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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 TWENTY NINE



The questions on the examination papers were not what I was expecting so I think I can say goodbye to getting a first. Some of them were straightforward but I had difficulty with the one asking why Herodotus was dubbed 'The Father of Lies' by his critics. That is not the way any of the questions have been phrased on past papers so I hadn't had any practise which those who had attended the lectures and tutorials in the second semester said they had. I also made a mess of the Ovid question. I was expecting it to be on 'Metamorphoses' and I know all fifteen books of that backwards but instead it was on 'Remedia Amoris', The Cure for Love, which is a very short poem that I have probably read no more than twice. The question itself asked if the poem was a renunciation of love or if it fails to offer convincing instruction on how to fall out of love. All I know about this poem is that it is aimed more at men than women and tells them not to kill themselves for love but to stop being jealous and find someone else which was nowhere near enough for me to give a decent answer.

After the exams were over I took myself off to Brighton for a week with one of my friends and tried to forget all about them. The results don't come out until the twentieth of August so I have a long wait and as I am sure I have at least passed it really isn't worth worrying about.

As soon as I got back I paid a visit to the auction house to discuss why my portraits weren't bringing me what I had been expecting. The gentleman I spoke to there was quite helpful but he didn't give me the answer I was hoping for.

"That Portrait of Omai made over ten million and not one of my paintings by the same artist reached over two hundred thousand. Why are my paintings not doing better at auction?" I asked him.

"Madame that Omai piece is quite different and you cannot in any way compare your portraits to that one. Reynolds painted the Omai for himself so paid great attention to the detail. Do you know he kept it until his death? Whereas yours were all commissioned works. I am not sure if you know Miss Paramour but Reynolds was receiving five or six sitters every day for only an hour at a time. He then only painted parts of each picture himself; the torsos and clothing were

painted by assistants and these assistants did not produce the same quality of work as the master. It was shall we say a production line for portraits and some are better than others and I am afraid that all of yours are of the poorer quality. As for the Hogarth I am sure your uncle told you, it's a forgery."

"A forgery; are you sure? My uncle didn't tell me anything like that."

"Yes it's definitely not a Hogarth and we are attributing it to Tom Keating. If we are correct then it would be one of the first of Keating's works, possibly painted in the thirties or forties whereas most of his work was done in the early sixties. In his later forgeries he left clues. For example, he might write text onto the canvas before he began the painting knowing that it would show up later under x-ray. He deliberately added flaws or he used materials not available at the time of the original painting. When he was arrested he used this in his defence and although he still pleaded guilty the case against him was dropped. After his death in 1984 these forgeries became quite sought after and do have a value in their own right. As your painting was an early work and has no tell-tale sign of the forgery we are not one hundred percent certain it is a Keating so it hasn't gone to auction yet. What do you want me to do Miss Paramour? Sell all your paintings for what I can get for them or do you want me to hang on and try to stick to your reserve prices which I must say I think are far too high."

"Too high! Those are the prices you put on them yourselves" I argued.

"I think you asked for a valuation which we assumed was for insurance. Those prices are always higher than an auction valuation. When your uncle brought them in to sell we did tell him that."

I thanked him and told him to go ahead and sell as long as he thought the price was good enough. I needed to go and see Uncle Julius now and demand an explanation for why he had told me nothing of all this.

I met up with my uncle in Compton's in Soho. Although it is traditionally a gay haunt it attracts a more mature crowd and I always feel comfortable in there. My uncle told me it was originally a hotel but has been a place where gay men have gone since the fifties when homosexuality was still illegal. It is just a place

for drinking now and I needed to eat so after downing a couple of beers we left and went across to Balans where we shared some fish tacos and I then ordered the crab linguini all to myself.

Over dinner I told my uncle everything I had read in the diaries apart from the bits where my grandmother says unpleasant things about him. It was quite tricky because he kept asking me what she had said about him and I didn't like to say 'virtually nothing'; sometimes I think that's worse than saying something bad. When I described the villa and the house to him memories started flooding back.

"Yes" he said, "the woman I remember there and thought was my mother wasn't my mother at all; it must have been this Barbara. I remember her very well now and the Egyptian man too but my father and mother I can't picture there at all. I remember being scared of all the masks on the summerhouse wall but I can't say I remember any paintings of half-naked African women. My nanny was called Aisha. I remember that, and she was a very pretty woman too. She never did come back to England. She got as far as Alexandria and left me there with an English couple who promised to get me home. I had a very plain English nanny after that whose name completely escapes me."

