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The Glass Room

Written by Ann Cleeves

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Ann Cleeves

THE GLASS ROOM

MACMILLAN



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To my sister, Sue

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Chapter One

Vera Stanhope climbed out of Hector's ancient Land Rover and felt the inevitable strain on her knees. Hector's Land Rover. Her father had been dead for years, but still she thought of the vehicle as his. She stopped for a moment to look down the valley at the view. Another thing her father had gifted her: this house. Sod all else, she thought, maybe she should forgive him because of this. It was October and the light was going. A smell of wood-smoke and ice. Most of the trees were already bare and the whooper swans had come back to the lough.

She'd stopped at the supermarket outside Kimmerston on her way home from work and there were carrier bags piled on the passenger seat. She took a guilty look round to make sure the coast was clear. Her eco-warrior neighbours despised the use of plastic bags, and after a day in the office she couldn't face a right-on lecture about saving the planet. But there was no one in the yard next door. A couple of hens poked around a weed patch. No sound, and if Jack was working in the barn there'd be loud rock music. Or howling blues. She lifted the bags out of the Land Rover, then set them down on her doorstep to search for her keys.

But the door was already open. She felt a shiver of

tension, but also of excitement. No way would she have gone to work without locking it. She'd never believed all the romantic crap about it being safe for country folk to leave their doors open. The rural communities experienced crime too. She'd read the reports and knew there was as much drug use in the pleasant middle-class high schools in Northumberland as in the ones in town. It was just that teachers were better at keeping it quiet. She pushed the door open, using her elbow, thinking that really the last thing she needed was a burglary. She didn't have much to steal. Any self-respecting robber would turn up his nose at her Oxfam clothes and her pitiful PC, her ten-year-old telly. But she hated the thought of anyone being in the house. And she'd have to call in the CSIs, and they'd leave the place in chaos, fingerprint powder over every surface. Then they'd go back to the office with tales of the squalor in which she lived.

Despite her considerable weight she moved quietly. A skill she'd learned in childhood. She stopped in the hall and listened. Nobody was moving in the house. Unless they were as quiet as she was. But there was sound, a cracking of twigs, of sparks. A fire had been lit. The smell of wood-smoke was coming from her home, not from the cottages in the valley as she'd first thought. But it surely wasn't a fire out of control. There were no fumes seeping into the rest of the house. No roaring flames. No heat where she was standing.

She opened the door into the small living room and saw Jack, her neighbour, sitting in the most comfortable chair. The chair where Hector had always sat. He'd put a match to the fire she'd already laid in the

grate and was staring at the flames. Shock, and relief of the tension she'd felt on coming into the house, made Vera angry. Bloody hippies! She'd given them a key for emergencies, not so that they could wander into her house whenever they felt like it. They had no respect for personal boundaries.

'What the shit do you think you're doing?'

Jack looked up at her and she saw there were tears running down his cheeks. She swore under her breath. What was it? Some domestic crisis? A family bereavement? It had been a mistake to get to know these people. Let folk into your life and they started making demands. She hated people making demands.

Then she remembered the times Jack and Joanna had dug the snow from the track so that she could get down the hill to work. The nights she'd gone uninvited into their house to steal bottles of homebrew when she was desperate for a drink. Evenings of good food at their kitchen table and the three of them laughing at some daft joke.

He nodded towards the fire. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It was bloody cold. And I hated waiting at home, once I'd made up my mind to speak to you.'

'What is it, Jack? What's happened?'

He shook his head. 'It's Joanna. I don't know where she is.'

Jack was a Scouser, soft and sentimental. He'd been in the merchant navy once, travelled the world, had stories enough to keep you entertained from teatime until a drunken early morning. Later he'd got hooked by the dream of the good life and, reaching the age of forty, he'd bought the smallholding next to Vera's house. A city boy, his only experience of rural

living had been his annual pilgrimage to the Glastonbury Festival, yet somehow he'd made a go of it. Worked from dawn to dusk and even longer. Often, coming home close to midnight after a difficult case, Vera would hear him in the barn, would tip her head round the door to say goodnight. And that brief contact allowed her to believe that her colleagues were wrong. She did have friends. She did have a life away from the job.

'What do you mean?' Vera tried to keep her voice patient, although something about a weeping man made her feel like slapping him.

'She's been away for two days. No word. I think she's ill. She won't talk about it.'

'What sort of ill?' A pause. 'Cancer?' Vera's mother had died of cancer when she was a child. She still had a kind of superstition about speaking the word.

