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Written by Barbara Taylor Bradford

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Playing the Game

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For Bob,
with my love

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Prologue

London
March 2007

Annette Remmington sat at her desk staring across the room at the painting, or rather at the photographic blow-up of the painting. It was propped up on the credenza, leaning against the wall, and the ceiling light, carefully angled, brought it into focus.

Her marvellous painting. Her masterpiece. Her Rembrandt. Well, not exactly hers any more, for it now belonged to someone else, the anonymous buyer who had bid for it over the phone, won it for the staggering price of twenty million pounds. The highest price ever paid for a work by the famous Dutch artist.

What would *he* feel if he were alive? Would he have experienced the same thrill she had at the auction, as the price had risen and risen to that final staggering amount? Rembrandt had become something of a recluse after finishing the painting in 1657, yet it had been in this period that he had created some of his greatest masterpieces; he had been unfashionable then. She smiled inwardly. He was hardly unfashionable now.

It was gone, hanging on somebody else's wall, and all she had was the photographic blow-up. Anyway, it had never actually been hers. She had merely been custodian of it for a while. On the other hand, she had brought it back to life – by having it cleaned and restored. And by singing about it; singing its praises to the world. That's what she thought she had done, anyway. Others said, rather mean-spiritedly, that she had hyped it to death.

Annette laughed out loud at the thought. *No, not death. She had given it a new life.* The Rembrandt had not been seen in public for over fifty years, hidden away in the dusty art collection of a man who perhaps no longer appreciated it. And she had put it on view and then sold it for an incredible amount of money and at a time when art prices had dropped.

Rising, she walked across the room, stood gazing at the photographic blow-up for several minutes, and admiringly so. The portrait was so lifelike, Annette felt that if she reached out to touch the woman's hand her fingers would alight not on canvas but on real flesh. That was part of Rembrandt's genius.

Back at her desk, Annette remembered what her sister had said the other day. Laurie called the Rembrandt the painting that had changed her life, and there was a certain truth in this statement, in that she had suddenly become the new star in the art world. At least for the moment.

There had been so much publicity about her auction of the Rembrandt it had been extraordinary. Even her husband Marius had been taken aback at the fuss, the attention given to her. He, a seasoned hand in the business, regarded as one of the great art experts and dealers, had been startled by the acclaim she had received.

Marius had a fine reputation, as did so many other dealers. Yet it was to *her* that Christopher Delaware had come,

seeking her out because he remembered her from a social occasion over a year ago now, when they had discussed art. That long chat had centred on her areas of expertise – Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings and, at the other end of the art spectrum, Old Masters. He had been keen to listen to her, learn from her that evening.

And so he had arrived at this office one day, many months ago, asking for her help. He had told her about his ancient uncle, a bachelor, who had recently died and left him everything, including an art collection with a Rembrandt in it. Could she, would she, take him on as a client? She had, and the rest was history. The auction had taken place a few nights ago and the art world had collectively gasped when the hammer had come down on the final bid of twenty million pounds. The audience was stunned. So was she.

Her sister had a favourite saying, which was 'God protects you', and of course Laurie could not resist saying this when she heard about Christopher Delaware's first visit to her Bond Street office.

Recalling that now, Annette smiled faintly. In her mind, it was Marius who protected her. No, perhaps 'guided her' was a better phrase to use. The faint smile flickered again. There were those who might say he controlled her, because that was what they believed.

Annette opened the folder on her desk, and looked at the seating plans for the party tonight. It was her husband's sixtieth birthday and she had been planning the event for months; it had taken her weeks to seat their guests appropriately, with those she thought they would want to be with, and at the right table. Marius had called it a work of art the other day, when he had gone over it with her for the final check and a few last-minute changes.

The party was very meaningful to him, and she had done

everything she could to make sure it would be special. He had taught her never to leave anything to chance, whatever it was she was planning. She had always listened to him, and learned; and she had left nothing to chance in this instance either. It was being held in the ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel on Park Lane, and anybody who was anybody had been invited, whether they were from the art world, society or show business. It was an international crowd.

Because her Rembrandt auction had been such a stupendous success, Marius had insisted that they turn the party into what he called 'a double-headed event'. It would no longer celebrate only his birthday but the success of her auction as well. It didn't change anything. The overall plan for the party remained exactly the same, much to Annette's relief. Except that now he would get up and toast her and tell the world how clever she was.

Her sudden jump from relative obscurity in the art world to the big league was nothing short of miraculous, and no one was more surprised than she. Marius had taken it in his stride, and when she had said how startled she was by her success, after the auction was over, he had been swift to answer her, exclaiming, 'But not I. I knew you would do something spectacular one day.' And then he had suggested they give the party a new twist . . .

