobering for her. She felt like she was heading through her own rehab.

“Stephanie, I just don’t know.”

At times, she wanted to just give up. Just go hide in Alaska.

“There’s a curse on me.”

“You’ll get through it.”

That was the scary part. She felt that she was turning her back on part of herself. She didn’t want to see Tony ever again. She had a life for herself. She needed to put back the pieces.

Bessborough Gardens would stay a memory for her. It had represented the summit of her powers. It showed her a side of herself that she didn’t know existed. She wondered if her ambitions were sufficient to contain all the skills that she had acquired from the time spent in paradise. She needed to leave her garden.