

DARK GARDEN

by

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2009

CHAPTER ONE

The gun is loaded,” said the woman with the rifle aimed from her hip. She was tall and disheveled. Her lank coal-black hair fell heavily around her face. She locked the door behind her. “Move and I swear I’ll blow your fucking head off.”

Vienna Blake hit the security alarm under her desk. Not that anyone could have missed the fact that a crazy woman had invaded their building. A SWAT team was probably en route already. “What do you want?”

“You know why I’m here.”

The intruder was sullen and suspicious, like a wild thing peering out from behind iron bars. Her clothes belonged on the set of a period movie, not in a downtown Boston office. Who wore a three-quarter length velvet coat and a white shirt with some kind of cravat at the throat? Only Mason Cavender. Vienna supposed the coat had provided camouflage so she could smuggle the rifle. But the black breeches and riding boots?

“Can you lower your gun?” she requested. “It’s making me nervous.”

“A Blake with a sense of humor, whadaya know.” Mason strode across the office and halted a few feet from the imposing cherrywood desk. Eyes dark with menace swept over Vienna. “You think this is funny?”

Vienna refused to allow her alarm to show. She’d be damned if a rifle pointed at her gut would turn her into a crybaby. “You’re only making things worse for yourself.”

“Worse? Your family has destroyed mine. And now you’ve

murdered my brother. Was that your finest moment? Or did you prefer seeing my father wet himself the day he had his stroke?"

Vienna assessed her chances of extracting the Smith & Wesson she kept in her top drawer before Mason could fire her weapon. Forcing herself to remain calm and think carefully, she said, "I'm truly sorry about your brother."

The long barrel inched toward her chest. "Sorry? My brother isn't cold in his grave and you have the nerve to send me that takeover offer?"

Mason looked like she hadn't slept since the funeral. Vienna recognized that the situation was dangerous, but she refused to allow herself the luxury of panic. People who panicked made mistakes. She belonged to a different ilk—people who made mistakes, survived them, and would never surrender their control again. She forced herself to breathe evenly as she analyzed her options. If she could get the revolver from her drawer, she would only need a single shot. Self-defense. Any competent attorney would ensure no charges were ever laid.

But shooting Mason could only be a last resort. Apart from anything else, Vienna would draw no satisfaction from such an end. She wanted Mason present to witness the final destruction of the Cavender legacy. She wanted her to take that offer because she had no other choice.

"With Lynden gone, there's only one of us left," Mason said hoarsely. "And one of you. The last of the Cavenders takes out the last of the Blakes. Poetic justice, don't you think?"

Vienna sighed. "I had nothing to do with that accident, and if you'd bothered to research your facts you'd know it."

Mason's fist smashed down on the desk. A stack of files toppled sideways, spilling their contents on the floor. "Liar," she chanted tonelessly, as though talking in her sleep. "Murderer."

"The police will be here any minute." Vienna eased the drawer open a few more inches. "For God's sake, you're going to be hurt. They'll shoot you. Do you want to die for nothing?"

Breathing hard, Mason snarled, "Do you think I care? I held my brother in my arms while he took his last breath. I promised him revenge."

"Then at least select the right person for your retribution," Vienna said with disdain. "I suggest you start with the aircraft mechanic."

“Why? Is that who you hired? So it would look like an accident?”

Vienna could almost get her hand into the drawer. She kept her shoulders still to disguise her intentions. Softening her voice, she said, “Mason, I had nothing to do with the crash. I swear it, on my mother’s life.”

Mason studied her closely for a long while, then lowered the rifle. Her eyelids drooped with exhaustion, but those black, savage eyes still gleamed vengefully from beneath long, dense lashes. “Why is it that when beautiful women lie, it’s so easy to believe every poisonous word?”

“Wow, you must knock ’em dead with flattery like that.”

The heavy eyelashes swept up and a very different Mason suddenly stared out. Vienna’s stomach dived and her pulse climbed sharply. A prickling chill spread its feelers beneath her skin, as though she were being delicately licked all over. Her nipples reacted, pressing against the thin lace of her bra. Vienna bit her lip so she wouldn’t gasp, but Mason must have glimpsed the reaction. An insolent heat invaded her gaze and she gave a sensual, cynical smile that bothered Vienna more than the gun.