He shook his head. His greying hair was pulled back into a ponytail. 'I think it's her nerves. Depression. She went on Monday while I was at Morpeth farmers' market. Must have got a taxi. She said she needed some space.'

'She warned you she was leaving?'

He shook his head again. 'Nah, she left a note.' He pulled a scrap of paper from his jeans pocket, set it on the small table next to him, moving a mug with five-day-old coffee dregs so that Vera could see it.

Vera recognized the writing. Joanna often communicated by notes. Purple ink and immaculate italic, spiky and beautifully formed. *'Septic tank emptied.' 'Parcel in barn.' 'Fancy coming in for supper tonight?'* This one read: *'Gone away for a few days. Need some space.*

Soup in pan. Don't worry.' No signature, not even J. No x.

'A few days,' Vera said. 'She'll be back. Or she'll phone.'

He looked up at her bleakly. 'She hasn't been taking her drugs.'

'What drugs?' Vera knew Jack smoked dope. Their house smelled of it. Sometimes, after a few beers too many, he rolled a giant spliff when he was in her place, not thinking that she might be compromised. Once he'd even offered it to her. She'd been tempted, but had turned him down. She knew she had an addictive personality; best to keep her vices legal. She'd presumed Joanna smoked too, but couldn't remember having seen it. Red wine was Joanna's poison, drunk from a large Bristol Blue glass. 'My only inheritance,' she'd said once, holding the glass to the light. 'All that I have left from home.'

'Pills,' Jack said. 'Lithium. To keep her on an even keel, like.'

'And that's why you're so worried?'

'I've been worried for weeks. She's been acting weird. Not talking. And now she's disappeared.'

It had been clear to Vera from the moment she'd seen the couple that Jack adored Joanna. He stole looks at her, basked in her presence. She was big-boned with long, corn-coloured hair worn in a plait down her back. Dramatically dark eyebrows. A wide mouth and large brown eyes. All her features big and generous – hands and feet to match. She wore red, boat-shaped leather shoes and patchwork dungarees, hand-knitted sweaters in bright colours. If Vera had been asked to describe her in one word, it would have

been 'jolly'. She'd never thought of Joanna as being depressed. Maybe a bit the other way, laughing too loudly sometimes and always the last one to leave a party, hugs and kisses all round. Not really in a sexy way, but flamboyant. Vera thought in an earlier life Joanna could have been in the theatre, or an artist. Or a lady. She spoke like an aristocrat, the sort of voice you'd have heard on the BBC in the Sixties. But life before Jack was never mentioned.

Vera went back to the bags still standing on the doorstep and pulled out a couple of bottles of beer. There was a bottle opener on the coffee table next to the mug. So much for her planned evening of domesticity: changing the sheets on her bed, sticking a few towels in the washing machine.

'Go on,' she said. 'Tell me all about it.'

'I never knew what she saw in me.' His voice was weedy, the Liverpool accent even more pronounced.

'Stop fishing for compliments!' Vera barked. 'I've no time for games.'

He looked up at her, shocked. He'd expected sympathy and an easy ride.

'Where did you meet her?' Vera wasn't sure how relevant this was, but she was curious anyway and thought it would get him talking.

'Marseilles,' he said. 'A cafe by the harbour. I'd been working out of there, just finished the contract with the shipping company, money in my pocket. She was sitting alone, halfway through a bottle of wine. Drinking to get drunk, not because she was enjoying a glass with her fish supper. She heard me talk to the waiter, realized I'd never get myself understood and

translated for me. She's always been a bit of a show-off. We got talking. You know.'

'What was she doing in Marseilles?'

'She'd run away from her husband,' Jack said. 'Some rich bastard.' He changed his voice, made it music-hall posh: '*He was heading up the office in Paris.* Some businessman. Or banker. Or wanker. Marseilles was about as far away from him as she could get.'

'Why didn't she go back to the UK?' Vera thought if you left your man, you'd want friends about you. Family even.

'Nothing for her there. She's like the black sheep in her family. They threatened to have her sectioned if she left her husband. You know, like locked up in a loony bin.' He paused. 'She tried to kill herself. There's a scar on her wrist. I saw it that first time, sitting in the sun outside the cafe in Marseilles. It's still there. She calls it her war wound.'

'I've never noticed.'

'That's why she always wears all those bangles. Anyway, that was a long time ago. I got her sorted out. Took her to the GP. She's fine if she takes her pills. They said she had bipolar disorder. I dunno, *I'd* have gone crazy if I'd lived what she'd been through.'

'But she's stopped taking the pills?'