Her private line rang, and she reached out, picked up the red phone. 'Hello?'

'Annette, it's Malcolm. Do you have a minute?'

'Of course I do. Is everything all right?'

'Absolutely. I just wondered if I could go over the birthday toast I'll be making to Marius tonight? If you could listen now it would be helpful.'

'I can, and I'm sure anything you've prepared will be right on the mark.' She laughed. 'After all, you're one of Marius's

favourite protégés, and you own his beloved Remmington Gallery. No one knows him better than you.'

'Except for you,' Malcolm Stevens shot back, chuckling, then swiftly went on, 'So here goes.' He began to read the words he had written about a man he admired, even revered. He had kept the accolades to a minimum, knowing Marius would squirm at an extravagance of hyperbole, but had included some hilarious stories and a few little digs which were amusing and made Annette laugh out loud.

When he finished he said, 'And that's about it, unless I can come up with a few appropriate ad-libs at the last minute.'

'You've done a great job, Malcolm! He's going to chuckle, be amused by some of it. You know he's got a fantastic sense of humour.'

'If you approve, then that's it. I'm going to put it in my pocket until tonight. Listen, just one other thing. I had a rather strange phone call earlier today.' Malcolm cleared his throat. 'From a private detective looking for a woman called Hilda Crump, who he said used to work at the Remmington Gallery. About twenty years ago. He asked if we had an address for her. Apparently he has a client who wants to get in touch with her. Did *you* ever know someone called Hilda Crump?'

'No, I didn't,' Annette responded, clutching the phone tighter.

'But if I recall correctly, you *did* work for Marius . . . When he first opened the Remmington Gallery, didn't you?'

'Yes, that's true. But I didn't know anyone called Hilda Crump. Anyway, when Marius sold the gallery to you ten years ago I'm quite certain he put all of the files on the computer.'

'Yes, he did, and there's no mention of a Hilda Crump anywhere. But this chap was so . . . well, so *insistent*, I just had to ask you.'

'Sorry, Malcolm, I can't be of help.'

'So be it then. No problem. Thanks for listening to the toast, and I'll see you this evening. With bells on. And I know we'll have the most marvellous time.'

'That we will, Malcolm,' she answered and hung up.

For a moment Annette Remmington sat with her hand resting on the red phone, frowning. She was puzzled. Who was looking for Hilda? And why? What did they want? She had no answers for herself, but she did know one thing. She would never betray Hilda. Years ago she had promised not to divulge her whereabouts, and *she* never broke the promises she made.

Annette leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes, sinking down into the past, thinking of those early years, all of the terrible things she had buried deep because she did not want to remember them. She shivered, and goose flesh sprung up on her arms. She felt a trickle of fear run through her. So many secrets, so much to hide . . .

Part One

A Remarkable Woman

'There was that law of life so cruel and so just that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same.'

Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park*

One

Much later that same day, Annette Remmington stood in front of the long mirrored door in her dressing room, staring at her reflection but not seeing herself.

She was not focused on her image at this moment but on the small knot of anxiety that had settled in her stomach since she had returned home. She could visualize it quite easily . . . it was the size of a pea but as heavy as a lead pellet.

Unexpectedly, she felt slightly dizzy and reached out a hand, steadied herself against the dressing table. After taking several deep breaths she managed to get her suddenly swimming senses under control. Now she looked at her full image objectively, nodded approvingly at what she saw, chided herself for being so ridiculous.

The mention of Hilda Crump had unsettled her earlier in the day, and the call from Malcolm had been nagging at her all afternoon. But her troubles with Hilda Crump had

happened long ago, and Hilda had moved on, and out of her life. The past was the past and she mustn't let it come back to haunt her in this silly way.

I must put her out of my mind. And the past. It's gone. I must focus on now. The present. And the future. I've always pigeonholed things and I have to do that again. Immediately. Hilda must go back into her pigeonhole and remain there. She is no longer part of my life and therefore unimportant. She can't hurt me. No one can hurt me. And I can't afford to waste time like this, reflecting on the past, a past I cannot change.

I've started a new phase of my life with the success of the auction. I pulled it off and I can pull it off again. Christopher Delaware doesn't have another Rembrandt but he does have some fine paintings and I can auction them off the same way. Marius told me the sky's the limit, and he's right, but will he let me go to the limit? He always wants to be in control of everything. And me. I know how to handle him now after all these years. So I'll manage. I always have. I think I'll do my next auction in New York. It would be profitable. I've got good clients there—

'Are you ready, darling?'