There was something raw and untamed about Mason that always unsettled her. That hadn’t changed since the last time their paths had crossed and, maddeningly, Mason had become even more physically attractive as the years passed. Her coltishness had given way to a long-bodied muscularity unsoftened by feminine curves. The lingering traces of childhood had fled her face, leaving the lean planes and hard jawline more sharply defined. Vienna took in the strange, sinewy beauty of the hand clamped around the rifle stock, the odd combination of elegance and artisan practicality. She knew how those hands felt. Sometimes it seemed she’d spent her whole life trying to stamp out that particular memory. She still couldn’t make sense of Mason’s effect on her.

Their first disturbing encounter flashed through her mind. The Blakes had held a wedding that day at Penwraithe, their home in the Berkshires. After the formalities the guests were enjoying a tea dance and picnic, hoping an impending summer storm would come to nothing. Everyone fell back in disarray when a huge black horse thundered through the proceedings and halted in front of the picnic blanket where

seven-year-old Vienna sat with her dolls. From the frozen faces of her aunts and cousins, Vienna understood she was in danger and slid slowly backward on her butt away from the restless hooves.

Once she was at a safe distance, she scrambled up and brushed off her fancy flower-girl dress. A spatter of rain landed on her top lip as she looked up into the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. Licking the water away, she asked, "Can I have a ride?"

The rider looked surprised. "Do you know who I am?"

When Vienna shook her head, the dark-eyed girl leaned down and offered her hand. Ignoring the protests of those around her, Vienna allowed herself to be pulled up onto the front of the saddle. The strange older child wrapped an arm around her waist, doubled the reins in her free hand, and kicked the horse into a gallop.

As Vienna laughed into the wind, the girl said in her ear, "I'm Mason Cavender. Your family wants me and my brother dead."

Vienna recognized the name instantly and her heart skittered, but even at seven years of age she knew exactly what was expected of her. A Blake never backed down in front of a Cavender. Leaning back to make herself heard, she replied carelessly, "So what?"

Mason's laughter warmed her cheek. "Hold on tight," she warned. And then they were airborne, jumping a stream and racing down a slope toward a pair of towering wrought iron gates.

For a few terrifying seconds Vienna thought they were going to attempt the impossible jump over the obstacle, but Mason slowed to a trot and a man emerged from the gatehouse. As he opened the gates Vienna studied the design on each: a lion, twin crescents, and a serpent.

Mason flourished an arm. "This is where I live. It's called Laudes Absalom."

Huge oaks overshadowed the broad avenue they followed. On the right lay a dark belt of unkempt woods from which drifted the scent of decay and fungus. On the left, beyond the stalwart oaks, a small white temple stood on the brow of a grassy slope just in sight of a lake bordered by pines. Ahead loomed a house unlike any Vienna had ever seen, a baleful fortress rising against the leaden sky. Stone towers loomed, angels propped up archways, demons lurked beneath the eaves. One wing of the monstrous residence was falling down, the roof gutted and the masonry crumbling. Slabs of stone and broken statuary

were piled up at the base of a wall jutting from the damaged building. Rambling roses made their way over this barrier like fugitives from the other side, spilling across the rubble in a riot of crimson and pink blooms.

Mason paused on the rise of a bridge halfway along the drive and guided her horse in a semicircle so they could look toward the shadowed lake and the temple. A gust of wind blew the rosebud wreath from Vienna's head and caught at her hair. Mason plucked a long coppery wisp away from her face and smoothed it back behind Vienna's ear. For a few seconds her hand rested on Vienna's cheek.

"You shouldn't be here," she said.

Vienna smiled, thrilled by that wicked truth. She never got to have any fun. Her nanny or some bossy female relative was always tagging along, reminding her of her duty as her parents' only child. "I don't care. Anyway, you shouldn't have crossed the boundary."

"That land where you were having your picnic," Mason said with a note of satisfaction. "It's Cavender land. Your family has to give it back to us next year."

"Why?"

"Because the judge said so."

