

Fragments of Light
Warring Hearts - Book 2
Vicki Gaia

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From the living room windows, Frank Simon's penthouse had a wide-angle view of the Manhattan skyline. The room buzzed with nonsensical chatter, reminding Richard of a tree full of obnoxious crows. The room bulged with men and women in military uniforms, a few guests dressed in evening apparel. Nanette Bishop stood by the fireplace wearing a thin-strapped pink gown cut low enough to reveal her ample cleavage. Richard frowned at his mother's attire. To think he came from the loins of that woman.

Making his way towards the bar, Richard sensed Claire somewhere in the room. Then he caught a glimpse of russet hair, and his heart took a nosedive, swifter than a B24 bomber. She stood near the balcony doors. Paul Brody held her hand, and Richard's insides caved in. He glanced down at his feet, surprised he was in one piece. He shoved his hands in his pockets, hoping to stave off the tremors. The first signs of stress hinted in his fingers, the electric current trailing up his arms. Heavy pressure took up space in his chest.

"Scotch on the rocks," he barked. "Better make it a double."

"Make mine the same." Leslie leaned his elbows on the bar. He turned to Richard. "Claire's a vision. I'm going over to say hello. Are you coming, or do you plan on hiding in the corner all evening?"

"Hiding in the corner." Richard drank back his scotch and the ice cooled his lips. The scotch was smooth, good stuff, expensive. "Look, go over and do what you have to do. Leave me out of it."

"You'll have to talk with her sometime."

Richard watched Claire leave for the balcony without her coat, her dress too flimsy for the approaching storm. So like her. He always had to chase after her with a coat or wrap. He crushed down on an ice cube and looked away. Jealous of Leslie and Claire's friendship, Richard wondered if he could be friends with Claire. Decidedly not, the sight of her made his erection a painful reminder of what they'd once shared. It was best to concentrate on why he was here.

Richard scanned the room. Paul Brody talked with Frank Simon by the balcony doors. Frank, the owner of this opulent penthouse, was a prime suspect. So was Paul. From the looks of his unkempt hair and disregard for proper dress, Paul appeared rebellious. Faded trousers with paint stains, and a white shirt, the

sleeves rolled up at the elbows, as in his photograph. Most likely, Claire adored Paul's defiant nature, his snubbing his nose at society's traditions. A communist, Richard decided, yes, definitely a communist...or a socialist. Not to be trusted, and certainly high on his list of suspects.

Leslie disappeared out to the balcony and Richard turned away. A shell of a man, that's what he'd become. Emotions tumbled over him, making it too difficult to hide behind a mask of indifference. This wouldn't do. He shook off his melancholy and forced his legs to propel him forward. He'd pay his respects to Frank Simon, make few introductions, and get the hell out.

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"Is that Claire O'Neill?" Leslie spoke across the balcony. His eyes crinkled at her astonished face, her mouth widening with every hurried step towards him.

Claire shrieked and threw her arms around his neck. "My God, I can't believe it! You're here in New York." She pulled back and studied him. "You look wonderful. Oh, this is such a surprise." Claire grabbed his hand and looked over his shoulder. "Where's Aaron?"

"Aaron didn't come. You know him. As much as he complains about London, he'd never leave the place. But he sends his love."

Claire wrapped her arms around Leslie's waist and her fragrance reminded him of everything fresh in the world.

"Thank you for sending that terrific write-up on him," she said. "I saved the article. He's taking off, and it's swell."

"I heard you're also making a name for yourself. New York's been good to you."

A brief flash of sadness passed over her face, and he wondered if Richard had entered her thoughts. Momentarily, she recovered and gushed. "New York's wonderful. There're endless possibilities, and I plan to grab for every one of them." She fixed a bobby pin slipping from her hair. "Frank Simon represents me...me! It's incredible to find my work hanging next to a Matisse."

"I'm going to be here for awhile. I'll definitely make it over to see your work."

Claire clapped her hands. "Oh, this is even better."

"But I did travel with someone." Leslie moved in closer to protect Claire, knowing it was useless to think he could save her from pain. "My traveling companion's Richard."

Claire's mouth twisted into a scowl, and her eyelids drooped. She grasped onto the balcony rail. Leslie stepped forward, a reflex to prevent her from jumping. Ridiculous notion, but he laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Tell me he's not at this party," she said.

"Indeed, he is. Don't you think you need to speak to him? Air out your differences?"

Claire took in his face with moist eyes. Leslie retrieved a linen handkerchief from his trouser pocket. She took it from his hand and wiped under her lashes. "He'd never come here, not unless he was forced into it."

"I don't know what happened between you, but it's madness. He's lost without you."

"He needs no one. Trusts no one, especially me."

"He's been miserable, a real ass to be around."

Claire crossed her arms. "Suddenly you show up with Richard. There has to be a reason."

"There is, and you're involved. I can't tell you much, not here."

"Claire, here you are. Peggy's been asking about you." Frank Simon stepped out on the balcony. He took in Leslie with ardent approval in his smile.

A stir in his trousers warned Leslie to tread with care. In a severe tuxedo and red bow tie, Frank cut an attractive figure.

Claire drew Frank into their circle. "Frank Simon, I'd like you to meet Leslie Havens. Leslie introduced me to Aaron Stein, the painter I told you about."

"Ah yes, the artist who took you under his tutelage in London," Frank said.

"Their artist temperaments were always at odds," Leslie said, ruefully. "But good-natured. Both are extremely competitive and talented."

"You're exaggerating. I demurred to Aaron most of the time." Claire cupped

Frank's elbow. "Frank's been wonderful to me. He owns one of the most prestigious modern galleries alongside Peggy Guggenheim."

"*Art of This Century*, this is Guggenheim's gallery, is it not? I read an article on the ship about the interiors rivaling the artwork." Leslie chuckled. "I can't imagine hanging paintings using baseball bats."

Frank kept his eyes focused on Leslie's face. "Sure, it's over the top, but it gets people into the gallery. I use nails to hang artwork, but I hope this doesn't deter you from coming in. Are you a collector?"

"I prefer the traditional."

"Except when it comes to my paintings," Claire added. "And, let's not forget Aaron's work."

"You must come, then. Perhaps I can change your mind about the moderns." Frank touched Leslie's sleeve. "I thrive on a challenge."

Leslie pulled away from Frank's close proximity. He walked over to the edge of the balcony and took in the view. "It's good to be here. London's too dreary with rationing, and one does get tired of the dogfights. It's a bloody bore, this war."

Frank touched the rim of Leslie's empty glass. "Looks like you need a refill. May I refresh it for you?"

"That'd be lovely." Leslie turned to Claire. "Let's have tea tomorrow at the Plaza. Say, around four o'clock? We'll talk then."

"You two go, get your drinks," she said. "I'm going to remain here for a while longer. The cool air feels good."

Leslie leaned into Claire. "It'll be all right, dear. He loves you."

"I don't think it's possible for him to love."

Leslie patted Claire's shoulder and left with Frank.

