

# Maybe Tomorrow Chapter One

*Today*

Only when she stepped into the main plaza at Covent Garden did Tabitha Simpson realize how much better she was feeling. She felt like herself again, the Tabby who'd existed before the disaster. Before Tom. She didn't miss him at all. Well, not much, anyhow.

Shoppers and tourists buzzed around her, and she felt the thrill of stepping into a place where so much had happened and so many people had wandered. Tabby loved history, but she hadn't realized how much until she'd fulfilled her lifetime ambition of walking the streets of London, the setting of so many of her favorite novels. Even if she was doing it on her own, this was still her trip of a lifetime.

Tom was as much history as the tall, brick buildings lining the plaza, and the great, columned facade of the Royal Opera House at the end. He was as dead to her as those buildings, too. She'd always thought finding a fiancé in bed with another woman was a cliché, but that was before it happened to her. Nobody had prepared her for the level of hurt, and she was still sorting it out.

Had she loved Tom, or was it wounded pride? Either way the incident had hurt. Now and then she poked the wound to see if it still hurt. The pain grew less until today she could think of him without wincing.

She shrugged and moved on. At last. A year had given her enough time to mourn. Even the Victorians had thought that, or so she'd learned from her visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum yesterday. Well, she'd found him in bed with another woman six months ago, but they'd booked this holiday as their honeymoon last Christmas. So not quite a year. But then, they were not quite married.

Thank God, as it turned out. She could've discovered him cheating afterward, then she'd have the mess and expense of a divorce.

Tilting her chin, she set her mind to today. Her past had taken enough of her time. She took a path around the edge of the piazza first. Stores and coffee houses lined the place, with a transport museum near the Opera House. Streets led off in all directions, fascinating, winding, narrow streets, lined with boutiques. She could browse here all day. After all, why shouldn't she? She didn't have anything planned. In her electronic diary she'd just put "Shopping," and the concierge at her hotel told her Covent Garden was a good place. The man was right. It was perfect.

So was the day. England in late September suited her perfectly, and today showed it as its best. Sunshine gleamed from a blue sky with fluffy clouds scattered across it. Despite the throngs of people, Tabby knew she'd enjoy her day here. No shadows, apart from the ones the four-story buildings cast over the cobbles. In the center of the piazza stood a covered market. The stalls carried a mouthwatering array of crafted goods, jewelry, candy and flowers. There'd always been a market in this place, fruit and vegetables to serve London's hungry population. She could imagine them here; lords and ladies dressed in satin and velvet, with beggars in rags and every class in between. If she half-shut her eyes, she could see them, exchange the gaily dressed tourists here today with tourists of a time long gone.

Wow, she hadn't dreamed this much for years. Hadn't had time, really. With a career that had taken off fast, and a fiancé as equally determined to make his mark on the world, the last few years hadn't had many chances for dreaming.

She'd make up for it this month. In a week she'd be home again, back in New York, going back to work. Starting a new phase in her life. A better one.

Unable to resist the lure of exploring, she left the piazza behind and followed a winding street. Browsing a few stores revealed quirky clothes that had no part in her life, but pleased her. She passed by the bag store with handmade purses. They were far too tempting.

Another, smaller street led off this one. She wandered down it. The air was cooler here, since the buildings didn't allow the sun to penetrate to street level. A chill hit her, and she rubbed her arms, covered only by a thin black sweater.

She continued to browse. She came upon an alley, a mere thread of a place, too narrow to have stores on both sides. She spotted a light, a glimmer at the end of the row, and she went toward it. A small shop stood there, its paint cracked and the light inside dim.

Bits and pieces filled the window. A piece of jewelry on a faded velvet cushion caught her eye—surely too casually displayed to be real. If the pearls on that necklace were real, it would be worth a fortune. But it was pretty, and it *looked* real. Caught by the hodgepodge of items, recalling she hadn't yet bought a gift for her mother, she pushed the door and went inside. A bell sounded, an old-fashioned clanging sound.

Timelessness hit her. Shelves lined the small space, with objects jammed on them. On a high shelf a dusty teen doll leaned drunkenly against a bald teddy bear. Its head tilted in her direction, as if listening to her words of wisdom. Glancing around, Tabby saw a million things she wanted to peer at, some to play with, and some to touch. A painting of a dark landscape called to her, but she couldn't make out much. The shop was dimly lit, and the painting sitting under a shelf heaped with hats of all kinds.