'Aye. Says she's okay now and doesn't need them.' He paused again and looked up, straight at Vera. 'I think there's another man.' Then: 'I think she wants the high of being in love. That's why she stopped taking the lithium.'

'Where would she meet another man?' Vera thought he was letting his imagination run wild.

'Besides Chris in the pub and Arthur the vet, who does she ever meet?'

'She has her own friends,' Jack said. 'Her own interests. That was the deal from the start. I wasn't going to run her life for her.' He hesitated. 'Last week she was on the phone and hung up when I came into the room. She wouldn't say who it was.'

'So where do you think she's gone?' Vera realized she'd finished the beer. She thought she'd like to get rid of Jack before she opened another. Then she'd be able to enjoy it in peace.

'I don't know,' he said. 'If I knew, I'd go and find her.'

'Even though you don't want to run her life for her?' Vera looked at him, challenging him to come up with a rational answer. 'Maybe it's just as she says in the note, and she needs a few days away.' She was thinking it would be easy enough for her to find out where Joanna had run away to. There was only one taxi firm within ten miles of the farm and everyone used it. If she had a word with Tommy Wooler, she'd soon know where Jo was hiding out. If Jack hadn't been so anxious, he'd have thought of that too.

'She's stopped taking her pills,' he said again, bending forward to make sure Vera understood the gravity of his words. 'She's been up and down for days: one minute high as a kite, singing and laughing, the next all angry and shouting the odds. She's not herself. I'm not going to drag her back against her will. Do you think I'd live with her if she didn't want to be with me? Do you think I'd force her to be unhappy? Look, I know you think I'm a soft git, but I'd die for Joanna

Tobin.' He paused for breath. 'I'm worried about her, about what she might do to herself.'

'You think she might attempt suicide again?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'That's what I think. If it doesn't work out for her. If whatever she's dreaming about doesn't happen.'

Vera pushed herself to her feet. There was frozen stuff in her bags that would soon be melting. 'So what do you want me to do?'

He looked at her as if she was mad. 'Find her, of course. Make sure she's safe.'

'And then?'

'That's all.' He'd stood too and they'd moved to the front door. Outside it was freezing and the sky was spattered with stars. 'Just make sure she's safe.'

Chapter Two

God, Vera thought, *if any of the others considered doing this – going freelance, playing the private eye – I'd give them such a bollocking.* She stood in the lean-to putting the contents of her shopping bags into the freezer. It was a chest freezer, too big for her, living on her own. Exactly the same size, she realized for the first time, as the one in which Hector had kept all his dead animals and birds, the core of his illegal taxidermy business. She'd got rid of that when he died. It had been stinking. So why had she bought another, exactly the same? Some shrink could make a big deal out of that. Or decide that she was an idle bugger with no imagination.

And why had she agreed to do as Jack asked and chase around the county looking for Joanna? *Because I'm soft as clarts. Because I enjoy happy endings and want to bring the couple together again, like I'm some great fat Cupid in wellies. Because it would be bloody inconvenient living here without them next door.*

In the kitchen she opened another beer, put a pork pie and a tomato on a plate, with a quarter of a crusty loaf and butter still in the packet, then carried the lot into the living room on a tray. The fire was low and she threw on another couple of logs. The round 1930s

clock that stood on the mantelpiece said it was nine o'clock. She'd better try Tommy Wooler now. He usually caught the last couple of hours before closing in the Percy Arms in Sallyford.

He recognized her mobile number. 'Where are you then? Pissed and incapable and needing a lift home?'

'Not a drop has touched my lips, Tommy. Well, not so you'd notice, and I'm home safe and well. I'm after some information.'

'What sort of information?' Defensive now. In his younger days he'd been a bit of a tearaway. Not malicious, just a tad wild and daft. He kept up with a couple of the bad lads he'd met in the Young Offenders Institution at Castington. Vera had never asked him about them, but that was the way his mind was working.

'You picked up Joanna Tobin two days ago.' A statement not a question.

'Aye, that's right.' There was no suspicion in his voice. He was just relieved she wasn't asking him about his old unsavoury acquaintances. Vera wondered what they were up to and why he was so jumpy, made a mental note to check on them. Or get Holly to do it.

'*Where* was it you took her?' As if she knew really, but it had just slipped her mind.

Tommy didn't care any more. He just wanted to get out to the pub.

'Out to the coast. Howick way.'

'Where *exactly*, Tommy?' She could feel her stomach rumbling, felt somehow that the pie was taunting her.