Vienna had no reply to this unfathomable fact. It came to her in that moment that she was on a dark, fast horse with the very child she'd been warned never to talk to, and they were inside the towering gates she'd been told never to enter. Her father always slowed the car when they drove past Laudes Absalom so he could deliver various lines from a litany of condemnation for their neighbors. *A curse upon their vile hearts and craven souls. One day, we'll see that house reduced to dust. Never trust a Cavender.*

Mason jumped down, telling Vienna to hold the cante. She took the reins and led the horse the rest of the way toward the house, where she yelled, "Mr. Pettibone," and a man ducked his head to pass through one of several small archways along the front of the house. He lifted Vienna down and led the horse away.

"Don't say anything till we get to my room," Mason instructed as they climbed the steps to the main doors. "That's if you aren't too sissy to come inside."

Vienna paused to stare up at a statue, a sorrowful marble angel with a strange-looking dog at her side. A phantom wind buffeted her,

molding her filmy robes to her sleek thighs and firm breasts. One hand clutched at the dog's scruff, the other trailed behind her, the fingers barely brushing the door pillar. She was not so much guarding the entrance as stealing away, looking back as though afraid of being followed.

Mason trailed her fingertips over the statue's hand. "This is my great-great-grandmother, Estelle."

"Was she an angel?"

"No, they gave her wings because she's in heaven. She drowned in the lake."

"Did the dog drown, too?"

Mason gave her an odd look. "You're asking baby questions. Come on."

She took Vienna's hand and escorted her indoors, into a huge wood-paneled hall crisscrossed with fragments of light from rows of high leaded windows on either side. Swords, axes, stag heads, and paintings cluttered the walls, and long, dusty red drapes were tied with fraying golden cords. A gigantic staircase rose in the center, leading to a gallery walkway high above. The floor creaked as they walked and Mason kept tugging at Vienna's hand to make her hurry.

Before they could reach a far-off door, a man's voice ordered them to stop. Vienna heard a cuss from Mason, and they turned around. The man was big and his face seemed to be etched from stone, just like the house. His eyes burned into Vienna.

"What's your name, girl?" he asked.

"Vienna Blake."

"Take her back," he told Mason.

"But I don't have anyone to play with. Why couldn't I go to camp with Lynden?"

He came closer. The smell of alcohol clung to him. The hand at his side formed a fist. "I said get her out of here."

Mason stepped in front of Vienna. "No."

He cuffed her so hard across the face that she staggered and fell. Standing over her, he said, "Take that spawn back where she belongs and don't ever bring her here again."

Vienna shivered at the memory of his rage. She wondered if Laudes Absalom was really as morbid and intimidating as it had seemed that day. Perhaps, with Mason's father gone, it was a just a big old house

that needed renovations. Assuming she won the next skirmish in their ongoing battle, she would soon be in a position to decide its fate. Laudes Absalom would finally belong to the Blakes.

She sighed. A hundred and forty years had passed since their families first began tearing at each other's throats, and she was the one who would finally make the Cavenders pay their debt in full. For as long as she could remember, this moment had obsessed her family. Sitting on her father's knee, she had recited the promise every Blake learned along with the first words they could speak: *While Cavenders breathe and prosper, the Blakes cannot rest in their graves.*

The last of the Cavenders was now in front of her, breaking the law, threatening her life, and soon to be led off in handcuffs, or possibly shot by the police. Vienna searched for pleasure in the prospect of her enemy's humiliation and defeat, but she could only find hollow pity and a sense of dismay.

Astounding herself, she said, "Go home, Mason. Just walk out of here. I guarantee you will be unmolested."

"Do I look like a coward? Do you think I would dishonor myself by running away?"

Vienna caught a flash of herself standing at the gates of Laudes Absalom two days after that horse ride, face-to-face with Mason, the heavy bars between them. Mason, with her ten-year-old dignity, had informed her they could never be friends. She kept her head down as if she could hide her bruised face and bloody upper lip.

Vienna had been chastised for their exploit, too. No dessert for a week and her dolls confiscated until she laboriously penned a letter explaining why Blakes did not play with Cavenders. As soon as she'd completed her punishment and apologized to everyone who seemed offended, she'd evaded her nanny and returned to the scene of her disgrace, worried about Mason. The man at the gatehouse had made her promise not to come by again, causing trouble, then he summoned Mason.