"Are you looking for anything in particular, or should I leave you to it?"

With a shriek, Tabby whirled around, knocking a Spanish shawl off the top of a pile of books. With a muttered apology she bent and picked it up. When she stood, the woman who had spoken was standing right in front of her. "It's okay. Things fall down all the time. Is this what you wanted to see?"

Tabby sucked in a breath. Yes, it was. When she'd started her wandering, she longed for one of those old shops she'd read about, like in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. But these days Covent Garden and the surrounding area was high value real estate. Shop owners had to make the most of the square footage they had. This was a miracle of a place. "Hi," she said feebly. "No, I'm not looking for anything in particular. I need a gift for my Mom." She didn't want to buy the pearls and leave. She wanted a chance to delve around this fascinating place.

"Ah, yes, of course." The woman stepped back and Tabby caught her breath again when she saw the woman's ethereal beauty. Copper-red hair flowed around a face of classical loveliness, porcelain skin and startling, black-lashed violet eyes taking her gaze. "My name's Korinna." She frowned. Tabby's suspicion that she was too lovely not to use filler dissipated when Korinna's brow creased, two lines indenting between her brows. "You've come here on a mission."

Tabby shook her head. "Not quite. I just needed a break." She sighed. Why was she lying to this woman? She had nothing to be ashamed of. "No, that's not true, not completely, anyway. This vacation was supposed to be my honeymoon, but I came on my own. I'm having a much better time." Wow, now she said it aloud, she knew she was right. She'd never have had this much fun with Tom.

Korinna lost the frown and nodded. "He wasn't right for you."

Did this woman read palms or something? She wore loose, draped clothes. Under the blue silk Tabby caught the impression of a slender body and full breasts. Chains and beads chinked when Korinna moved, turning toward the counter that stood before a door. She went around it. “No, I’m not a fortune-teller,” she said calmly. “People get into trouble that way.”

“How did you know I was thinking that?” Tabby demanded, startled.

“People ask all the time.” She gave a bright smile, one that flashed and then disappeared. “I have some experience in that department.”

Why shouldn’t she talk? Tabby never shared her feelings, but she’d probably never see this woman again. Where was the harm in telling her a little more? “I found my fiancé in bed with another woman, someone I thought of as my best friend. It turned out she wasn’t. But we’d started going wrong months before.” It startled her to find herself saying this, but once she’d said it, rightness of what she’d said convinced her. “Tom said I bored him. I daresay I did. The idea of love and marriage appealed to me more than the person. It could have been anyone. I won’t make that mistake again.”

Korinna tilted her head on one side, gazing at Tabby with assessing eyes. “No, you won’t. You’re ready now.”

Before Tabby could ask her what she meant, Korinna reached under the glass and drew out a handful of small objects. “Do any of these take your fancy?”

She was showing Tabby trinkets, gold charms, a small silver locket, and a few other things. Tabby picked up a chain bracelet and turned it over in her hands. “Jewelry’s a great idea. I have to make the weight of the case for when I go home. I’ve bought too much already.”

As she laid the bracelet down, she caught sight of something else lurking at the back of the case. “What’s that?”

Korinna’s hand hovered over the jumble of objects, until she finally landed on the item Tabby had spotted. She drew out an elaborately jeweled case, about half an inch thick and four inches square. Tabby longed to see what lay inside.

When Korinna handed her the case, Tabby was surprised to find her fingers trembling. She pressed the little button on the side. The case opened without a sound.

She gaped. Inside lay an exquisite miniature painting. A man, his dark gold hair windblown, his blue eyes looking to the side as if he yearned for something just out of sight. She wanted him to look at her. He called to her in a way she didn’t understand. She lifted her free hand, automatically trying to touch him, but stopped herself in time. “Who is he?”

Korinna shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe you can find out.”

“How much is it?”

The price would have made her faint if she’d been the fainting kind, which she wasn’t. “Wow,” she said faintly, but she couldn’t bring herself to give the picture back. When Korinna took it, she had to tug a bit too hard.

