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DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

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**The story of two women,
two revolutions and one house.**

Marina Hitchen



CHAPTER ONE



My twenty-first birthday would have passed by unheeded had I not been summoned to the Bursars office a little after nine that morning. There I was met by two sombre looking gentlemen in shabby black suits who were completely unknown to me and who made no attempt to properly introduce themselves. After sitting me down and handing me a cup of tepid, weak coffee one of them casually informed me that my grandmother, Nancy Paramour, aged seventy nine had passed away in the night from a heart attack. I needed to go home at once they said in order to deal with the funeral arrangements and 'other matters.'

Now I had never been very close to my grandmother despite her having brought me up from the age of three following the mysterious disappearance of my mother and the subsequent sudden death of my father. She had been a cold and rather distant guardian who although providing for me financially had offered little in the way of love and had never made even the slightest show of affection towards me.

I received the news as casually as it had been given and placing the coffee untouched on the table beside me, I stood up with the intention of bringing the meeting to a close.

"Thank-you gentlemen for coming here in person to inform me of this sad news; I am most grateful. I need a few minutes to pack some things and then I assure you I will set off for home directly. I should reach there by mid-afternoon. "

This seemed to satisfy them and with a few mumbled words of "Sorry for your loss" they made a hurried departure leaving me alone in the office. I fell back down into the chair and started shaking uncontrollably. The realisation that I was entirely alone in the world apart from an uncle I had never met had come as a big shock. "What has changed?" I asked myself sharply, desperately trying to pull myself together. "I hardly had anything to do with the woman; I seldom even saw her. She was nothing more than a pay-cheque coming through the post every month. As long as she has left me enough money to get me through my last year of university then I will hardly notice her passing. Hopefully she

prepared for that at least and didn't leave everything to Uncle Julius without making any provision for my fees. I need to get home as soon as possible to check on my financial situation."

Home! Hardly what most people would envisage as a home. Extwistle Hall had been the seat of the Paramour family for over a century, but the Paramours being what one would call these days 'nouveau riche' the house was not comparable to the great stately homes of the era. My grandmother had moved there in the sixties after the death of her husband Simon Paramour, the only son of the industrialist Josiah Paramour MP. My grandmother had been living in Egypt when Simon died since he had been some sort of antiquities inspector out there. The house had been empty for some years prior to that and was already in a state of disrepair when my grandmother, heavily pregnant with my father, returned there with her young son, my Uncle Julius. They confined themselves to one wing of the old hall which my grandmother maintained to a level of what I would call barely habitable. Being on the edge of the Yorkshire moors it is a cold, damp miserable place and my Uncle Julius had left for London at the earliest opportunity, never to be seen again. My own father having been born there never left. He married a local girl, Janice, my mother, who I barely recall. It seems as though she could not take to the place either because she disappeared suddenly on my second birthday also never to be seen again. Birthdays have never been the luckiest of days for me.

The drive up north took much longer than expected, partly due to fog and heavy traffic but more because I was in no hurry to get there. I stopped off twice on the way at two of my favourite watering holes; one in Letchworth and one close to home in Hebden Bridge. I had had no need to pass through Hebden Bridge at all but I had made the detour in an almost subconscious attempt to delay my arrival home. It was after seven in the evening when I drew up to the Hall to see a battered old Volkswagen parked outside. "Uncle Julius I presume" I thought, suddenly showing some interest in the day's proceedings.

I hurried inside to the large reception room to find a fire blazing in the hearth

and a middle aged flamboyant man seated round it clutching a large goblet of what looked like brandy.

"You must be Gloria" he said standing up, and moving the glass to his left hand he unceremoniously grasped my thumb with his right, "and I am your long lost Uncle Julius. The last time I saw you was at your father's funeral; you were just three or four years old at the time. I don't suppose you remember me."

"No I'm sorry I don't, I was too young." I replied carefully extricating my thumb from his grasp and staring aghast at his attire. My uncle was wearing what had once been a very expensive striped suit circa 1940 with a spotted waistcoat and a bright red cravat. I could just discern the hint of mascara or eyeliner round his sparkling grey eyes. "You never made the effort to come up here even once after that" I added accusingly.

"No well my mother, your grandmother that is, didn't exactly welcome me here. She didn't approve of my lifestyle you see and I can't say I approved much of hers either. She never forgave me for running off with her houseboy back in the seventies. She must have told you all about that. Very cross she was; more about losing the houseboy than losing me I think. The love of my life that boy was although it was a regrettably short lived affair; less than a year as I recall. Anyway I'm sure you don't want to hear about that right now; another time perhaps. As I said, I came back for my brother's funeral although I wasn't invited nor was my mother one bit pleased to see me there. I never came back inside this old place even then. This is the first time I have put my foot over the threshold since I was a young lad. It hasn't changed much. Maybe some more pieces of it have fallen into the ground and the carpets are a little more threadbare but that's about it. It's still as cold. I had to get the old retainer to light a fire otherwise I would have frozen to death by now. He made a great show of cleaning out the fireplace and he grumbled a lot. Your grandmother didn't hold with too much comfort he told me and she usually kept herself warm with a couple of blankets. She kept a good stock of brandy though; want one?"

