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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 FOUR



I don't need to take a sabbatical. My professor told me that most of the teaching will be done by Christmas and he will provide me with a reading list to take to Egypt. He says that if I keep up with my studies I should have no problem sitting for my degree in June. This is great news. I virtually forgot about my family, my inheritance and the diaries as I knuckled down to some hard work in the few weeks proceeding Christmas. I spent the holiday alone getting ready to travel. I spoke to Uncle Julius a couple of times on the phone but I didn't tell him much about my meeting with Lily Johnson. I felt that what she had told me was private and personal and she wouldn't appreciate me turning it into gossip.

"She doesn't know any more than we do about my mother's disappearance and her affair with my father lasted less than a year so there's nothing I can tell you about that either that you don't already know" I answered him when he pressed me for all the details.

Every time we spoke he told me he was all set to go back to Extwistle Hall but by the time I was ready to leave England in January he still hadn't managed to get himself there.

I was much more organised than he was and by the middle of January I was all packed and ready to go. I flew out to Cairo on the 23rd of January on Egyptair which I was displeased to discover is a dry airline. I survived the five hour flight from Heathrow by sleeping throughout most of the journey and landed in Cairo feeling fully refreshed. I was shocked to find it was cold. I had always thought Africa and the Middle East were hot places and no one had ever informed me otherwise. My suitcase was filled with loose cotton dresses, shorts, swimsuits and strappy sandals so the first thing I would have to do was to go shopping. Although I arrived late evening the roads were still crowded and it took me almost two hours to reach the hotel. The hotel was tolerably comfortable although nothing grand. The view from my room was spectacular though. I could see up and down the Nile River for miles. As soon as I had unpacked I tried calling the lawyers but there was no answer. I would have to

try again in the morning. After sitting on the balcony for just under an hour drinking a lukewarm Stella beer I got into bed but I was unable to sleep. I tossed and turned for what seemed like hours finally dropping off around five in the morning only to wake up again just before eight. Due to the time difference it was still much too early to call the lawyers. I wasn't particularly hungry either but I ventured down to the dining room anyway more in search of company than food. The place was practically empty. I found a table close to the window and far away from the buffet table. After contemplating my surroundings for a while I eventually dragged myself over to see what there was to eat only to find that apart from the cold cuts and salads I could not identify any of the dishes. My stomach was churning and I was in no condition to try any of the highly spiced delicacies on offer so I was pleased when a kindly English lady came to my rescue.

"They can make you an omelette if you like" she said almost conspiratorially, "and you need to order English tea otherwise you will get some strong sweet stuff in a glass which will have mint where the milk ought to be. Unless you want coffee of course; then you need to order American. Drinking their Turkish coffee is a bit like drinking mud and anyway the cups are far too small."

"Thank-you" I said gratefully. "I do mean to be more adventurous in the future and try everything but not this morning. I will have a plain omelette as you suggest and the English tea. Can you help me to order?"

"I can but there is no need" she laughed. "The waiters all speak English and they are used to our idiosyncrasies. Would you like to join me at my table? I have already eaten but I usually sit for an hour or so drinking coffee. One needs to get ones strength up before going out onto the streets."

I allowed myself to be led to her table which was at the far side of the room well away from the windows "You will see enough of Egyptian life when you get out there" she explained "so no need to bring it inside the hotel with you."

She chattered on incessantly and although I was glad of the company I have to admit I didn't listen to half of it. I allowed her to think I was just a tourist like

her and fortunately she didn't ask too many questions. She seemed intent on telling me that although the country is full of fabulous sites and artefacts the place is filthy and the people most inhospitable. I was relieved when she finally got up to leave and more than a little pleased to hear that this was her last day in Egypt and she would be flying out that afternoon. Once I was left alone I called the lawyer's office again and this time I got an answer.

"Oh Miss Paramour we have been expecting your call" a toneless voice replied. "The diaries are already in Egypt and our representative out there will deliver the first volume to you today. You will receive one volume at a time I assume that was explained to you."

"No it was not explained to me" I said crossly. "I am not even aware how many volumes there are. When do I expect to get the rest?"

"That decision is out of your hands" the voice droned on. "Just leave things to us. Your grandmother was very particular that her wishes were carried out to the letter. We do know what we are doing Miss Paramour. Now kindly wait in the hotel until the first diary reaches you."

