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DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

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**The story of two women,
two revolutions and one house.**

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Just over twenty fours later I was in Luxor. I had taken the night flight and by seven o'clock on the morning of the thirteenth I was already checked into my room in the Winter Palace. I sat on the balcony with a big plate of almond croissants on the table in front of me gazing across the Nile towards the Valley of the Kings. "Now this is the real Egypt" I thought. It certainly wasn't the hustle and bustle and pollution of Cairo where, despite the fall of Mubarak major protests were still continuing. They were demanding to be rid of military rule now. "These people seem very sure of what they don't want but do they know what they do want?" I asked myself: "Democracy maybe or possibly a return to something more Islamic." I really had no idea.

I had not been happy to check into yet another hotel but had been left with no choice. There had been no time to arrange for somewhere for me to stay on the West Bank. Apparently someone had built a small bungalow right next to my grandmother's villa and I was hoping to be able to rent that. A representative from my lawyer was coming to the hotel at lunchtime to let me know if it was available and hopefully I would be out of here by tomorrow.

When the lawyer arrived at the hotel well before the stipulated time, he told me he had some excellent news.

"The Spanish people are moving out of your villa so you will be able to stay in your own home. Isn't that marvellous? You have no need to rent anywhere after all. The only thing is there will be a slight delay unfortunately; maybe two or three days."

This sounded good on the face of it but I couldn't bear the thought of being trapped in a hotel for much longer and I had never intended to inconvenience anyone either.

"I hope they are not moving out on my account" I said, "I am perfectly happy renting somewhere as long as it's not too far away. I was hoping to be out of here tomorrow. I have been marooned in hotels for weeks now and I don't think I can take much more of it."

"No, no, no; it's nothing like that. Your tenants are getting older and your house

is too big for them. They have been thinking about moving for a while now and your coming here has made them do something about it at last. I will speak to them today and see if they can vacate any quicker and I will call you later and let you know what they say. By the way you are not trapped in the hotel. You can go anywhere you like. Luxor saw very little violence during the revolution and everything here is as normal."

"Well there are no tourists here are there?" I countered, "And the Foreign Office is still advising all but essential travel to Luxor so I wouldn't say things are normal."

"Your Embassy!" he laughed; "Always so over-cautious. I have to get going now. I need to get to the West Bank to see if I can speed things up over there. As I said I will call you later. Goodbye for now."

He left then leaving me to think over what he had said. Of course it would be perfect to be right on site and in my own house as well and another day or two in a hotel wouldn't kill me, especially such a luxurious one as this one. I reluctantly resigned myself to a longer stay and headed to the bar for lunch.

My lunch consisted of two Bloody Marys and some olives. I wasn't very hungry after all those almond croissants. The bar like the rest of the hotel had been renovated with every care to keep the colonial atmosphere. I can't put my finger on what it was exactly but despite all their efforts it didn't work well; it never does when these big hotel chains get their hands on these old places. I booked myself a table for dinner and went back to my room to sleep off the effects of the Bloody Marys.

It was almost eight by the time I was ready to go down to the dining room. The dress code was formal and I hadn't really got anything suitable to wear but after I had added a few accessories to what was quite a plain summer dress I decided I would get away with it. The restaurant was beautifully appointed although the lighting was a bit on the bright side. The menu was both extensive and interesting. I ordered the prawn stuffed ravioli followed by lamb with lemongrass and a good bottle of Italian wine. I had already decided on the trio of chocolate

mousse for dessert. I then sat back to wait for what I hoped was going to be an excellent dinner