Tabby couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing him again. “Even if you gave a discount I couldn’t afford that,” she admitted. She’d spent up, preparing for her wedding and booking this trip. Walking out on her fiancé had proved expensive. She couldn’t recover everything she’d laid out. The deposit on the apartment they were supposed to share, the cost of the invitations, all kinds of things had added up to hollowing out her savings. But she had a decent job and she was doing okay.

She wouldn’t consider getting married again in a hurry.

Tabby took another peek at the gorgeous picture, now out of her reach. He'd make a great husband substitute. He wouldn't answer back, or cheat on her. That suited her fine. Sure, she'd never feel his touch, or his kiss, but she'd cope. The picture and her battery operated boyfriend were a match made in heaven. So what if she didn't ever feel a man's naked body next to hers, turn in the night and have somebody to snuggle up to? She'd get a cat.

The picture called to her. She wanted it back.

Korinna put the picture down on the counter. "That's a leather case and real stones. That's why it's so expensive. But do you know what? I don't think this is the original frame. The edges show. Besides, I think the painting is Regency and the case dates from later in the century. I can't pin down the date exactly. However, his hairstyle was only around in the early nineteenth century, and he's clean shaven, which also points to the Regency era. If he matched the frame, he'd be heavily bearded and his hair would be neatly combed, not so tousled. You know?" She glanced up with a smile. "Do you want the miniature, or the case?"

She must know the answer. Surely it was obvious. "The miniature."

"Okay, then give me a few minutes and I'll see if I can find a better frame. It doesn't suit your man."

"Won't it decrease the value of the frame?" She could hardly bear it. "You should tell me how much the painting is without the frame first."

Korinna glanced at the painting and shrugged. "A hundred pounds should do it. It's not a masterpiece."

Tabby thought it was. A hundred pounds, she could do that. She'd skip her visit to Oxford Street. What was new make up and a piece of clothing next to that? She wanted the miniature so much. She'd always regret not buying it if she left it here.

Swiftly, Korinna turned the jeweled frame over and opened the back deftly. She tsked when she saw the painting. "Yes, it's parchment on a card backing. Someone's jammed in here. This frame is meant for something else." She glanced up, and smiled. "*Someone* else, that is." Without explaining her cryptic remark, she returned to work, lifting the painting carefully away from the case. "I wonder originally belonged in here? Ah!" Something tumbled out with the painting. Korinna picked it up and examined it. "A lock of hair. I presume that's what should be in here." She smiled. "Now I have two items to sell instead of one. You've done me a favor."

Laying the painting face down on a velvet pad, she closed the case with the lock of hair and took it back to its place in the glass case. Then she visually skimmed the shelves. "Ah yes." A small chest of drawers stood in one corner. She opened a drawer and rummaged, giving a cry of triumph when she came up with a plain wooden frame. "This looks right." She replaced the painting in the frame. "It's perfect," she declared with satisfaction. "There's a loop on the back. People used to wear these. Hold on." Delving below the counter she pulled out a piece of black velvet ribbon. She closed the frame and pushed the ribbon through the gold loop at the top of the wooden frame, tying the two ends in a bow. "There. The perfect pendant."

She handed the object to Tabby. It was gorgeous, better than the original frame. A carved rose decorated the back, a flower in full bloom. The edges were chamfered, so the pendant could be worn either way around. Tabby loved it. She'd willingly pay extra for the frame, if she could afford it. "So how much do you want for it?" She'd better ask before she got too involved. She hadn't liked the jeweled case, it hadn't felt right in her hand, but this was perfect.

"We'll call it a hundred and five pounds, five pence," Korinna said. "I told you, I have two objects from one. That case will sell for what I asked you for, so I'll only ask you five pounds, five pence. But you have to pay for the painting."

Hardly believing her luck, Tabby counted the money and handed it over. She didn't usually carry that much, but she'd planned to browse around small stalls and outlets, and she hadn't wanted to give them all a credit card. Korinna had asked her for a strange amount, but Tabby wasn't about to quibble. The store owner might change her mind.

Korinna gave her a bunch of change. As she put her hand over the pile of coins, Korinna slapped her hand on top of Tabby's. Startled, Tabby looked up. "You may go there and back," Korinna said. "Once. You have a return ticket. That's all. Do you understand?"

Tabby started to nod, then shook her head. She didn't understand at all.