"Please" I answered, quickly warming to this man, "and make it a large one."

"Large enough for you" he asked handing me what was equivalent to about four pub measures in a flashy crystal goblet. "Nice glasses" he continued as if reading my thoughts.

"Yes" I answered "there are a lot of quality pieces lying around amongst the ruins as it were; some fabulous bone china and of course the paintings. There are a couple of portraits by Joshua Reynolds and even one attributed to Hogarth but I suppose you already know that. I think you will make quite a killing from your inheritance if you sell them. God knows who will want to buy this old place though. I only hope grandmother left me enough so I can finish University. It's my final year studying Classics you see and I thought I might continue with a master's degree in Egyptology after that but that's probably gone by the board now."

"I wouldn't be jumping the gun like that Gloria love" my uncle said turning his steady gaze towards me. "Firstly my mother detested me and secondly you are the descendent of the love of her life; not a Paramour at all."

"Exactly" I interrupted, "that's the point. My real grandfather was not a Paramour. My father, being the son of her lover and not her husband could lay no claim to this property and the same goes for me now. No I am sure you will inherit everything. It's only fair."

"Fair it maybe my dear but the lovely Nancy was not known for her fairness now was she. I know I am the last surviving descendent of the Paramour family and by rights all this should be mine but being as bent as a nine bob note I will have no offspring so where will the country seat go then? No, no that would never do. My guess is that old Nancy, having no restrictions placed on her as to what she did with her property will have left it all to you. Even if she hasn't and she goes with the time-honoured tradition of leaving it to the oldest legitimate son you may have no fears; Uncle Julius will trump up the cash for your studies. Actually I was going to ask you if you could find your way to handing a bit of the lolly over to me if you should be the one to inherit. I am a bit down on my luck now. Mother has been putting a cheque in the post for me every month for

the last thirty years or more so I never found it necessary to pursue a career or indeed to take up any form of gainful employment. I'm what you might call a remittance man. So it looks like we are both in the same boat ducky. What do you say to us making a pact?"

"I say that whoever wins the spoils will continue writing the same cheque every month for the other one. Fair enough" I laughed clapping my hands. "Agreed?" "Agreed my lovely niece," my uncle acquiesced. "Let's shake on it and seal the deal with a slice of stilton and a glass of that fine old port over there."

After our small but excellent supper I decided I would like to know a bit more about my family, especially my strange elusive Uncle Julius.

"Tell me something about yourself" I asked him. "I mean do you remember Egypt at all and is there anything you can tell me about my father? Grandmother never talked much about him."

"Delving into the family history little girl. Be careful. You might turn up something unpleasant. I can tell you what I know and you tell me if you want me to stop."

"Go ahead" I answered, "but I won't ask you to stop even if it's horrid. Start straightaway please and be sure to leave nothing out."

"Well I was only three when we left Egypt. I don't remember much. I only remember living in a very grand house by the Nile. It was in Luxor apparently but I only found that out later. It seemed like a palace to me then although I can hardly picture it now. My father I remember only vaguely. He was much older than my mother and I don't think they were very happy together. I remember a summerhouse close to the river where I played in the afternoons and a handsome young Egyptian man visiting me there. Who knows, maybe that was your grandfather! Then suddenly everything changed and I was on the train to Alexandria with my nanny. My father was dead and we had to go home to England she told me. That's all I know of our life in Egypt Gloria."

"And then" I said pressing him to continue. "What happened when you got back here?"

"Mother came home not long afterwards and a few months later I had a baby brother, Amer. Mother told me how Amer's father was Egyptian so he was only my half-brother and that because of who his father was she would always love him more than she loved me. Not a pleasant thing to say to a child. Maybe that's what turned me queer. Anyway Amer, your father, was quite mad. Even as a child he said the most outrageous things. At one time he believed himself to be the reincarnation of an Egyptian pharaoh, possibly even Tutankhamun himself. As he got older he said he received messages from the God Horus, and that he was destined to great things after a big war had been fought throughout the whole of the Middle East. As I told you he was quite mad. A lovely looking child though and he grew up to be a very handsome young man. Incredibly clever as well once you got beyond his madness. Very kind to everyone and he absolutely adored animals. He used to say they spoke to him. He must have been about fifteen or sixteen when I left and I never saw him again. I heard he had a grand affair with an older woman. Much older I mean; and married. He wanted children though so he finally left her to look for a wife. He always said that he had to have children even when he was still a child himself. He had to continue his name, he said even though he had no idea what his name was. He had to continue the bloodline. I knew the girl from the village that he married; your mother. She was a good bit older than him too because I remember her from school and she was at least a couple of years above me. A nice girl but very ordinary if you know what I mean. Not someone who could deal with Amer at all. A couple of years after you were born she upped and left. Nobody heard from her again. I always thought she must be dead. Who would leave a daughter like you behind with never so much as sending a message to ask how you were. Some say your father killed her but I don't believe that for one minute. He couldn't harm a fly, your father, let alone kill another human being. I only know what I read in the papers about it Gloria so sadly I have no first hand information for you. It was almost a year to the day of Janice's disappearance that Amer shot himself. I had to read that in the papers too. My mother never even called