Once I had given him all the details of the property I told him I was going to need about a million pounds to restore it. The six Reynolds would bring only a little bit more than that and I asked him why he hadn't explained that to me properly when they failed to sell the first time round and even worse why had he never told me the Hogarth was a forgery. He had no answers and looked suitably abashed so I couldn't stay cross with him for long. He had been up to Extwistle two or three times and was happy when the conversation turned away from the portraits to what he had been doing up there.

"I can't find the book you want or the wedding ring" he explained and the rest of the jewellery has no value other than the stones and gold themselves. The antique jeweller I went to said they all need breaking down and resetting before I sell them so I need to be sure you don't want any of them before I do that."

"No it's OK" I replied. "I am happy with the three pieces I have. I knew you wouldn't find the book in the library because I know exactly what is in there. It is either somewhere else in the house or she left it in Greece. Don't worry; it's not important. I would like to find the wedding ring though. It's an heirloom of the Paramour's and by rights you should have it but according to my grandmother it is very beautiful so I would at least like to see it and maybe borrow it sometimes."

"If I find it you can have it if you want" Uncle Julius replied generously then added, "I think a couple of the landscapes are more valuable than your portraits, which doesn't seem very fair. If you need the money we could go halves on them I suppose." No wonder he was being generous; he could afford to be.

"No you keep them Keep everything. Maybe I'll take the Vanity Fair prints back with me. There are some others in the palace library I might get framed as well."

"Sorry Gloria I have already sold them. You should have said" my uncle apologised. "Anything of value has been sold or else is at an auction house waiting to be sold. The rest I will sell in a general sale at the house at the end of August. Then early September I will put the house itself on the market. If I can't get rid of it through an estate agent I will auction that off as well. I'll tell you what I did find; your father's old MGB convertible. It was in the coach house covered in dust. I hope you didn't want that because I sold it to a dealer last week for eighteen grand."

"No that's fine" I replied, feeling a little bit peeved that my Uncle Julius was slowly cashing in and would finally end up with much more money than me. I think my grandmother intended me to have the lion's share that's why she left me the portraits. I pulled myself up sharp then. "It's funny what money does to you" I thought. "Here am I feeling envious when I have more than enough for myself. Less than a year ago I had nothing so I should be grateful and stop this silly comparison between me and my uncle."

"When are you going back?" my uncle asked trying to change the conversation back to me and my life.

"End of August most probably" I replied; "after I get my results. It's too hot to do much out there until at least September so I may as well make a proper holiday of it over here. I still want to do my Masters sometime but it won't be this year and I haven't registered for anything yet."

"But is it safe over there?" my uncle continued. "I was very worried when that revolution kicked off and I couldn't even contact you by telephone. It's still going on as well isn't it? Last Friday there was a demonstration called 'Retribution' where they were all out complaining about the slow pace of change. I watched it on television and there looked to be a lot of violence. When is it all going to end Gloria?"

"Well its five months now and the people are afraid the military will stay in power indefinitely. There is usually some sort of protest every Friday and more often than not they give it a name; don't ask me why. This is all going on in the big cities and nothing ever happens in Luxor. I don't believe they were ever in favour of getting rid of Mubarak down there. Look I have to get going now. Thanks for lunch. I will call you before I leave."

I walked back to my apartment feeling happy that I had cleared the air between us. I do love Uncle Julius even if he is irritating sometimes.

Throughout July I visited friends, went to a few concerts and the ballet and generally did what people do when they are on holiday in London. I kept my eye on the news to check things weren't getting any worse out in Egypt but it was just more of the same. They had their 'Friday of Determination' and then suddenly seemed to lose interest in their little name game or more likely they had run out of ideas for what to call Fridays after that. They did seem to be out there every Friday so thinking up a name each time must have become a little taxing. Towards the end of July things started getting nasty with the soldiers attacking back which they hadn't done before. Throughout August hundreds of protestors were arrested and there were a number of civilian fatalities. This was beginning to resemble the 1952 revolution more and more.

I was getting bored in England by this time and booked my flight back a few

days earlier than I had originally planned. I picked up my results on the twentieth, a disappointing 2:1 and went for a final celebratory lunch with my uncle. Well he thought it was celebratory even if I didn't. He gave me a giant carriage clock which he said was an early birthday present. I remembered it had been in my grandmother's office at Extwistle Hall and I had never liked it. I am ashamed to say that on that same afternoon I took it to an antique dealer and when he saw it was from Dent's of London and was over a hundred years old he offered me ten thousand pounds for it. I took it immediately which was stupid of me because when I got home and checked on the Internet I found it was worth nearly double that. I was still cursing myself right up until the time I boarded the plane for Cairo on the twenty sixth.