She swung around. 'Yes, I am,' she answered at once, forcing a smile for her husband, who was walking across the dressing room. Surreptitiously, she glanced at the clock on the dressing table. It was just five thirty. And of course he was ready on time, punctual as always.

'You're upset,' he said, drawing to a standstill next to her, peering into her face.

'No, I'm not, not at all,' she answered, and immediately wished she hadn't sounded so defensive.

'Yes, you are, Annette,' he insisted in his usual firm manner. 'Look at yourself in the mirror. You're only wearing one earring.'

Startled, she immediately swung to the mirror. Surprise flickered. God, he was right! As usual. Where was the other one? She spotted it on the dressing table, snatched it up, quickly put it on. 'I went to get my wedding ring from the bedside table, where I'd left it. I just became distracted, that's all really.' She felt flustered all of a sudden. He stood staring at her intently and she found his penetrating stare unnerving. Damn, she thought, he's going to pick on me all night, but she took hold of herself firmly, not wanting to be rattled.

Annette now offered him a warm smile. 'You look very handsome tonight, Marius, and the new dinner jacket is fabulous.' Stepping closer to him, she stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek. 'Happy birthday again, darling, and I do hope you're going to enjoy your party.'

Relaxing his rigid stance, smiling in return, he said in a lighter tone, 'I know I will, and let us not forget it's your party too, my darling. We're celebrating your amazing success.' His black eyes sparkled in approval as they rested on her.

Annette laughed.

Taking hold of her arm possessively, he brought her closer to him, wrapped his arms around her. 'I love you very much, you know, darling,' he said before releasing her. Holding her at arm's length, he added, as his eyes swept over her, 'You look very beautiful, you really do.'

'Well, thank you, but I think I've looked better,' she murmured, meaning this.

Shaking his head, half smiling, he led her out into the corridor, wondering why she constantly found it hard to accept a compliment gracefully. He said, 'We'd better go, I don't want any of our guests to arrive before we do. We can't be late.'

Stay calm, she told herself. And keep cool.

* * *

'Wow!' Malcolm Stevens exclaimed, literally gaping at Annette, astonishment mingled with admiration flashing across his face. 'Oh, *wow*!' he said again, more emphatically, in genuine awe. 'You look fantastic, absolutely bloody marvellous.' It was quite apparent he meant every word.

Her blue eyes sparkling, filling with laughter, Annette looked both pleased and amused by Malcolm's reaction to her appearance.

She stood with Marius in the long reception room that adjoined the Dorchester ballroom, and she leaned forward, kissed Malcolm on the cheek, thanked him.

As she stepped back, his glance swept over her once more, taking in the stunning ice-blue strapless gown, worn with a matching satin stole lined with scarlet silk. That was the surprising touch, the brilliant red against the cool blue, plus the huge cabochon ruby earrings hanging from her ears, echoing the vibrant colour of the silk.

Annette Remmington was elegance personified, her blonde hair, usually worn loose, was swept back from her face, wound up into a chignon at the back of her head. It suddenly struck him that her eyes looked bluer than ever tonight; perhaps it was the evening gown that heightened their colour.

Gripping Marius's outstretched hand, Malcolm went on, 'And you don't look half bad yourself! In fact, the two of you are so glamorous you'll put all your guests to shame.'

Marius chuckled. 'I'm afraid you haven't seen anything yet. Wait until the show-business crowd arrive, they're much more glamorous than we are. But thanks for the compliments, Malcolm. And welcome. We're very glad you're here.'

Now, turning to his wife, Marius shook his head, chided lightly, 'I told you how beautiful you looked, but you didn't believe me. Now that you've just witnessed Malcolm's stunned reaction, you must know I'm right.'

'I did believe you,' she protested, slipping her arm through his, leaning against him. 'You're always right.'

Clearing his throat, Malcolm interjected, 'It's great to be here, and thanks for having me, but now I think I'd better move on, so you can greet your other guests. See you later.'

Marius nodded, immediately turned around, stretched out his hand to welcome some of the new arrivals streaming through the door.

Malcolm slipped away.

Moving down the room, he took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, and walked around, mingling with the crowd. He spoke to a few people he knew, then positioned himself near a pillar, leaned against it, watching the show unfold.

And quite a show it was. He spotted two beautiful American movie stars with their husbands, done up to the nines and dripping diamonds from every pore, a famous, recently knighted writer of literary fiction, a controversial politician with his busty wife, a duchess renowned for her young lovers, and quite a few old friends and acquaintances, as well as a number of other art dealers.