me to tell me. I wasn't surprised. Amer had threatened to kill himself many times over the years. He said that if the 'people' who controlled him, whoever he thought they were, ever asked him to hurt anyone he would kill himself first. That's why I am sure he didn't harm your mother. Your mother's family still live in the village; maybe they know something but they have always maintained that they don't. You could try asking. The woman your father had the affair with, the older one, is still alive. She might know something. In case you want to talk to her she's called Lily Johnson and she lives in that big house behind the Post Office. Anyway as I said earlier I came up for the funeral; a very sad affair with no more than a dozen people there. I tried to speak to my mother but she refused to talk to me so I went back to London the same night and never saw her again. You were at the funeral. I remember it. You were dressed all in white whilst everyone else was in black. You had a spray of jasmine in your hand and you wouldn't throw it into the grave. I can still picture it and almost smell those flowers even now. My mother snatched them from you and tossed them down onto the coffin and you started screaming. You were crying for your flowers, not your father, but it was heart rending. I don't think my mother went out much after Amer died but you would know more about that than me. That's about it." "So you don't know much about your father then or anything at all about my grandfather? How did your father die I wonder and what happened to my grandfather?"

"I have no idea how my father died and as you quite rightly pointed out I don't know very much about him at all. As for your grandfather I don't even know who he was. I'm sorry I can't help you there love" Uncle Julius said apologetically.

"I didn't know my father was mad" I said sadly. "I knew he shot himself of course but I thought it was just because he was so unhappy after my mother left. I did speak to my mother's family once; well at least I tried to. They started shouting strange things at me calling me the child of the devil and other nonsense like that so I gave up to them. They seemed quite disturbed. It was about three years

ago and it was a very unpleasant experience so I won't bother asking them again. My mother's disappearance will just have to remain a mystery unless that other woman knows anything. I think I will talk to her whilst I'm up here. You are right about Grandmother Nancy never leaving the house. She often went out into the garden but never further than that. Everything was delivered and if she needed anyone like a doctor or something then she called them out. I wasn't allowed to have any friends round either. I had some friends of course but I had to visit them at their houses not here. In a way Granny reminded me of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* mourning the loss of her son though not her lover. She changed her clothes a lot too, not like Miss Havisham living in her wedding dress. Actually she paid a great deal of attention to how she looked. She always dressed for dinner even when it was only me and her. We barely spoke in the whole seventeen years we lived together. 'Pass the butter; nice weather; it looks like rain' is about the extent of our conversations. It seems funny now but I was dreadfully lonely at the time. At least it made me turn to books. I read almost all the time. I have read everything in the library at least once. She didn't let me make friends with the servants either; not even my nanny. I did have a nanny once when I was very small who showed me some affection but grandmother soon got rid of her."

"Your childhood sounds remarkably like mine" Uncle Julius sniggered sardonically. "Your father had quite a different upbringing. I was very bitter and angry about that and it took me a long time to get over it. It wasn't your father's fault of course and although I was terribly jealous I couldn't hate him. He was far too lovely a person for that and anyway as I said it wasn't his fault. I had to get away though. Look we had better be getting to bed soon so the story of my own fascinating life will have to wait for another occasion. We have a lot to do over the next few days. The funeral will be on Thursday which is only three days away, and as you knew my mother better than anyone I will leave the choosing of the hymns and such to you. The lawyer said that after the funeral he will do a formal reading of the will like in the movies. Sounds very macabre. Anyway now

we have both agreed to see each other right it doesn't much matter which one of us gets the country pile does it. Personally I hope you end up with the house. I don't know who would want to buy it and I could never see myself living here. I'd like the brandy glasses though and you can have the Reynolds. Those portraits are not to my taste at all. Come on let's get to bed. You can have your old room and I'll take my mothers. No other bedrooms are fit for habitation. Oh by the way if you want to see your grandmother she is in the city morgue. I had to move her out of here I hope you don't mind."

"No not at all. I'm glad in fact. I won't bother going to see her. Just make sure she has some decent clothes to be buried in. That would have been important to her."

"Already done" my uncle confirmed. "I did know that much about her. Come on, it really is time for bed now. Goodnight Gloria. I am sure we will get on famously now that we have finally met. Oh and happy birthday; the lawyer told me it's your twenty first today."

After thanking him for his good wishes I climbed the stairs to my old room. It was bitterly cold for the end of October and I looked around for an extra blanket. There wasn't one so I crawled into bed fully clothed and thanked my blessings that I wasn't facing all this alone. Uncle Julius was definitely a good sort and in a strange sort of way I was looking forward to spending the next few days with him.