'I don't know *exactly.* She had to direct me. In the middle of nowhere. She didn't have the postcode, so I

couldn't get it on the satnav. Nightmare!' He paused. 'She called it the Writers' House. Strange name.' He paused. 'What do you want her for anyway?'

But Vera didn't answer. She'd replaced the phone and her mouth was full of pie.

The next morning Jack was lurking in the yard waiting to catch her on her way to Kimmerston. She was earlier than usual and she'd thought she might miss him. How long had he been out there? He was pretending to work on his old tractor, but Vera knew fine well he was waiting to check up on her. She went up to him and stood, legs apart, hands on hips, and put on the fierce voice she used occasionally to show her team she meant business.

'I've promised I'll look for her. But I'll do it in my way and in my time. I'll tell you as soon as there's any news.'

He nodded, but said nothing, and Jack – who was all words, flowery and flowing, whose life was a series of stories – made this silence speak volumes. She got into the Land Rover and drove away, aware of him watching her all the way down the lane.

In the office she googled the Writers' House and found it at once. It seemed there was nothing sinister about the place. Unless you found poets and novelists sinister. This was a retreat for writers of all sorts, and throughout the year it hosted a number of residential courses for writers with different levels of experience. What had she been expecting? A Gothic tower, where Joanna had been trapped by a madman who'd persuaded her to fall in love with him? The pictures on

the website showed a large whitewashed farmhouse. Part of it was very old, according to the advertising pitch, and fortified against the Scots who had raided across the border. One view *did* show a bare-stone outside wall with crenellations. And there was a small, dark chapel. But inside it was all very tasteful and not Gothic at all. Flagstones on the kitchen floor, bare beams, stripped wooden doors. Low sofas and easy chairs, with only the occasional flipchart to indicate it wasn't a private home. The place was run, apparently, by a company of the same name, headed by someone called Miranda Barton.

There were pictures of the tutors, and even Vera recognized a couple of names: a poet who appeared on television occasionally, talking about the decline of British culture; a playwright. The fees seemed to her to be exorbitant, and certainly well beyond Joanna's pocket. Unless Joanna had a secret fund left over from her marriage. In large red letters it said that bursaries were available to writers who showed talent, and it occurred to Vera that Joanna's disappearance was no more disturbing than that: she fancied herself as a writer. Perhaps she'd been awarded one of the bursaries, but had been embarrassed to tell Jack what she was up to. Perhaps she wanted to wait until she'd finished a piece of work before telling him.

A course had started the day Joanna took herself off from Myers Farm: 'Short Cuts. The art of the contemporary crime short story.' *Cuts*, Vera thought. *Very witty. You could tell they'd be good with words.* She had just clicked onto the link when she heard footsteps outside her office: her sergeant, Joe Ashworth, dead on time for their daily morning meeting. She turned

off the PC, feeling faintly guilty without really understanding why.

Mid-afternoon, she wandered through to the open-plan office where Joe was filling in his overtime form.

'I'm off,' she said. 'Taking back some of the time I'm owed from the Lister case.'

'Going to the gym?' A sly little grin. He knew she'd been told to lose weight.

'Piss off!' But there was no animosity in it. After a week of strategy meetings and appraisals she was looking forward to being away from the office. It was still clear and bright and, driving east past the newly ploughed fields, where the low sun threw long shadows from the trees lining the road ahead of her, she felt more optimistic than she had for ages. Since the last major inquiry.

She'd printed out a map from the Writers' House website and had to stop every now and then to check directions. This wasn't work, not really, so she was back in Hector's Land Rover. No satnav. She felt the wonderful liberation of the truant. Rounding the brow of a hill, she had a view of Alnmouth, with its pretty painted houses, and the bay, and turned north past the masts and domes of RAF Boulmer. Then after a series of missed turns and narrow lanes, she could see the house. It was in a steep valley that led to the coast, sheltered on the landward side by trees. The old fortified farmstead with a newer extension leading away from the sea. The chapel forming one side of a courtyard. She pulled into a farm gate to get her bearings and decide what tack to take with Joanna. Now she

was here, she wasn't sure how she should play the situation. What if the group was in the middle of some intense discussion on the meaning of literature and life? Vera pictured them seated round the room she'd seen on the Internet, writing pads on their knees, brows furrowed in concentration. She was sure everyone would enjoy the drama of the interruption: Vera walking in demanding to talk to Joanna. Everyone except Joanna, who'd be mortified. *Time for a bit of tact, girl.*

There must be, Vera thought, staff. An office manager, a cook, someone to make the beds and clean the toilets. People she could talk to and get a feel for the place. If the punters paid that much for a week in the wilds, they would expect to be looked after. She decided she'd leave the vehicle where it was and go in on foot, get the lie of the land, wait until any group activity or workshop was over and she could get Joanna on her own.

