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Quite like old times

by Lesley Dawson

Quite like old times, the room says. It is a long time since you were last here. Both you and I have been through traumatic experiences since then. We have both changed as a result of those experiences but in some ways we are still the same.

Phoebe had to think back 25 years to her previous life in this gracious Roman villa. She had been a slave in those days, albeit treasured and well treated. She was now a free woman, a leading citizen in Corinth, a place where people were able to reinvent themselves. She frowned as her heart contracted at the memories coming alive behind her eyelids. She had successfully buried them for many years and managed to live her half-free life in their shadow without disturbing the dragons that stirred in the murky depths.

Now, back in this house the dragons began to roar. She wondered what had happened to her kind master, Titus. She remembered him with affection. How had she not seen the evil in the heart of his cousin Quintus? How could she have been taken in by his interest and so-called love? At first life with him was exciting and she enjoyed being the centre of attention but when she fell pregnant it was another story. When the baby was born it was taken away, she knew not where until much later and she never saw the child again.

She remembered with both gratitude and guilt the friendship of Chrestus, also a slave, who cared for her in her misery after the loss of her daughter, who eventually bought both of them their freedom. She smiled as she saw in her mind's eye, the villa they were able to buy in Corinth and their pleasant, uneventful life there.

However, the bile rose in her throat and she had to swallow hard as she remembered the night he died, when he told her that he had been paid by Titus to look after her. All those years she had walked around believing she was loved. She could see the tears in his eyes when he told her that, although at the beginning his care was bought, he had come to love her. Those thoughts pushed the good news that her daughter lived down into her subconscious mind.

Now, back in Rome she had heard that Titus had taken her daughter and fled to Ephesus away from the cruel plans of Quintus, where they lived until a few months ago. Now they had returned to Rome. The knowledge that her daughter was alive took away some of the sorrow but she desperately wanted to see her again. Phoebe was back in this house because she had received a message that Titus was back and living here.

Maybe today she would meet her daughter again. Then she could begin to live life fully, instead of enduring this half-life. Phoebe stood up as Titus entered the room and greeted her gently. He informed her that her daughter had grown into a beautiful young woman who had married. He shook his head sadly when Phoebe looked around and explained that a smallpox epidemic in Ephesus had taken the lives of Carina and her husband but had spared their small daughter.

Phoebe didn't know whether to cry or to laugh and ended up doing both at the same time. At this point a small whirlwind ran into the room and Phoebe was face to face with her granddaughter.