They didn't have the wine I wanted and the only foreign wine that was available was a Chablis Grand Cru which was way out of my budget so I was back to the Omar Khayyam. The ravioli was tough which was a shame because the filling and the sauce were both delicious. The lamb arrived without the lemongrass. "We haven't been able to get our delivery from Cairo" the waiter explained. I was very cross that he had brought me a dish lacking its most essential ingredient but I ate it anyway. It was good but it wasn't what I had ordered. It was more akin to a Sunday roast at home than a gourmet dish in a five star hotel. The stunning presentation of the chocolate mousse trio had been achieved by the use of too much gelatine and I know I'm no chef but I am pretty sure a good chocolate mousse shouldn't have gelatine in at all. Overall it was a disappointing meal but what can one really expect in a hotel with no tourists in the middle of a revolution. The Irish coffee was perfect though and I ordered a second one to be sent to my room. I needed the alcohol to put me to sleep because I wasn't at all tired after my long afternoon siesta. When I reached my room I found a note from the lawyer saying he would collect me at eleven next morning. The Spanish people had made a big effort on my behalf and were vacating my house tonight. This news made sleep even more difficult and it was well into the early hours before I dropped off.

I woke early in a state of great anticipation looking forward to my first day in Egypt outside of a hotel. I was already packed and having nothing else to do I turned on the television. Yesterday the Supreme Council had dissolved parliament and suspended the constitution in response to demands by the demonstrators. The army chief said that the military would have to remain in power for six months at least before any elections could be held. The Egyptian people seemed a bit happier and although they were still asking for more specific deadlines most of the demonstrations had stopped and the protestors had even begun to clean up Tahrir Square. There were still a few small protests going on but I put

that down to Egyptians, having found some freedom at last, simply enjoying demonstrating.

I was waiting in the lobby long before the lawyer showed up. Thankfully he was in good time and he had brought a boatman with him. The porter who carried my bags across the street to the Winter Palace's private jetty where my boat was moored didn't look very pleased with the tip I gave him and hovered around far longer than he needed to. I didn't give in though because after all I am not a tourist and my tips were going to be no more than the Egyptians would give from now on.

The boat journey was stupendous but there was a definite wind chill. I had not been prepared for that and had no jacket with me and then I suddenly realised my shoes were not going to be suitable either. I should have learnt from my grandmother's mistakes! On the way over the lawyer pointed out Djorff Palace, the house my grandmother had built all those years ago. It looked huge and the imposing entrance right at the water's edge reminded me more of a Maharajah's palace than an Arabian one. From what I could see the gardens were very overgrown and some of the windows looked to be broken but the impressive arabesque balconies had stood the test of time and looked to be in near perfect condition. I asked the boatman if he could stop or at least slow down a bit but he said he didn't have time and I would have to wait until later to get a proper look.

Things must have improved since my grandmother's day because the path to the house was quite negotiable even in my strappy sandals and it was only two minute's walk from the boat to the house. I came upon it quite suddenly. It was hidden from view from the Nile by towering palm trees and you had to be practically on top of it before you would know it was even there. Next to it was the smaller bungalow I had been going to rent. That must have been built more recently because there was no mention of it in my grandmother's diary. As I approached the gate I was met by an elderly couple who I assumed to be my ex-tenants.

"Welcome to Luxor" the old lady said in near perfect English, "and welcome to your home. We just have a couple of boxes to move and then we will be out of your hair."

"I am so sorry to inconvenience you like this" I apologized, "and there really was no need for you to move. I could have found somewhere else to stay."

"Not at all" it was the man who spoke now. "To tell you the truth you did us a favour. Your house was getting too big for us but we never seemed to get round to doing anything about it. The small villa next door came up for sale at just the right time. The lady who owned it has moved back to Australia. It has a much nicer garden and a rooftop with stunning views of the Nile and the sunset. Your house doesn't have much by way of a view because that enormous mango tree is in the way. The garden isn't really a garden either; more of a courtyard with a fountain and a couple of palms. Don't you worry miss; it has all worked out for the best. It has been a bit of a rush moving at such short notice so if we have left anything behind we will come and collect it later if you don't mind.

"Of course; come round whenever you want" I replied grateful that I was not going to have any ill feeling between me and my neighbours.

"There is just the matter of the staff to sort out" the old man continued. "You see they go more with the house than the people. The one in your house, Islam, is the grandson of Mamdouh, your grandmother's original houseboy, and he knows the house very well. Hassan who works next door will be better for us because he does the garden as well as the cleaning. A garden like that takes quite a lot of upkeep and I am not sure Islam could manage it. The only problem I can see is that Hassan doesn't have any transport and we need someone to run to the shops for us. Islam has a motorbike and he knows exactly what we want. He goes to the laundry for us well. If we could just borrow him every now and again that would be wonderful."