The world and his wife, he thought. Everyone's here. And why not? When Marius gives a party on this scale, he usually pulls out all the stops. That is why everybody wants to be invited.

Actually it was Annette's party this evening. She had long planned it for Marius's sixtieth, and she had put a lot of time and effort into it. Just the way Marius had taught her. That was his way. He tended to be a teacher by nature.

Certainly he had been *Malcolm*'s teacher, mentor, friend and colleague as well. Their association had lasted a long time, and yet Marius didn't seem a day older than when they had met fifteen years ago. He stared down the length of the room, focused on him, thinking that he looked

especially well this evening. Tall, slender, as immaculately dressed as ever, wearing an impeccably tailored dinner jacket, no doubt from his favourite Savile Row tailor. His mane of silver hair gleamed above his lightly tanned face; Marius was forever popping off somewhere to catch the sun, and the tan gave him a youthful look. But it was his hair that Malcolm envied, and it was his hair, of course, that had inspired his nickname: The Silver Fox. Although he and a few others knew that it also referred to Marius's nature. He was considered to be decidedly foxy by some.

Malcolm had gone to work for Marius fifteen years ago, when he was twenty-seven, had been thrilled to be one of the team at the Remmington Gallery in St James's. When Marius decided to sell the gallery ten years ago, he had borrowed the money from his father in order to buy it. He had kept up its fine reputation, garnered many new clients, and Marius said he was proud of him, was forever praising him for upholding the great tradition of the Remmington.

Wanting a less hectic life, Marius took offices in Mayfair, became an art consultant and private dealer with only a handful of steady and very rich clients. They had remained close and Malcolm was an admirer of the older man.

Not everyone felt the same way he did. There were those who bad-mouthed Marius Remmington. They said he was arrogant, mercurial, temperamental, driven, and something of a manipulator. But there were lots of people in this world who loved to carp. Malcolm knew *that* only too well.

There had always been gossip about the Remmingtons for as long as he could remember. In his opinion it was because they attracted attention, caused resentment and jealousy. Talented, socially acceptable, upwardly mobile and highly successful, they were quite a remarkable couple. Reasons enough for tongues to wag. And wag they did.

Then there was the difference in their ages. Marius was

twenty years older than Annette . . . sixty to her thirty-nine. But she would be forty in June, and the twenty-year gap between them didn't seem so startling now. But once it had, when she was eighteen and he was thirty-eight, and something of a man about town, considered to be a bit of a roué. Cradle-snatcher he had been called, and worse.

There was mystery surrounding Annette's background. No one really knew where she had sprung from. Except, of course, for the Marius Mafia, who bragged that they knew. His mafia, so called, was a cadre of young men who constantly surrounded him, whom he called his protégés, which is exactly what they were. Young men who'd been singled out for their talent; who had worked for Marius at some time, or still did; who were loyal, devoted and forever at his beck and call. They enjoyed being around him because something was always happening. It seemed to Malcolm that there was a constant show going on . . . famous people, people in the know, and in the news, gravitated to Marius. That was an essential part of his success as an art dealer, that charisma of his, the gregariousness, the bucketsful of charm and the clever way he had of pulling everyone into his orbit.

Malcolm was one of Marius's favourites and he had received special treatment from the very beginning. The Marius Mafia had told him about Annette.

Seemingly she had come to London from some Northern city, he wasn't sure which, to study art. But there was not enough talent to lift her up into the stratosphere of genius that equalled eventual fame. Good looking. But the looks were obscured by her hesitant manner, according to some of the Marius Mafia; it was a sort of diffidence, they said. Blonde, blue eyed, slender as a reed, and exceedingly bright. But ordinary. That was the way they had described her to him. He himself had not known her then.

Not so ordinary now, though, Malcolm thought, his eyes settling on her. It was an elegant creature who stood there. Not the most beautiful woman in the world, but good looking, well put-together, whatever the occasion, and the current golden girl in the art world. Her auction of the Rembrandt had assured her a place in the front row, had given her art consultancy business a big boost . . .

'What are you doing here all alone, Malcolm?' a familiar voice exclaimed.

Swinging around, Malcolm grinned. 'Watching the show and having a bit of the old bubbly. How about you, David? And where's Meg?'

His old friend David Oldfield shook his head. 'Still in New York. On business. I'm solo tonight.' Reaching into his pocket, David pulled out a small envelope, looked inside, and said, 'I'm at table ten. What about you?'

'The same. I have a feeling it's Marius's table. Come on, let's try and get to the bar. I'd like a vodka.'

