

Episode 1

'Of love bereft,
this life is torment.'

The Force of Destiny – Verdi

January 1968

Snow crystals hit his face as he carried his suitcases up the icy footpath. Only the thought that he might be in Australia in a few weeks cheered him. The blizzard almost obscured the elegant house he had inherited, but did not want. Kew, with its botanical gardens and tree lined streets was too suburban for Nicholas. He preferred the frenetic atmosphere of Chelsea where he had lived for seven years. Tomorrow someone else would take his place in the crowded attic flat.

He stood outside the gate, daunted by the responsibilities facing him. The house had belonged to his family since 1890, and to sell it seemed wrong. Gusts of wind caught the hem of his coat, hooking it over the jagged end of a fallen branch. Disentangling himself, he walked up the path, and opened the front door. It was the first time he had been in the house alone. He took a deep breath, expecting to smell the Chanel perfume his grandmother had worn, but her scent had not lingered. Unprepared for the stale air, he felt bereft. He dumped his cases at the foot of the staircase.

Letters scattered over the black and white tiled hallway raised his hopes. He looked for an airmail envelope, but there was nothing from Australia. Most of the others were electricity and gas bills addressed to his grandmother. His letters were from people in the drama company, begging him to return. He shook his head. Working with Sally would be unbearable.

His grandmother's money had given him the luxury of not having to find another job in a hurry.

As he pulled off his scarf, he saw a shadow through the stained glass panels on the front door.

When he opened it, Tanya, one of his friends from the drama company, held up a shopping bag. "I've bought you a moving in present. I knew you'd forget all about food."

He kissed her cold cheek. "You're right. Thanks."

She began to unbutton her orange coat.

"Leave that on till I light the fire."

Taking off her woollen cap, she shook the snow from it. "What a fabulous house."

Underneath her affectionate manner, he detected tension.

She's going to tell me something about Sally, he thought.

After putting the food she had bought in the kitchen, he led her into the drawing room. The fire was set and there were logs on the

hearth and a box of kindling and newspapers. He flicked on his cigarette lighter and held the flame to the paper. When he stood up, he saw Tanya looking at the portrait over the mantelpiece. It struck him that, as well as the house and antique furniture, he also owned all the photos and portraits of Harriet.

"Is that your mother?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Her sister. Well, that's what she's reputed to be."

She looked puzzled. "But?"

"I'm not sure." He frowned. "When I was a child, every time my relatives looked at her photos or this portrait, they'd gaze sorrowfully and sigh. Actually, for years I thought she was dead. I was twelve when I discovered that she lives in Australia."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "No one would tell me. They said she had gone to Australia because she wanted to start her own theatre."

"Sounds plausible. Are you sure you didn't dream about the sighing relations?"

"Positive. I have vivid recollections of family gatherings. They'd stand in front of her portrait and then say, 'What a tragedy'."

Tanya burst out laughing. "I can't believe that people stood in front of a portrait moaning like a chorus in a Greek ... " She was too overcome with laughter to continue.

"It didn't happen like that." In spite of his exasperation the image amused him. "Why did I think she was dead? Listen, she had an amazing life here. She sang leading roles at Covent Garden." He went to the piano stool and took out a scrap book his mother had kept when she was a child. "Look through that."

As Tanya scanned the newspaper cuttings, he could see she was impressed.

She nodded. "It's certainly strange that she gave all this up. Australia's not the cultural centre of the world, is it?" She looked intrigued. "If I was as famous and feted as she was – I see what you're getting at." She pulled a face. "I bet it was something to do with a man."

"I doubt it. She never married."

Tanya poked him in the ribs. "Then it's definitely something to do with a man. Damn men. Are you going to make me a cup of tea?"

"Do you trust a man to make you a cup of tea?"

"I'm so desperate I'll trust anyone – even you." She started to follow him out of the room, then paused and looked back at the portrait. "Nick? Maybe ... um ... no."

"What? Tell me."

"She might have been – you know."

"I don't."

"She might have preferred women."

That had never occurred to him. "What makes you think that?"

"It's unusual for her not to have married. People keep secrets because there's shame attached – otherwise they wouldn't care if anyone knew. Maybe there was a scandal and that's why she went to Australia."

He shook his head. "Millions of women were left without men after the First World War."

Tanya took a photo off the grand piano. "Not a woman like her."

"You're supposed to be a feminist. You're going on as if marriage is the ultimate achievement for a woman, and if they don't marry there's something wrong with them."

"Nick, in those days marriage was the ultimate achievement for a woman. For too many women it still is." She picked up another photo. "She's got – I don't know how to describe it. Nothing as crude as sexiness. It's not the superficial thing of walking into a room and men staring at her. Just looking at these photos, I feel I want to know her." She put the photo back on the piano. "When did she go to Australia?"

"Forty years ago."

Tanya went back to the portrait. "She's old now."

He nodded. "In her seventies."

"She looks a lot like you."

"Yes. That's why ... " Not wanting Tanya to think he was obsessed by Harriet, he hesitated.

"Go on."

"I've often wondered if she's really my grandmother. It's possible – she was twenty when my mother was born."

Tanya whistled. "Yes. In those days it would have been disgraceful. I bet that's the secret. Now where's my tea?"

He didn't move. "You want to tell me something about Sally, don't you?"

She blushed. "I'll tell you when we're having our tea."

I hope you have enjoyed reading **Vissi d'arte** so far. Please visit my blog at <http://outbackwriter.blogspot.com> (you should be connected to the internet to use this link) for future episodes and I would appreciate your comments on what you have read so far.