Korinna removed her hand, her blood red nails gleaming in a flash of light. "It doesn't matter. You will. Remember what I said."

Bewildered, Tabby nodded, and thrust her change in her coin purse. This was getting weird. At first the shop fascinated her, but she was getting creeped out. Korinna's hand felt cold, despite the warmth in the store. It chilled Tabby right the way through. But she remembered her manners, forced a smile, and said, "Thank you," before she collected her wrapped parcel and left.

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The next day Tabby had booked a trip up the Thames to see Hampton Court. The boat cruise sounded tempting, but the prospect of seeing the palace topped off her day. She'd read all about it, avidly poring over the pictures.

Her hotel stood near a huge exhibition center nearly ten miles from the center of London, but Tabby told herself she didn't mind too much. The Tube station lay across the road, and it was quiet at night. Every morning she took her Oyster card and traveled into the city, where she found somewhere to eat breakfast that cost less than the hotel. She'd stuffed the minibar with snacks, too, so she got up early, bubbles of excited anticipation filling her, and chose her clothes carefully. She wouldn't wear the typical tourist garb of Capri pants and T-shirt, not when she was going to a real live palace.

Not a dress, either. It was going to be a long day. So she found a pair of black pants and a white frilly blouse, which she teamed with her black velvet jacket. It wasn't even raining today, so she could leave her umbrella behind.

The final touch was the portrait. She wore it as a pendant, with the carved side out. At four inches long, it made a pretty chunky pendant, but it worked well with her outfit and she felt a strange desire to keep it close. She'd spent a lot of the previous evening gazing at it.

Was there a way she could find out the identity of the subject? His clear skin and bright eyes, with the hair flowing back from his face made him look like a perfect romantic hero. But this man was real, or had been once. Or was he? He could be an illustration. He was painted in watercolors, at least the loose brush strokes looked that way. She'd learned something at the free lecture she'd attended at the Tate a few nights ago. While always interested in history, Tabby's studies had taken her away from her first love. She'd had to make a living, so after her literature degree, she'd had to do something practical, and she'd chosen administration.

At least that part of her life had worked out well. The hospital where she worked had promoted her rapidly. When she'd refused to give up her job, Tom had reminded her nastily that time was passing fast. If she wanted kids, she should think about taking a

step back. That had started the rot, really. He had wanted to become the main breadwinner, the “man of the house,” as he’d put it. When she weakened, recalling his sense of humor or his soft brown eyes, she recalled moments like that and got her strength back. And yes, it didn’t hurt to think about him anymore. Tom belonged well and truly in her past, over, kaput.

After checking her bag, a capacious number that would fit an amount of modest shopping and her water bottle, Tabby stepped out of the door and into the Tube train.

An hour later she stood by the pier at Westminster, lining up with the other passengers on this trip. The crew didn’t keep them waiting long. She climbed into a typical tourist boat, with a bar and snack place undercover and a bunch of seats outside. Tabby opted to sit outside with her drink and the sandwiches she’d bought on the way here. A delightful sense of anticipation bubbled inside her as the boat cast off and chugged up the Thames.

They passed the Houses of Parliament. The awesome towers and elaborate detail were stunning in their magnificence. The tour guide helpfully pointed out the landmarks as they passed, including the reconstruction of Shakespeare’s theater on the south bank. Perhaps another day she’d visit the Globe and see if she could get tickets for a performance. She could pretend she was an undergraduate again, reliving her student years.

Leaning back, Tabby relaxed, and enjoyed the trip. She didn’t take many photographs, because she could pick up pictures of the Gherkin, the Golden Hind, the Tower of London and the rest online. The day wasn’t as warm as she’d have liked, but she ignored the chill that swiftly sank into her bones. She’d get to the palace and reward herself with a pot of tea at the café. She heartily approved of the English habit of serving tea in a pot rather than a cup. Although after a few attempts, she avoided the coffee unless it came from an overpriced chain, or she’d made it herself.

But the tea was good. She enthusiastically adopted the British style of eating, fish and chips, scones and jam and everything else. Could she live here? Sure, for a few years, but she’d ever get the opportunity.

She did her best to commit this trip to memory. Better than a camera, she could remember the emoting and the responses, as well as the raucous voices around her. People from all nations came to this remarkable city to wonder and to share.