The light was fading quickly now and the temperature had dropped. Walking east down the lane into the valley, she was entirely in shadow. In the morning the house would be filled with light, but now the place had a gloomy air. The trees in the copse had dropped their leaves and the lane was covered with them. Once she almost slipped. She arrived at the gate to the Writers' House. There was a professionally painted sign and the logo of a quill pen that she recognized from the website, and beyond, a large garden. After the house the lane petered into a track that was no more than a footpath. It led steeply down to the small shingle beach that she'd seen from the car. There were no other buildings within sight. If you wanted a place

to write without distraction, this would suit the bill. But it occurred to Vera that it would be a long trek to the pub.

Approaching the house, she felt nervous. Here she was well out of her comfort zone. She couldn't flash her warrant card and demand respect and attention. No crime had been committed. And she'd never really got on with arty types: people who used words with ideas behind them, but had nothing real to say. She was more comfortable with the villains she brought to court.

Now she could see the place in more detail: a big house and then some old outbuildings, stables perhaps, that had been turned into a cottage. Both faced into a paved area that must once have been a farmyard. To her right the tiny chapel that must once have served the extended family that had lived here. In the house they'd switched the lights on, but they hadn't drawn the curtains. This was Vera's favourite time of day. She'd always been curious, loved the glimpses of other folks' domestic existence as she walked down the street. And what was it to be a detective, after all, but to pry into other people's lives? There was a big front door, but she avoided that. It looked as if it locked automatically from inside, and she didn't want to ring the brass bell that hung outside. Not until she knew Joanna was still there and she had some idea of what was going on.

She walked round the side of the big house, avoiding the shingle path, keeping to the grass border that ran right up to the wall. She made no sound. Arriving at the first window, she stopped with her back to the house. It came to her suddenly that she must look

completely ridiculous. If there were someone further up the bank looking down – a couple of birdwatchers, for example, with binoculars – they'd take her for a madwoman, or an inept burglar. Still standing close to the wall of the house, so that she couldn't be seen from inside, she looked in. The kitchen. A young man in chef's whites stood with his back to her, stirring a pan. There was a teapot on the table and two blue mugs. An older woman sat at the table, reading a typed manuscript. She was rather glamorous, with dyed blonde hair. The finger that turned the page had red nails. Was that Miranda Barton? At any rate, there was no sign of Joanna and, crouching so that she was lower than the windowsill, Vera moved on.

The next room was empty. It looked like a library, the walls lined with bookshelves. There were a couple of small tables and leather-seated, upright chairs. Now Vera had turned another corner and was on a paved veranda that looked out over the sea. On the grass below was a bird table and a set of elaborate feeders filled with nuts and seed. She could see the lighthouse at the Farne Islands to the north and Coquet Island to the south. In the summer this would be a magnificent place to sit. Vera pictured them here after a day's writing, drinking fancy wine and sharing their ideas. Posing. Why did she feel the need to sneer? Because people who talked about books or pictures or films made her feel ignorant and out of her depth.

She'd stopped right on the corner, because most of the wall facing out to sea was made of glass. There were two long windows, almost floor-to-ceiling, and between them double glass doors. A long, light room. The place featured on the website, with the sofas and

the easy chairs. And there were people inside. It seemed to Vera that the group had just broken up. They were standing and chatting. Tea must have been served, because they were holding cups and saucers, balancing scones on paper napkins. Now it was almost dark outside, and Vera thought there was little danger of her being seen. The people in the room were preoccupied with their own concerns. Their faces were animated. There were six of them, but the door leading further into the house was open, so it was possible that some people had already left. Certainly there was no sign of Joanna.

Vera stood for a moment and wondered how Joanna might fit into this group. Joanna, with her big hands and feet, her loud laugh and her dirty fingernails. Her brightly coloured home-made clothes. If she was here, had she escaped already to the privacy of her own room, daunted by the confidence of her companions?

Vera had decided that it was time to go back to the front door, ring the bell and ask to speak to Joanna. She had a cover story prepared. There would be a domestic crisis: a relative's illness, which Joanna should know about. That was when Vera heard a sound that shocked the people on the other side of the glass from their self-indulgent conversation. A scream. It seemed hardly human and was without age or gender: loud and piercing and terrifying.