Standing on either side of the gate, they'd solemnly shaken hands, forswearing the possibility of friendship and avowing their status as enemies. Vienna could still see Mason's black eye and the grimace of pain as she tried to smile when they said good-bye. She'd stopped once as she walked away, looking back for the longest time. Vienna waved, but Mason didn't respond. It was eight years before they spoke again.

“I think you’ve suffered a terrible loss,” Vienna said coolly. “You’re not fully in command of yourself.”

“I see. And you think this temporary softness in the head would induce me to accept pity from a Blake?”

“Don’t mistake self-interest for pity.” Vienna finally opened the drawer far enough to admit her hand. “Do you seriously imagine defeating you in this condition would give me any satisfaction? It’s hardly a fair fight.”

Mason barked a harsh laugh. “When did that ever stop you or any of your family?”

“Don’t judge me by Cavender standards,” Vienna said haughtily. She closed her fingers around her revolver. “There are some things I won’t stoop to, including cold-blooded murder and taking advantage of a person unhinged by grief.”

“How did you come by these newfound scruples? Obviously they’re not genetic.”

Vienna contemplated the best way to defuse the present threat from her old foe. Liberating the .38 from the drawer, she lifted it into view. As Mason’s eyes registered the revolver, Vienna said softly, “Yes, we’re both armed. And I could have shot you right then, but I chose not to.”

“Proving what? You’re a lousy shot and would have missed? Or you don’t want a mess on your carpet?”

“For the record, I could take you down at a hundred yards, but I don’t have to kill you to destroy you,” Vienna replied sweetly. “Let me explain what I have planned. I’m going to buy the last pieces of the Cavender Corporation, and then I’m going to bankrupt you and buy that ramshackle castle of yours and the land that rightfully belongs to the Blakes. Then I’m going to raze your family’s edifices to the ground, cut down your trees, and sell every animal on that property for slaughter.”

She got no further with her dangerous taunts. Mason lifted the rifle, her knuckles white, and for a split second it seemed that she would pull the trigger. Then she let the weapon fall.

Extending her arms, she invited, “Why waste time plotting and scheming? Just shoot me.” When Vienna didn’t react, she ripped open the front of her shirt and exposed her naked, heaving chest. “Get it over with. Come on, lay waste to another Cavender heart.”

Vienna didn’t know when she’d ever seen a body more beautiful.

Mason's breasts were like the rest of her, the muscles sheathed in smooth, pale olive skin. Her small, hard nipples were an unlikely shade of Merlot, a deeper hue than her mouth. Her toned torso flinched visibly beneath Vienna's gaze and her breathing grew more rapid. Vienna fixed her attention on the belt loosely fastened above the rise of her hips. The buckle was silver and ornately carved, a lion and two crescents within the loose coil of a serpent. The Cavender emblem, the same one that decorated the wrought iron gates at Laudes Absalom, supposedly created from an ancient family crest.

There was talk that a Cavender bride had Romany ancestry, accounting for the dark-haired, dark-eyed look of the entire family and for their unruliness, reckless passions, and legendary superstitions. A penchant for gambling, drinking, brawling, and womanizing had ended the lives of a succession of Cavender males over the past two centuries. The women were no strangers to vice, either. Vienna had heard the stories; the Blakes circulated every sordid detail as evidence of their superior gene pool. If Cavender women didn't die in childbirth, they took their own lives or vanished in peculiar circumstances, littering the family tree with motherless children. The men were handsome and charming, and known for their violent rages.

The Blakes were diametric opposites, with their blond or red hair, pale skin, cool nature, and dogged self-discipline. Blakes were conservative, logical, and dispassionate, except for their desire to vanquish the family that had wronged them. But even their quest for revenge was cold and ruthless, tempered by a determination to win by the rules of civilized society. Vienna could not imagine how the two families had ever started out in business together, let alone that their enterprise had thrived and that relations had been so cordial, they'd built their homes on adjoining land. They jointly ran a farm and orchard to provide both households with food. Their children were schooled together. There was even a Blake-Cavender marriage, cementing the alliance.