The boat floated upriver, the engine thrumming gently under her. Getting hungry, she ate her sandwiches, and snapped a few pictures of the countryside with her phone. There weren’t too many commercial pictures of the lovely fields and some of the houses that lined the river. The ones she could see, that was, but there were also some beautifully tended gardens and small boats moored in private inlets.

A strange feeling came over her, as if she was coming home. And yet she was certain she’d never visited here before. This was her first visit to Britain, much less this part of it. Yet the gardens and the glimpses of the houses gave her an odd sensation. She knew what lay around the next bend. Something slightly out of her reach, at the edge of her mind.

The sense of comfort and wild happiness shocked her when she saw what lay around the bend.

A perfect house stood in a perfect garden. Roses bloomed exuberantly, over their perfection, but displaying blowsy brightness, and honeysuckle scented the air. Not that she could smell it from where she sat, but she knew exactly what it was like. White stucco covered the house and the back had a pillared portico.

Right on cue the guide spoke. "To your left, you can see River House. The modestly named villa was once the country home of the notorious Frank Abbott, the Victorian gentlemen who wrote some very saucy books. Which, ladies and gentlemen, you'll have to visit a bookstore to buy, because they're too racy for us!" A few people laughed. Tabby was too busy watching the house. Nothing else mattered except seeing it. She *had* to see it. "Before that, it belonged to a succession of London notables. They used it as a getaway and sometimes a place to stash the bit on the side. Or in more proper terms, the current mistress."

People chortled.

"Politicians, aristocrats and companies have owned the house, but until five years ago the local council used it as offices. At present, it is privately owned, but open to the public at certain times in the year."

The house was going out of her sight and she couldn't bear it. Tabby sprang to her feet, leaning over the edge to get the last glimpse of the house. She couldn't leave it there. At least she knew its name. Could she come back one day? *No*. The thought of leaving it now she'd found it drove her nuts. But short of swimming, she'd have to say goodbye to this place.

Amazingly, the boat seemed to be pulling in. Wondering what was going on, she made her way to the front.

The guide stood there, mic in hand, but he touched it off as she approached. "Do you want to get off at this stop?"

"Yes."

"May I see your ticket?"

She pulled the piece of card out of her bag and showed it.

"You booked to go to Hampton Court. Don't you want to see the palace?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine with this." She didn't like his questions. "I feel a little sick, to be honest."

"Ah." The man shot her a sympathetic glance. "There's another boat later this afternoon, if you want to carry on, but it won't give you much time at the palace."

Mumbling a word of thanks, Tabby could hardly wait until the boat docked. People stared as she disembarked but she took no notice. She wanted to see that house.

"Do you know where you're going? This part of the river gets pretty lonely at night," the man said. He seemed genuinely concerned.

"This is Kingston-Upon-Thames, isn't it?" She'd checked her location on Google Maps, so she was pretty sure about that.

The man nodded. "You can catch us on the way back. The last boat leaves at six. There's a train station farther inland, in Richmond, but it's a fair walk."

"I'll be fine," she assured him. If she got desperate, she'd call a taxi, but there were plenty of trains and buses. That was the beauty of having a cell phone. She was never alone, and in this country, she could usually find a signal wherever she went. She'd bought a UK SIM, so she was fine for this trip.

After climbing the narrow steps they reluctantly let down for her, she took stock of her situation. Across the river lay Kingston, modern buildings jostling at its center, an ugly, seventies style block towering above the roof of the villa. It wasn't as if she'd been stranded in the middle of nowhere, but her sudden decision to get out must have taken the boatman by surprise. The boat chugged away, leaving her exactly where she wanted to be.

Anxious to know why she'd had that jarring and powerful sensation of déjà vu, Tabby hurried along the narrow path that led away from the river toward the house. She passed by a great oak tree and through the lovely garden. The roses were past their best, dropping pink, red, white and yellow petals on the lush green grass.

The path curved around the side of the house to the front, giving her a good view of the sides. This would be where the master came in after he'd been out riding, and the servants would use the door as a shortcut to the kitchens. It never occurred to her to wonder how she knew that until she rounded the corner and came to the front of the house.

A portico supported by simple columns sheltered the approach to the front door. Since this was a villa, rather than a grand house, the steps to the porch were shallow and unassuming. Holding her breath, Tabby lifted a foot and deliberately placed it down. The sense that she'd visited this place before increased.

