

THE
BURNING
TOWER



GRACE CHETWIN

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FOR CLAIRE

The Burning Tower

...The Ruin of the House of Life when evil has prevailed therein...the rending of the House of a False Doctrine. Intellectual destruction. It illustrates also in the most comprehensive way the old truth that "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." ...The Tower has been spoken of as the chastisement of pride and the intellect overwhelmed in the attempt to penetrate the Mystery of God....It may signify also the end of a dispensation.

Arthur Edward Waite



ONE

Darkness. Space. Wind streamed past, lifting her hair, chilling her nape. Not a good place. But Tess was here, she knew it.

High wall loomed, entrance arch, stone steps, round and up. A lighthouse? No sound of waves. A belfry, then.

Flesh crawling, Tabitha leaned in.

"Tess?"

Echoes spiraled up.

"Tess!" Too late! "Tess!"

She toiled up the stone steps round and round until she came out on the belfry platform. A mere arm's length away, two figures stood locked against the stars. Humpbacked man. And Tess.

"Tess."

Tess turned her head. The man spoke in her ear and they laughed.

Couldn't Tess see the danger she was in?

"Let her go!" Tabitha leapt through air molasses-thick, and as she leapt he shucked off his hump and swung it.

Back pack, blocky full.

As it hit there came a flash, the floor heaved, the stone walls cracked. Flames sprang, smoke swirled. Heat singed her face as the very air exploded and the belfry dome shot out into the dark.

Tabitha grabbed for Tess's arm, they rose with the blast into the air. "Hang on!" Tabitha tried to get a better grip but winds tore them apart. Tess arced away, arms flailing, mouth wide in silent shout.

Then Tabitha was falling head-first, down through the night. . . .

For a moment, Tabitha lay, queasy with nightmare. The bunk was heaving under her: *Daisy* was bumping against the dock. At that thought, her head cleared, some. A fishing boat must have just gone past, roiling the calm waters. Tabitha sat up, shivering. Her nightmare was fading, but not the terror. Tess, up a high tower—with that bastard Wolf.

She climbed from the bunk, lit the little stove, and set the coffee dregs to heat. Was Tess in trouble? Tabitha glanced toward the phone. Dare she call the cops again?

She tipped hot sludge into her mug and perched on the bunk's edge. An anxiety dream, only. Not one of her premonitions.

Wolf was into drugs, no use Tess denying it. And taking Tess out on that damn bike of his at all hours of the night. If one of Wolf's deals went bad, and Tess got in the way . . . Tabitha sprang up. She *was* hurt! No, someone would have called. A cop, why not say it. Wouldn't be the first time.

Tabitha snatched up the phone and dialed 911. "Ms. Mornay here. Tabitha Mornay. No, there's no emergency." Three twenty-five a.m. the clock said. "Is my daughter, is Tess Goddard there?"

Pause. The voice said "Please Hold." Other voices off. Tabitha strained to hear. Someone grappled the receiver. "Ms. Mornay?"

Logan Brookes. *The cop. Chief.* On the red-eye watch?

"Ms. Mornay, your daughter isn't here."

Tabitha let out a cautious breath.

"Should she be?"

Tabitha bit her lip. They'd been around that block a few times over Tess—nothing criminal exactly, just mischief, but worrisome enough. Drunk and disorderly. Disturbing the peace. Dissing cops. First it was Tess and Bucky with the acne and bad teeth. Then Tess and Bob. Now Tess and Wolf, and if she didn't do something about it soon it would be Bonnie and Clyde.

"Ms. Mornay?"

"No, no reason. Goodnight." An anxiety dream, that was all that it had been. Tabitha winced at the coffee's bitter dregs.

She set the mug down, *bam*. Once upon a time she had called the shots. And not too long since she'd still been able to drag Tess from the brink by the scruff of her self-destructive little neck. But their last row had marked that era's end. Ironic. It had been just after Tabitha had bought boat and coach house and a chance of better times.

All because of Wolf. Wolf the Pharmaceutical Entrepreneur.

She'd tried hard not to muscle in. Hell, that only sent Tess running. They'd long since done the mother-daughter stuff on protection and the dangers of controlled substances. She'd done everything short of chaining Tess to a basement post. She'd had Tess go in for checkups, had bitten her tongue over a couple of yeast infections. But that last

trip to Doc's had lit the fuse.

All I'm asking, Tess, is "Are you clean?"

Mom-mo!

Tess, I'm sorry, but Doc said—

You listen to him? After I told you I'm not into anything?

Tabitha tried to tell herself those telltale symptoms could be, well, just Tess. After all, she'd always been jumpy, it was in the genes. And the short attention span? She'd always had that, too. So Doc had found Tess's nostrils sensitive. Hell, she'd been hyper-touchy since she was a baby.

But there was Wolf.

How do you run with the dogs and not grow hair and fangs?

