

# ***The Orchid House*** **by Lucinda Riley**

## **Chapter 1**

### **1**

*Norfolk, England*

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

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

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

*I go to sleep to forget. To find some peace, because I spend the whole day remembering. I am not mad. Though recently, I've been thinking a lot about what madness actually is. Many millions of human beings, each one an individual, each with their own DNA profile, their own unique thoughts—their personal perception of the world from inside their heads. And each view is different.*

*I've come to the conclusion that all we humans can really share is the flesh and bones, the physical matter we were born with. For example, I've been told time and time again that everyone responds differently to grief and that no reaction is wrong. Some people cry for months, years even. They wear black and they mourn. Others seem untouched by their loss. They bury it. They carry on exactly as they had before. As if nothing had happened to them. I'm not sure what my reaction has been. I haven't cried for months. In fact, I have barely cried at all.*

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

*I can hear someone downstairs. I must get up and pretend I am ready to face the day.*  
Alicia Howard pulled her Land Rover to the curb. She switched off the engine and walked up the shallow hill to the cottage. Knowing the front door was never locked, she opened it and stepped inside.

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

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 One out-of-date yogurt, some butter, and an aging tomato sat on the shelves.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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's not much milk, I just looked in your fridge."

"That's okay, I'll have it black." Julia walked to the sink, filled the kettle, and switched it on. "So, how have you been?" asked Alicia.

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

Alicia grimaced. "Fine" was Julia's stock reply. She used it to swat away probing questions. "Seen anyone this week?"

"No, not really," said Julia.

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

"Thanks for the offer, but I've told you, I'm fine," Julia replied distantly.

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

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

"No, thanks."

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

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

"Actually, I've got plans for today."

"Then you'd better cancel them. I need your help."

"How?"

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

"And you need my help to do that, Alicia?"

"It's his sixty-fifth, the day he becomes a pensioner."

"I'm aware of that. He is my father too."

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

“Wharton Park is being sold?”

“Yes, didn’t you know?”

Julia’s shoulders slumped. “No, I didn’t. Why is it?”

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

“How sad,” Julia murmured.

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

Surprisingly, without need of further persuasion, Julia nodded. “Okay, I’ll go and get my coat.” Five minutes later, Alicia was maneuvering the car along the narrow high street of the pretty coastal village of Blakeney. Turning left, she headed east for the fifteen-minute journey to Wharton Park.

“Wharton Park . . . ?” muttered Julia to herself.

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

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

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

Whenever Julia thought back on the time she had spent at Wharton Park, she remembered the blue sky and the lush colors of the flowers blossoming under the summer sun. And Wharton Park had once been famous for its collection of orchids. It was strange to think that the small, fragile flowers had originally grown in tropical climes, and yet there they had been, flourishing in the cool Northern Hemisphere, amid the flatlands of Norfolk.

When she was a child, Julia had spent all year looking forward to her summer visits to Wharton Park. The tranquility and warmth of the hothouses—sitting snugly in the corner of the kitchen garden, sheltered against the cruel winds that blew in from the North Sea during the winter—stayed in her memory all year. This, combined with the domestic certainty of her grandparents’ cottage, had made it a place of peace for her. At Wharton Park, nothing changed. Alarms and timetables weren’t in charge, it was nature dictating the rhythm. She could still remember, in a corner of the hothouse, her grandfather’s old Bakelite radio playing classical music from dawn until dusk.

“Flowers love music,” Grandfather Bill would tell her as he tended his precious plants. Julia would sit on a stool in the corner by the radio and watch him, listening to the music. She was learning to play the piano and had a natural ability for it. An ancient upright piano was in the small sitting room of the cottage. Often, after supper, she would be asked to play. Her

grandparents had watched appreciatively, and with awe, as Julia's delicate young fingers sped across the keys.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's the turning!" Julia said, as Alicia almost overshot it.

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

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

"You always loved it here, didn't you?" Alicia said softly.

"Yes, didn't you?"

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

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

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

"You fell in love and had a family."

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

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

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

"I've never forgotten," murmured Julia.

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

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

Wharton Park was not large enough to be termed a stately home. It did not have the perfect architecture to complement it either, having had a couple of odd additions from later generations of Crawfords, which had compromised its purity. But for that very reason, neither did it have the daunting starkness associated with other great houses of the period.

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

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

Julia shrugged. "Let's see, shall we?"

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

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

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