People stood around the front door, some chatting, all dressed in casual clothes. A few glanced her way. A plastic sign on a tripod proclaimed "Entrance," and a more permanent brass sign by the front door held a list of opening times.

She became the twenty-first person to stand in the line waiting for the house to open. How lucky could she be? The brass sign said the house was opened three times a week for four hours at a time from March until October. And this was one of the times. A guide would take them around. Maybe she could shake off this disturbing feeling, together with the slight dizziness that disoriented her. She didn't like it one bit; it upset her. When she turned her head too sharply, the world spun. It was as if she saw two things at the same time and one took a few milliseconds to catch up with the other.

A plaque attached to the stuccoed wall told her the house had been built at the end of the eighteenth century as a retreat for an aristocrat, Lord Northcote, who brought his mistresses here. After his death, the house was sold to a prominent politician, who used it for the same purpose. Then it changed hands again. This wasn't the kind of house that passed down in the family, clearly. For a while the local authority had owned it, and used it as offices. Currently a businessman owned it, and he'd worked to restore the house to its original state. When he visited England he liked to live here, which explained why the house wasn't open very often. If he was so rich, Tabby wondered why he bothered opening it at all.

Moneybags had clearly made a good job of the gardens. Had he done as well inside?

The double doors opened smoothly and a middle-aged woman in a tweed skirt and jacket stepped out, her demeanor brisk. "Thank you for waiting, ladies and gentlemen. If you would stop at the desk in the hall and collect your tickets, we'll get on with the tour. Welcome to River House." She said the last as a kind of afterthought. "I'm Maddie Dickinson and I have the pleasure of showing you the house this afternoon. We have several masterpieces, some exquisite furniture and a few curiosities you may care to see." The line slowly started moving and Tabby fumbled for her wallet.

Cool air struck her skin the moment she entered the hall. A flare of light came from a door at the back, open to reveal the lovely vista of the garden beyond. The black and white tiling of the space and the grand staircase curving up to the next floor gave a glorious sense of space, stretching to the heavens.

Tabby blinked to clear her vision. That weird sensation was happening again. The portraits lining the stairs blurred, showing the outlines of others, then came back into focus. Maybe she was sickening for something, a cold or an infection. But she had no

other symptoms. Her glands weren't swollen, she didn't have a sore throat or dry eyes. Nothing.

The effect might be the result of tiredness. But she'd felt so rested on the way here; almost her old self again, after the stresses of the last year.

"Five pounds and fifty pence," the girl sitting behind the desk demanded. She smiled.

Tabitha gave her the note, then fumbled in the coin section for a fifty pence piece. She didn't have one, so she tipped a few out. "the coins confuse me," she confessed. "All but these." She picked up the pound coins, the pale yellow ones, and dropped them back in her purse.

The girl wore a T-shirt with a cartoon figure on it, and had purple hair. Tabby wished she had more respect for the place, but it would be stupid to say so. "This one won't get you in here." Tabby clicked her tongue in annoyance when she saw the stray quarter. She'd put her US money in the safe in her room, but this one must have found its way out.

"You need these," the girl said. She picked out what she needed, and shoved the rest of the change back at Tabby. Tabby put it all back, and tucked the ticket into one of the sections meant for credit cards. She kept them in another place in her bag, not feeling safe enough to keep everything in the same place.

Maddie Dickinson held up her hand after everybody had paid. "When we've finished the tour, you may buy tea and homemade cake in the pavilion in the garden. We also have books about the house and postcards, if you would like a souvenir. We prefer you don't take photographs of the house, although you're welcome to take pictures in the garden." She led the way upstairs. The treads were oak, polished to a shine. A strip of green canvas like industrial carpeting ran up the center, presumably so the visitors wouldn't mark the wood. "That should be red," she murmured.

"I beg your pardon?" She must have said it too loud, because the guide heard her.

"Nothing," she said. "It's just that I've seen a picture of stairs like these, and the carpet was red."

Ms. Dickinson smiled a little more warmly this time. "I see. As it happens, the owner agrees with you. He's given orders for red carpeting to replace this." She shrugged and sniffed. "He's a rich man. He can have whatever he wants."

He sounded like a spoiled brat. Still, Tabby wasn't likely to meet him.

