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A Dark Dividing

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CHAPTER ONE

Writing an article on a newly opened art gallery in Bloomsbury was the very last kind of commission that Harry Fitzglen wanted.

Slosh down over-chilled wine and sandpapery savouries in company with a lot of smug females with too much money and not enough to do? It was hardly in keeping with the image, for God's sake! Harry observed, with some acerbity, that covering arty society parties was a female thing, and then was so pleased with the disagreeable nature of this remark that he repeated it in a louder voice to be sure no one in the editorial department missed hearing it.

'You're really just a sweet old-fashioned romantic at heart, aren't you?' said one of the sub-editors, at which point Harry threw a reference dictionary at the sub-editor, and went off to his editor's office to point out that he had not joined the staff of the *Bellman* to report on fluffy Bloomsbury parties.

'It's not until next month,' said Clifford Markovitch, ignoring this. 'The twenty-second. Six till eight stuff. The gallery's called Thorne's, and it's the latest fling of Angelica Thorne.'

'Oh God,' said Harry, and demanded to know where Angelica Thorne had got hold of the investment capital to be opening smart Bloomsbury galleries.

'I don't know, but it's one of the things I want you to look into,' said Markovitch.

'It's probably guilt money from some ex-lover.'

'Well, if he's a front-bench MP with a wife and children in the Home Counties, we'd like to know his name,' said Markovitch at once. 'The thing is that Angelica's reinvented herself as a purveyor of good taste and of Art with a capital A, and the gallery opening's worth a few columns on that alone. What I want is—'

'Names,' said Harry, morosely. 'Celebrity names. The more celebrity names the wider the circulation.'

'It's our golden rule.'

'I know it is. It's carved over your office door like the welcome to hell line in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.'

'You know, Harry, I sometimes wonder if you're quite suited to this place,' said Markovitch doubtfully.

'So do I. Let's get on with this, shall we? I suppose this gallery opening will be packed with the great and the good, will it? Angelica Thorne knows half of Debrett, in fact she's probably woken up in the beds of a good few of them.'

'Yes, but I don't want anything libellous,' said Markovitch at once. 'Gossip, but not libel. Oh, and you'd better have a look at the exhibits while you're about it.

Up-and-coming paintings on the one hand, and futuristic photography on the other, apparently. The photography's the partner's side of things, by the way.'

'If they turn out to be exhibiting displays of dismembered sheep pickled in formaldehyde you can write the copy yourself.'

'You have *met* Angelica Thorne, have you?' demanded Markovitch. 'No, I thought not. Dismembered sheep and Angelica Thorne aren't words that occur in the same sentence.' He considered for a moment, and then quite suddenly leaned across the desk and in an entirely different voice, said, 'It's Thorne's partner I'm interested in, Harry. She's down on the PR hand-out as Simone Marriot, but I've been delving a bit.' Markovitch loved delving. 'Her real name is Simone Anderson.'

Silence. Markovitch sat back in his chair, eyeing Harry. 'Now do you see what this story's really about? And why I've given it to you so far ahead of the date?'

Harry said slowly, 'Simone Anderson. But that was more than twenty years ago— Are you sure you've got the right person?'

But Markovitch would have the right person, of course. He had a complicated card index system of events that might be worth saving up in order to disinter them in ten or twenty years' time. Harry would have bet next month's rent that the wily old sod had been gloating over these particular notes for at least a decade. The *Bellman*'s critics said, loftily, that reading it was like eating reconstituted leftovers, but Markovitch did not mind this in the least; he said the *Bellman* did everything in good taste and took no notice of people who said he would

not recognize good taste if it bit him on the backside every morning for a fortnight.

'Simone Anderson,' said Harry again, thoughtfully.

'You do recognize the name, then?'

'Yes.' Harry said it with supreme disinterest. Never display enthusiasm for a job. Hard-bitten Fleet Street hack, that was the image. A reporter who had come up the hard way, and who rode with the knocks on the journey.

'We'll run the Thorne Gallery thing, of course,' said Markovitch. 'But what I really want you to do is delve back into the Anderson story. Properly delve. I don't just want a cobbled-together re-hash—'

Harry observed that this would make a change for the *Bellman*.

'—cobbled-together re-hash of the original facts,' said Markovitch firmly. 'I want some new angles. Now that Simone Anderson has turned up in the world again, so to speak, let's try to find out what she was doing while she was growing up – school, college, university if any. Boyfriends, girlfriends, lovers of either sex. How did she end up in photography? Is she any good? How did she come to link up with Angelica Thorne? I daresay you can manage all that, can you?'

'I might.' As well as never sounding enthusiastic, never sound optimistic, either. Always sound as if there's a bottle of Chivas Regal in your collar drawer, like a sleazy American private-eye. 'If I agree to do it, I suppose I might come up with one or two angles,' said Harry unenthusiastically. 'I'm not a bloody research assistant, though, you should remember I'm not a bloody research assistant.'

'I know you're not, but something odd happened within that family, Harry. I can remember the whispers, and I can remember three-quarters of Fleet Street trying to ferret it out. It was twenty years ago but I can remember the buzz. People died and people disappeared from that family, Harry, and although most of us suspected something odd had happened, no one ever got at the truth. There were rumours of murder covered up and whispers of collusion within the medical profession.'

'Collusion? Collusion over what?'