The phone went dead without a word of goodbye from the voice. I was left wondering just how long I would have to wait here and quite angry at this restriction being placed on my freedom. I still hadn't solved the problem of finding some warmer clothing and looking at the other hotel guests I could see that I was most inappropriately dressed. My sleeveless dress, although below knee-length, left me looking very exposed compared to the other women I could see around me who were almost all totally covered from head to toe. There was nothing for it but to go back to the privacy of my room and wait there. I had brought nothing to read with me apart from my university work and I was in no mood for that. The hotel boasted a small bookshop so I wandered over to it in search of something light. All I could find there were guides to the monuments and a couple of Agatha Christie novels. I settled on a copy of 'Death on the Nile' although I had read it before as well as having seen the movie countless times. I had almost reached the end of the book and I had drunk my way through half

the mini bar when the telephone in my room rang. The concierge spoke to me in what I considered to be a very off-hand manner.

"There is a gentleman in the lobby for you Miss Paramour" he said. "He is asking to come up to your room. We don't normally allow visitors of the opposite sex up to the rooms but he is most insistent. He says he is on business. I can send him up there if you like but I must request that you leave your room door slightly ajar whilst you have a male visitor with you. Shall I send him?"

"Yes send him" I said slamming the phone down heavily.

A few minutes later a smart young Egyptian arrived at my room accompanied by the porter who hovered around seemingly reluctant to leave us alone together. "That will be all" I said sharply as I ushered my guest into the room and contrary to instructions closed the door firmly behind him.

"This is for you" said the young man handing me a fat parcel. "The diaries are all quite long" he said stating what I thought was obvious looking at the size of it. "I took the liberty of purchasing some trousers, jumpers and a jacket for you" he continued. "The hotel staff thought you needed them and your uncle in England told us your size. You will need some flat shoes too but I wasn't able to get those for you. You will have to try them on for yourself I think. I can send someone from a shoe shop round here if you would like."

With that he deposited close on a dozen bags of clothing onto the bed.

"I am quite capable of doing my own shopping and will organise my own footwear thank-you" I said, reluctant to let him see how grateful I was for the warm clothes. I had a couple of pairs of flatties with me as it happened but I didn't tell him that. I detest letting anyone think they are in control.

"I'm afraid you will not be going out tomorrow Miss Paramour. It is a holiday; Police Day. There are some demonstrations planned and I fear the streets will be unsafe. Don't worry" he continued seeing the look of horror on my face "these things never amount to much. Our President and the army are well prepared for this kind of thing. Best to stay indoors though. I need to leave now. As you know it's not proper in our culture for you to entertain male guests in your hotel

room."

As he opened the door I saw the porter scurrying away down the corridor. He must have been keeping a check on us. I retired back into my room most vexed that I would have to spend my second day in Egypt once again confined to the hotel. I wasn't in the least concerned about the demonstrations. The Egyptian army would soon sort that out. Nothing would be allowed to happen that might affect tourism let alone depose their thirty year dictator. I decided that I would go down to dinner, finish 'Death on the Nile' and volume one of my grandmother's diaries would just have to wait until morning.

In the lobby I discovered that the hotel boasted an Indian restaurant. This cheered me up enormously. "At least I will recognize the food" I thought "and probably once I leave Cairo I will be restricted entirely to an Egyptian diet so I should enjoy this while I can."

The restaurant was beautifully appointed with a large fountain flanked by four granite lions taking up the entire centre of the room. The design of the whole place was more Arabic than Indian with mashrabeya windows and each of the tables nestled discreetly amongst an array of fake palms. Happily the menu read exactly like any other Indian restaurant menu. I ordered samosa, Rogan Josh and naan bread and then feeling greedy I added a Palak Tikka. The drinks list was somewhat less inspiring. The only wine they had on offer was that blasted Omar Khayyam. I didn't fancy drinking more beer because I had already had three or four Stellas in the room so I asked the waiter if they had any wine that wasn't Egyptian. He proudly told me that they had Moet-Chandon champagne at five thousand Egyptian Pounds a bottle. I quickly worked out that that was about four hundred and eighty sterling pounds and decided against it. Anyway champagne and curry didn't seem quite right together somehow. The waiter assured me that the Omar Khayyam wine producers had made great advances in improving their wines and I should not be put off by my previous experience. I wasn't convinced but as I had no choice I ordered a bottle of the red. When he brought it and I saw the familiar bottle I almost asked him to take it back

without opening it but then I thought I may as well give him the benefit of the doubt. I was glad I did. Whilst still being far removed from the St Emilion I usually drank it was quite palatable. The food was delicious and although I have never visited India I am quite a connoisseur of the Indian takeaways on the Portobello Road and this food was just as good. Fully replete I ended my meal with a glass of fine cognac and went back up to my room. I fell asleep at once and did not wake up until after ten next morning.