"Oh yes take him whenever you want. I wasn't really thinking of having anyone to work for me. Do you think I need him?"

"Oh my goodness" the man continued. "Of course you need him. You will

never manage alone. Too much dust for one thing and those birds flying all over the place make quite a mess. It's a long walk to the nearest shop too so unless you are thinking of getting a car Islam will be invaluable. If it's the money you are worried about you have to know that Islam's salary is a pittance for what he does. He needs the job as well. We foreigners are a big source of employment for these local boys and with so many expats leaving Luxor he won't find another job easily."

It wasn't so much the money but more that I don't like people wandering around my house and cleaning up around me. As if reading my mind the old man added; "you won't even know he is there. Islam will keep out of your way when he is cleaning and he is very discreet."

That settled it. I would take my neighbour's advice and keep Islam.

"Now I think we all have to get on. We haven't introduced ourselves properly yet. I am Carlo and this is my wife Carmen."

"Gloria" I said holding out my hand. "Perhaps we can meet up for a drink later on this evening."

"Yes but you must come to us. Just pop round whenever you are ready" he said making his way out of my garden and round to his own front door which seemed to be only a couple of metres away. I looked round to see that my lawyer and the boatman had already left. How annoying. I had wanted to ask him about the second volume of the diaries. I would have to call him and I'm sure that he wouldn't want to come back over here again today. I picked up my two cases that the boatman had left by the gate and made my way into the house. Islam was already inside waiting for me. Without a word he took my bags and carried them upstairs leaving me alone to look round my new home.

It was exactly as my grandmother had described it apart from what must have once been the library had been turned into a spare bedroom. The kitchen was large and airy and very well equipped so it was rather a pity that I didn't particularly enjoy cooking. The office was compact but comfortable. Just as my grandmother had said the main salon was sparsely furnished and a most incon-

venient shape. "Nothing has changed in the last fifty or more years" I thought as I headed for the upstairs. Nothing had changed there either. Everything was exactly as she had depicted it right down to the two granite dogs. It was as if I had turned the clock back. I went back downstairs to see that Islam had made coffee; espresso. He asked me what I would like for dinner and when I said that I hadn't the faintest idea he said he would make me fish and chips. He just needed a few Egyptian pounds and he would go off to the shops and get everything. My neighbours were right. I definitely needed Islam.

At that point Carmen's head appeared through one of the salon windows. Her garden went right up to it and it was perfectly possible for anyone to simply climb out through the window and enter her house that way from the back.

"Do you want to come for dinner?" she asked.

I explained that Islam had already arranged dinner so we agreed to postpone her invitation until tomorrow and just stick with our original plan of cocktails on her roof at sunset. Life here was definitely going to be good.

Islam had the fish and chips ready by five o'clock so I was able to eat before going next door. He also served me a small bowl of fresh mango soaked in Cointreau and topped with a sprig of mint. It was delicious but I had to wonder where he had got the Cointreau from. I had better check with next door.

At six o'clock Carmen called for me and I unceremoniously jumped through the adjoining window into her garden. I climbed the very steep stairs to the roof to see that she had set out a table with an array of cheeses and was pouring Sangria from a large jug.

"You have to do something with the local wine" she told me. "It's not very nice otherwise. It's fine for Sangria though and I even use the local brandy in it."

I sipped it with some trepidation and was surprised to find it tasted absolutely fabulous.

"I think you might have left some Cointreau in my house" I informed her, "and I'm afraid Islam used some of it on my mangoes tonight."

"Yes I know" she said. "There were only a couple of measures left and Islam

asked if he could keep it. I think he wanted to impress you. It's one of your grandmother's recipes. Islam has his grandfather's old book full of them. There's some good stuff in there. Your grandmother had some very original ideas for food. Try the spaghetti with oranges. It sounds weird but it tastes divine."