The feeling that she knew this place grew stronger as Tabby followed the other visitors up the stairs and on to a broad landing. "The house is a charming example of a Thames-side villa," the guide said. "At one time this part of the river was filled with gracious houses like these. Many still remain, but this is the only one in this stretch of the river open to the public. Originally these houses served as bachelor retreats. The Earl of Northcote built this house for that purpose. He had a mistress here whom he loved dearly, but after her death he never came back."

"What did his mistress die of?" Tabby asked.

Ms. Dickinson glared at her. "I don't know. After the earl died, the house was sold to the great Duke of Melreck, one of Queen Victoria's earliest mentors. With Lord Melbourne, Melreck helped her break away from her repressive childhood to become a great Queen."

Tabby wanted to know more about Lord Northcote. The guide treated him as if he was a sideline, a post-it note in history, but everybody had their place. They all had their own lives and so what if Lord Northcote wasn't as interesting historically as the Duke of Melreck? She would look the earl up when she got back to her hotel tonight.

She listened to Ms. Dickinson, the woman with iron-gray hair cut into a neat, smooth jaw-length bob. She reminded Tabby of her old math teacher at High School. She only graduated because she was too terrified of the woman to disappoint her, so she'd redoubled her efforts to master calculus.

Tabby dropped back, let the other visitors crowd eagerly around Ms. Dickinson and her stories. Apparently the house had become a retreat of a different nature, a place where politicians gathered to discuss matters they didn't want the press to find out about. Treaties and policies were hammered out here. The old duke had been a roué, but he'd used his mistress as a cover for secret meetings. Tabby had to admit that was an interesting fact, but she was still annoyed that Ms. Dickinson had skimmed past the house's original owner.

So it had always been a private house, not a showplace or somewhere the owners would use for guests. Tabby was glad of that. River House deserved some loving.

After seeing a series of pretty rooms, Ms. Dickinson led them upstairs, to the main reception rooms.

Doors opened off the hallway. They gave Tabby glimpses into elegant rooms that appeared, nevertheless, comfortable, not the grand, daunting affairs she'd seen in London. She'd sit in that window seat with a book and a pot of tea, savoring the view of the garden and enjoying her lazy time. Or entertain a few select guests in the pretty dining room the guide showed them. Apparently the table opened enough to seat twenty, and somebody had signed an important treaty there. Ms. Dickinson invited the visitors in. They could see a copy of the treaty laid out on the table, with the very pen they'd used to sign it.

Unimpressed by the treaty, although she probably should be, Tabby wandered further up the hall. The press to get into the dining room obscured her break for freedom. She wanted to see more.

Another room caught her attention. Inside, she saw a tantalizing glimpse of blue, a large painting on one wall. She slipped inside. This room had a comfortable sofa facing the plaster fireplace, and she caught a flicker that made her jump as she entered. It was only a mirror above the fireplace, reflecting her as she crept past it. She stood, her hands clenched into fists, staring at the picture.

She knew it well, at least the top part. It was the life-size version of the miniature she'd bought yesterday in the funny little shop.

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Tabby stepped forward, unheeding and blind to everything but the vision before her. She pulled the pendant away, lifted it to see the painting. Reluctant to share the likeness with anyone else, she'd worn the pendant with the carved side showing, keeping her secret greedily to herself.

It was him. She had a watercolor miniature of his face and bare shoulders, but the painting before her was in oils, vibrant with vitality. In this, the man wore in a plain blue coat and cream waistcoat, with immaculate pants, delineating the hard muscles of his thighs. In life, he must have been about six feet tall, maybe an inch or two more. He stood in a landscape, the green lawn at his feet and a dog at his heels, a spaniel who gazed up at him adoringly. A grand house stood in the background, but Tabby had no eyes for that.

She'd found him. Was he Lord Northcote or the Duke of Melreck? Or a relative, or maybe just a picture the current owner had bought?

This painting had called her. Now she finally stood in its presence she recognized its demands. Not a siren call, that would hint at a female seductively pleading. What Tabby had felt was a demand, hard and masculine, a "Come to me" she found it impossible to ignore.

A crisp male voice came from behind her. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" She spun around, but dizziness she'd swam up and took her under. She must have stumbled because the last she remembered was falling like a stone into sweet oblivion.