'I don't know. None of us could find out.'

'And you think I'll find out, twenty years on?'

'You might. But even if you don't, an update on Simone Anderson – Simone Marriot – will still make a nice human interest story.'

The *Bellman* specialized in nice human interest stories. It liked to tug at heartstrings and it liked publishing rowdily illustrated triple-page spreads about celebrity couples, and minor royalty. Sometimes it ferreted out an injustice and mounted a campaign to put it right, or petitioned for the release of some wrongly convicted criminal.

Harry suspected that Markovitch selected the injustices and the wrongly convicted criminals more or less at random, but he had never said this because he needed the job, in fact he needed any job, and so far he had managed to steer clear of drafting appeals to clear the names of old lags which was one mercy.

'Oh, and keep a note of all your contacts. I want them on the computer, *and* on the card-index.' Markovitch did not entirely trust computers. 'In another ten years' time

there might be another follow-up on this one. I'll save it up.'

'Don't save it up for me. I won't be here in ten years, in fact I won't be here in five, in fact you'll be lucky if I'm around this time next week. Now that I think about it,' said Harry, disagreeably, 'you might as well give the whole thing to somebody else here and now.'

'I'm giving it to you.'

'Well, I don't want it.'

They often had this kind of discussion but it never got to the 'You're fired' stage, because Markovitch could not forget that Harry had worked in the upper echelons of Fleet Street before the messy and acrimonious divorce that had eventually led to him being sacked, and Harry could not forget that he needed the money after Amanda's perfidy over the joint bank account and the house.

'You can have a by-line.'

'I don't want a by-line,' said Harry. 'I don't want my good name attached to the drivel your paper serves up. But I'll tell you what I will have, I'll have a bonus if that week's circulation goes up.' He would not get one, of course, because nobody on the *Bellman* ever got bonuses. So he got up to go, but before he reached the door, Markovitch said, 'Harry.'

'Yes?'

'It's the mother I'm most interested in.'

'I thought it might be.'

'She might be dead by now,' said Markovitch. 'She vanished completely, and we could never find her.'

'Was she nice-looking?' Harry had no idea why he asked this.

'She had a quality. Something that made her stick in your mind.' For a moment Markovitch even sounded wistful.

'She'd be mid-forties now, presumably?'

'Maybe even a bit more. Melissa Anderson, that was her name. I would very much like to know what happened to her Harry. What you need to do is find a pathway into the past, that's what you need to do.'

'You don't want a reporter on this job, you want an orienteer,' said Harry crossly, getting up.

'Where are you going?'

'To the pub to find the magnetic north,' said Harry.

Extract from Charlotte Quinton's diaries: 28th October 1899
Tonight during dinner, I suddenly wished there were pathways into the future so that one could know what lay ahead, and sidestep awkward situations.

But at least Edward v. pleased at confirmation that it's almost definitely to be twins in January as already suspected, and is already talking about moving to a bigger house after the birth. This house dark and gloomy – dark houses no place for children (don't I know it!), and anyway, there will have to be extra servants, have I thought of that? Surprisingly enough, I have.

Has told everyone we know that we are expecting twins (in fact has told some people several times over), and is expanding delightedly like a turkey cock all over London. Suppose he thinks that appearing to have sired twins emphasizes his virility.

Dr Austin has promised that I will be given something to help with the birth – expect that will be

chloroform which they use for royal births nowadays, although Edward's mother, who came to dinner tonight, disapproves of the practice, and says it's God's will that children come into the world through pain and suffering. Pointed out medical science now strongly in favour of alleviating pain of childbirth – better for both mother and baby – at which she said I was being indelicate and supposed it came of mixing with writers and artists in Bloomsbury.

Suspect Edward of being of the same opinion as his mamma. He has a lot of opinions, Edward – most of them disagreeable. Wish I had known about all his opinions before marrying him.

10th November 1899

We have been discussing names for the babies, although Edward's mother says it tempts Providence, and that pride goeth before a fall.

Still, Edward thinks George and William will suit very nicely, since these both good English names, none of this foreign rubbish. Sounded exactly like Mrs Tigg when she orders in household supplies. A nice saddle of English lamb for Sunday, madam, I thought that would suit very nicely, she says.

At a pinch, Edward will concede George and Alice for the twins, since a daughter always a pleasant thing to have, and if the name Alice good enough for Her Majesty's daughter, good enough for a Quinton.

Asked him what about Georgina and Alice, to which he said, Oh nonsense, my dear, you're built for bearing boys, anyone can see that. Hate it when Edward is bluff

and head-patting! Pointed out crossly that am actually quite slim-hipped and strongly object to being regarded as brood mare anyway, to which he wondered huffily what the world was coming to when a wife could make such a very unbecoming remark, and said his mother had been quite right when she said I was indelicate at times. Told him I thought it unbecoming and indelicate for husband to discuss wife with mother.

Sulky silence all through supper as result of this. Would not have thought it possible for anyone to sulk while eating steak and kidney pudding and steamed treacle sponge, but Edward managed it.

Question: What am I doing married to a selfish and self-centred turkey cock who sulks at supper?

Answer: Being revenged on Floy. (Who does not, I fear, give a damn what I'm doing any longer).

Answer adjudged correct in all particulars. And if there really were pathways into the future, I would never (underlined three times) have succumbed to Floy's silver-tongued seduction.