'Good idea,' David responded, and together they struggled through the throng. Once they had secured their Grey Goose on the rocks, they went off into a quiet corner. Clinking glasses, they both said cheers in unison, and David asked, 'Is it true that Christopher Delaware inherited a lot of really great art from that uncle of his? And that Annette's going to be representing him?'

Malcolm said in an even tone, 'I haven't heard about any great art. But I know he's Annette's client. Oh, look, there's Johnny Davenport. He's bound to know. Let's go and talk to him.'

'Malcolm! Malcolm!' He heard a woman's voice calling his name. Trying to be heard above the clamour. Swinging

his head, he spotted her at once. An old friend. It was Margaret Mellor, the editor of the best art magazine in Europe called, very simply, *ART*. She was waving to him.

Catching hold of David's arm, he said, 'Will you excuse me for a moment? Margaret Mellor's beckoning to me. Go ahead, chat to Johnny. I'll join you both shortly.'

'No problem.' David pushed ahead, moving adroitly between people, edging his way forward.

Malcolm went in the opposite direction towards his friend. When he finally reached her, he grinned. 'I almost didn't hear you above the din.'

'It's bedlam. I was just with Annette, she wants us to go and see the ballroom before it fills up with guests. She says it's charming.'

'Then let's go now, before we get trapped in this corner. The place is suddenly milling with old friends and colleagues. Plus loads of photographers, I notice.' He frowned.

'Don't tell *me*. The press are swarming all over the place!'

Malcolm sighed. 'That's Marius, he never does things by half and he does love the media. As far as he's concerned, the more the merrier.'

'He's a glutton for punishment.' She sounded sarcastic.

Malcolm laughed. That was Margaret. Spot on with her comments. He put an arm around her shoulders, guided her through the crush. Behind them, flashbulbs were already popping; it seemed to him that the crowd was swelling, getting bigger by the second. How many people had they invited? The whole world, he decided, and hoped the huge crowd wouldn't ultimately spoil the event. Why do I worry? *She* knows what she's doing, even if he doesn't, sometimes. *Marius*. Such an enigma.

Finally, Malcolm was pushing open the door into the ballroom. Instantly, a waiter confronted them. 'I'm very sorry, but you can't come in. Mrs Remmington doesn't want anyone

in here for another half-hour. She was very precise.' Polite but determined.

'Yes, we know. Mrs Remmington sent us to see the ballroom before it fills up. I'm Margaret Mellor of *ART* magazine, and this is Mr Stevens, a colleague and friend of Mrs Remmington's.'

The waiter inclined his head but didn't budge, blocking their way. Still determined – to do his duty and keep them out.

'My chief photographer Josh Brady was here earlier,' Margaret added. 'Taking pictures for the magazine. You must be Frank Lancel. Mrs Remmington told me to speak to you.' Charm, a warm smile. Her tools.

'Yes, I'm Frank,' the waiter answered, relaxing, but only slightly. 'And I did help Mr Brady a while ago, when he was taking his shots. So please, come in, look around. I have to stay here at the door. Stand guard. Mrs Remmington's instructions.' He sounded droll.

'She explained that,' Margaret answered. Taking hold of Malcolm's hand, she led him forward. The two of them finally stood at the edge of the ballroom floor near the orchestra stand, their eyes sweeping around the room with interest and anticipation.

They were both taken aback by the unique beauty of the magical scene that Annette had designed. The room was a sea of pale green – that peculiar pale green with a hint of grey, so often found in the interiors of French châteaux, which seems to create a misty look. This pale green silk rippled down the walls from the ceiling to the floor, and was repeated for the tablecloths, napkins and chair seats.

But what was so unusual and wonderful about the setting were the green dendrobium orchids with pink centres. These were massed in banks in front of mirrored, folding screens, and also stood on mirrored consoles, Venetian style, placed

against the green walls. There were literally hundreds of orchid plants in pale celadon green pots, and those banked in front of the mirrored screens instantly appeared to be twice the quantity because of their reflections. Centrepieces on the tables were crystal bowls filled with stems of green orchids, surrounded by lots of votive lights. Tall crystal candlesticks holding tall white tapers were on either side of the bowls of orchids. Everything glistened and sparkled in the candlelight: the crystal wine goblets and silverware, the silver service plates.

The two of them stood there for a few minutes longer, endeavouring to take everything in. Then Margaret said slowly, 'It's almost ethereal, dreamlike. What an effect Annette has created . . . it's a garden . . . a garden of orchids. How clever.'

Malcolm turned to her, exclaimed, 'Yes, it is. And you can be sure of one thing. It's going to knock everybody's socks off.'