Tabitha knelt up on the narrow bunk, pulling the comforter up around her shoulders, and peered through the porthole. Cold and dark outside; distant light specks danced upon the water. To her left, the town harbor and marina. To her right, her neighbor's dock and beach house. An Arab from some obscure emirate who'd bought the Witchener estate, all but Tabitha's small back corner: dock—with elderly *Daisy* thrown in—and a sliver of land at the water's edge; encompassing the former coach house—her studio with living space above—and right of way through the front gate. Mrs. Witchener had offered the parcel at a ridiculous price to Tabitha just a few months before she died, why Tabitha never knew. Maybe the old lady fancied Tabitha as her protégée. She'd worked hard for years to be known as a patron of the Arts. Or maybe she'd been tickled to have a live sculptor on her premises. The main thing was that thanks to Mrs. Witchener and her generous offer, the place was hers, free and clear.

First thing she'd done on moving in was make a room for Tess.

Tess wouldn't touch it, of course, so soon after their big row. But

Tabitha had made her daughter accept the spare key and leave some token belongings to mark her space. And ever hopeful that Tess would relent and come home, she herself had spent the summer on the houseboat, leaving the coach house vacant.

She heard a hum of engines, felt the wash against the boat's side. Another fishing boat, heading back into the marina no doubt. Tabitha peered out, saw nothing. She shivered, pulling the comforter tighter. She was not a night person. Didn't like the idea of running blind.

She climbed back into bed, lay down. And sat up again. Couldn't throw off the dread. Sighing, she swung her legs to the floor and this time pulled on her sweats. Saturday already. Her big day: the opening of her first solo show. She crossed the gravel tract from dock to house and climbed the outside stairs—an old fire-escape—to the back door, bypassing her ground-floor studio.

Just inside on her right was the narrow passage running the length of the entire coach house. Across the passage, directly facing the door was the kitchen. She reached for the passage switch—and froze. Someone was there. She snapped on the light. The passage was empty, all the way down to the end. She cocked her head, heard nothing. But something hung in the air, a whiff, a trace.

Tabitha stepped into the kitchen, hit the light, and looked around: living room off to the left, dining room and the spiral stair leading down to her studio on the right.

Tabitha edged toward the stair and caught another whiff of sweet and cloying scent.

She went down step by cautious step. If someone was down there, he'd have trouble hiding with almost everything gone to the gallery. A few more steps and her remaining pieces came into view: a dozen or so scattered figures, mostly plaster prototypes for her current opus:

a seven-foot hollow chunk of cast aggregate: *Caitlin Brushing her Hair*. She moved to the nearest one, rested her hand on an upraised arm, the loop of armature poking out the elbow where the plaster had fallen away.

"Hello? Tess? Honey, are you there?"

No reply.

She reached out, snapped on the floods and stood, blinking, in the arc lamps' brilliance. After a moment, she moved warily up and down the studio's dusty length peering behind each piece. With every step, her heart pumped faster. Seven to go. Six . . . Five . . . Four more hiding places left. Three. Two . . .

She fetched up against the little side door at the studio's far end, beating a rapid, light tattoo on her sternum with the flat of her hand. No one—now. But there had been someone, she was certain. There was no mistaking the stink of marijuana.

She ought to call 911, yes.

Halfway back upstairs, she checked.

What would she say?

Someone was just here in my house.

No, officer. Whoever's not here now.

No, officer. No sign of any break in.

She climbed the rest of the way. She couldn't call. Could have been Tess. Say Tess had come to spend the night and taken off again, not knowing her mom was in the houseboat.

And the marijuana?

Tabitha clung to the top stair rail, knuckling her sternum hard now.

No, please God.

There was one way of making sure. She could drive out to Checkpoint Charlie, the security gate at the entrance to the tiny—and

exclusive—peninsula that was Lucas Point. Because no one got through without signing in or out. The dozen or so members of the Lucas Point Residents' Association (which Tabitha had not yet been invited to join) paid out a bundle to make sure of that.

If Tess had crossed from the mainland, Tabitha could find out for sure. But then what? What if Tess *had* been and gone? Even if Tabitha went on into town, there was no way of getting to her if she was with Wolf.

Her worry came around full circle.

If Tess *had* been in, if there was trouble. . . .

Around she went again:

Maybe that was why the nightmare. It wouldn't be the first time Tabitha had had a premonition over Tess. That also ran in the family, the power to sense or even see what others did not.

Enough with circles! She had to *know*.

So . . . she'd give herself a reading.

Tabitha crossed to the kitchen counter, pulled her Rider tarot deck from the bottom drawer, unwrapped its threadbare blue silk casing and set it face-down on the countertop. She could pull a quick card or two. But that was not her way. She'd use her favorite, the Celtic cross.

First, she had to pick her key card, the basis of the reading. There were several ways to select it, but she always took the top card, no peeking, no second guess.

She reached for it, withdrew her hand.

This was ridiculous. Why the sudden reluctance?

Maybe . . . the cards needed shuffling.

She took up the pack, shuffled, cut three times from right to left, then stacked. She stared down at the new top card's blue-and-white whorls as if they were a nest of serpents.

She picked up the card and turned it.

“Oh.”

Tall gray pillar on a promontory, bleak against a stark black sky. From the window holes burst thick gray smoke and flames curled out. Lightning had snaked from the top right corner and hit the tower roof, a golden dome-shaped crown, blasting it up to the left. On either side of the tower two figures, man on the left, crowned woman on the right, plunged headlong down, their hair, their clothes streaming back from the force of their descent, their mouths round with horror: *le feu du Ciel*.

The Burning Tower.