I went downstairs to the breakfast room and seated myself at my table near the window. When I looked out I saw that the streets were practically empty apart from a strong police presence and there was an army truck right outside the hotel just to the right of me on the corniche. "Looks as though they have everything under control" I was thinking as the waiter came over to ask me if I wouldn't prefer a seat away from the window. I told him I was perfectly fine where I was and in fact I was disappointed there wasn't more happening. Seems like Egyptians have no idea what a demonstration should be like. I got up and went to the buffet. This morning I was going to have a fine old Egyptian feast. The waiter, who seemed particularly interested in me, explained all the dishes and I went back to my table with a big bowl of fowl and a pile of tamiah otherwise known in the rest of the Middle East as falafel. The waiter came over again. "You won't go out today will you? he asked. "Nothing is happening here at the moment but you will see some crowds later on I'm sure. In other parts of Cairo there are already hundreds of protestors out. They are chanting our slogan 'Bread and Freedom' and saying they are ready to sacrifice their blood and their souls to remove this regime."

"How dramatic" I replied. "No I won't be going out although it all seems a bit tame to me. You should see demonstrations in London. Now they are what I call demonstrations."

He sniffed disdainfully and walked off. I had a leisurely breakfast preparing myself for the first reading of the diaries and seeing if anything would come of the protests. The waiter came back to tell me that there were now actually thou-



sands of protestors out all over Egypt but they just hadn't reached Downtown yet. I looked at him sympathetically. "These people really want a proper demonstration but they just aren't up to it" I thought. As I finished off my breakfast with a Turkish coffee I heard some vague rumblings in the distance. Either there weren't many people out there or it was a long way off but I couldn't decide which. I went back to my room ready to start reading the diary but when I got there I kept putting it off. I had to read it I knew that but I had a deep sense of foreboding. I felt sure that I would find something unpleasant there; something I might not want to find. I took a shower, tried on all my new clothes, which were surprisingly tasteful and fit perfectly before getting myself a beer and going to the balcony with the first volume. The noise from the protests was much louder now and down the corniche I could see quite a number of Egyptians gathering together across from the museum. I watched with some interest, leaving the diary unopened on the table beside me. I picked up my phone, connected it to the hotel Wi-Fi and flicked through the social media sites to see if anything was being reported. Some sites appeared to be blocked and the ones that weren't were all in Arabic so I soon gave up to that. I went back inside the room, lay on the bed and turned on the TV. There was nothing on BBC but Nile TV showed a few scattered protestors here and there.

I must have dropped off because the next time I looked at my watch it was almost 3.30pm. I went back outside and looked down from my balcony to see that there were definitely some pretty big protests going on now. What looked like it could be tear gas was being fired. I went back to the TV and BBC was now reporting the news from Egypt. Twitter was down they said and there had been hundreds of arrests including many journalists. I flicked over to the Egyptian channel where the reporter was saying that things were quietening down now which did not tally with the BBC which was currently showing huge numbers of protestors throwing rocks at the police. I don't know Cairo of course but I got the impression that all this was going on fairly close to my hotel. The deafening noise outside confirmed my suspicions. About half an hour later the manager

called my room asking me to stay away from the balcony and the windows. "I don't want you to inhale any tear gas or get hit by any rocks" he explained. The idea that that could happen was so obviously ludicrous that I totally ignored his instructions.

By early evening things seemed calmer and watching the proceedings from my balcony was becoming boring so I went down to the bar for a cocktail. I was the only person in there and the bartender informed me that he would be closing soon because he needed to get home and the streets were dangerous. I ordered three Tom Collins just in case. "The restaurants are not going to open tonight" he told me gleefully, lining up my drinks on the bar. "You can get a sandwich in the coffee shop and room service won't be affected." That was all I needed; I was starving. I asked if I could eat in the bar and the barman went off to find out. "Yes" he said returning almost immediately, "you can have a hamburger." "That's it?" I asked. "A hamburger?" He didn't make any response so I decided I had better order the burger while it was still on offer. The barman was now twiddling around with his radio and the crackling from it was quite disturbing. Seeing my look of consternation he explained that the demonstrators in Tahrir Square had set up a radio station and it was imperative that he listen in. He then started a running commentary about what was happening. "It's quiet down there but they are saying they will stay there all night;" then "they are handing out sandwiches and blankets." This reminded me that I was still waiting for my hamburger so I instructed my barman to go and look for it. He came back with a cheese sandwich apologising that all the chefs had either gone home or gone over to Tahrir. He then promptly left himself.

When I returned to the lobby I found that the hotel manager had been looking for me. "Your lawyer called" he said. "He's coming for you in the morning to move you to the Mena House. You should go. We might have to close this hotel tomorrow if things get any worse."

"Totally unnecessary" I mumbled to myself but my life was no longer my own it seemed so I obediently went up to my room where I packed my things ready

for the move. The BBC was no longer reporting from Egypt so I presumed the worst was over.