Taking in the woman breathing hard in front of her, Vienna suffered a pang of deep regret for the divide between them. Neither could cross that treacherous chasm without reaching out to the other, but their mutual mistrust was too great for either to make the first move. For a brief, crazy instant, Vienna wanted to step around her desk and take Mason in her arms. If anyone needed a hug, her sworn enemy did.

She drew a sharp breath and caught a whiff of soap and spice blended with another scent. Mason's. She hated that she recognized it, that it was imprinted in her sense memory just as indelibly as Mason's touch.

"What's wrong? Can't stand to besmirch your pretty white hands?" Mason let her arms fall to her sides. Her shirt fell loosely closed. "No, of course not. You're a Blake. You have lawyers and flunkies to do your dirty work."

Lowering her eyes, Vienna tried to distance herself from the physical turmoil she felt. She set her weapon down next to Mason's and almost laughed when she realized she was looking at an antique rifle. Even if Mason had pulled the trigger, the Winchester probably wouldn't have fired. Vienna studied the elaborately engraved silver plate on the walnut rifle butt. Below the Cavender crest, an inscription read, "Presented to Thomas Blake Cavender, 1870."

She frowned. The man who had caused the feud between their families was Thomas's father, Hugo Cavender, who shot Benedict Blake, the family patriarch, in 1870. Was this the murder weapon? Had he bestowed it upon his son, Thomas, to celebrate the crime? Perhaps the same convoluted Cavender logic had made Mason choose this rifle for her vengeance fantasy. Was Vienna supposed to be goaded by this tasteless symbolism?

The phone on her desk started ringing before she could summon a suitable putdown. "That's probably the police," she told Mason. "By now I'm sure they're in the building."

"Then it's time for you to play the poor, helpless victim terrified for her life. They'll buy it."

Vienna picked up the phone.

A man said, "Sergeant Joe Pelli, Boston Police Department. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is Vienna Blake. How may I help you, Sergeant?"

"Just answer my questions yes or no, ma'am. Are you being held against your will?"

"No."

"Is an individual in the room with you?"

"Yes. Ms Cavender and I are having a meeting."

"Are you in any immediate danger?"

Vienna hesitated. "No."

"Is she armed?"

“There are two weapons lying on the desk in front of me, Sergeant. One of them is my revolver, the other is an old collector’s firearm that is probably not in working order. Ms. Cavender will be leaving shortly.”

“It’s not that easy,” the sergeant said. “She’s broken the law.”

Vienna placed her hand over the phone. “He wants to arrest you.”

Mason wandered to a club chair in one corner and flopped back into it, arms dangling over the padded rests, legs sprawled in front of her. “Send him up.”

“Are you drunk or just absurdly stubborn?”

“I don’t drink.” Mason took a silver case from an inside pocket and withdrew a corona and a pair of scissors. “There are more pleasurable vices.”

“This building has a no-smoking rule.” Vienna hated that she sounded like her mother.

Mason severed the cigar cap and indolently lit up. “Bite me.”

Her soft taunt awakened Vienna’s nipples once more and a dart of awareness jarred her spine. She told the sergeant to stand down his men. Studying the woman filling her office with aromatic smoke, she asked, “Why did you come here?”

“Those vices I mentioned, one of them is pissing off Blakes.” Mason kept the cigar in her mouth as she refastened the few shirt buttons that weren’t torn off. She took another puff, then perched the corona on the edge of the chair arm. Her expression was one of brooding introspection. “I’ve just had the worst two weeks of my life, and now I have to leave without killing you. So I guess I’m procrastinating.”

“I’ve heard that’s a Cavender trait.” Vienna stood. “Look, I have a lunch date. Security will escort you out of the building.”

She unloaded the Winchester and the revolver, slid the bullets into her purse, and picked up both weapons so that her unwelcome guest could not take a gun with her. Unable to prevent herself, she glanced at Mason’s face. The dark, unearthly eyes flashed at her and Mason’s smile, though harder, was as sensuous as ever. In another life, Vienna would have found her impossible to resist. But Mason was the last of the Cavenders. The Blakes would settle for nothing less than her annihilation.