I changed the subject then and asked her what she knew about the old palace. It was Carlo who answered.

"Absolutely nothing; we have wanted to see it for years but the guards won't let anyone in there. We have really been looking forward to your coming so that we might get a chance to go inside at last. Have you seen it yet?"

"Well only from the river like everyone else. I thought I'd have a wander over there tomorrow. Come with me if you want."

"No we couldn't do that" Carmen interjected. "You need to go on your own first. We can see it later."

I stayed up on the roof with them for a couple of hours watching a rather ordinary sunset.

"There are some spectacular ones sometimes" Carmen assured me "but tonight isn't one of them unfortunately."

I didn't linger long once the sun had faded and when I got back home I went straight upstairs to bed. There was a large bookcase just outside my bedroom door full of novels and I was browsing through it looking for something to read when I came across a photograph album. It was the Sudan album. I could hardly believe it. I got myself into bed and excitedly started leafing through it. There they were; all the pictures of a smiling Simon with the 'Barbara look alike.' "It is her" I said to myself. "It must be." I wanted to call the lawyer now to get the next diary so I reached for my phone and dialled his number.

'The number you have called cannot be reached. Please leave a message.'

I left no message. I would call him in the morning.

The next morning I woke at five. The mosque was calling and birds were flying around the room. It was uncanny. I only needed to hear a rooster crowing and I would be re-living my grandmother's first morning here. Sadly there wasn't

one and I couldn't see any birds' nests on the light fittings either. Islam came at seven sharp so he wasn't going to be another Mamdouh by the look of things.

"Do birds still nest on the lights?" I asked him.

"No madam I stopped them" he replied looking very pleased with himself.

"Miss Carmen didn't like them to do that because they made such a mess everywhere. I can leave them to do it again if that's what you want" he said worriedly.

"No don't do that." I replied hastily. "I don't want to make more work for you. I just wondered that's all. Now make me some of that excellent coffee of yours please and a slice of toast, then finish the cleaning and get yourself off home early. I am eating out tonight and I will be going across to the palace straight after breakfast."

"They won't let you in" he replied rather smugly. "They don't let anyone in."

"Nonsense! Of course they will let me in. It's my house; I own it."

Islam shook his head doubtfully and went off to make the coffee while I called the lawyer; still no reply.

Immediately after breakfast I took the short walk across to my other house. The old guard at the door refused to let me enter. I told him who I was but it made no difference. I had no choice but to go back home and try the lawyer again. This time he answered.

"Can you get the next diary to me today please and call that old guard at the palace and tell him to let me in" I demanded.

"The diary is still in Cairo. I won't get it today; maybe tomorrow. As soon as I have it in my hands I will bring it to you directly. You won't be able to go inside the palace until you have read it. These are your grandmother's instructions." He made no apology for any of this and I almost lost my temper.

"This is ridiculous" I said. "It's my property. I don't see how you can stop me."

"Well technically it isn't your property until you complete the refurbishment. Then it will be your property. Right now it is in the hands of the executors. You really must exercise some patience Miss Paramour. As I said I will get the diary to you as soon as I have it. The delay has been caused by the revolution not by

us so there is no point shouting."

I slammed the phone down then. I was getting nowhere fast. I had the whole day in front of me with nothing to do so I decided I may as well visit one of the sites. I wasn't going to go on the regular tourist trail though. I wanted to visit Thoth Hill which supposedly has a small temple dedicated to Horus. Thoth Hill is not located in the valleys of the West Bank but is higher up on the plateau and it took me a while to explain to the taxi driver where exactly I wanted to go. At first he said he had never heard of it and it was only after I mentioned that fragments of baboon statues had been found in the vicinity did he realise where I meant. No wonder he wasn't keen to go there. The area was very difficult to reach because the hill is surrounded by large ravines and the road leading up to the temples is very steep and difficult to ascend. There are two temples there and the one I wanted to see was the less impressive of the two. It is made of mud brick and the only interesting features found there are the many inscriptions dedicated to the god Horus. The most famous of them being written close to the entrance. It's written in hieroglyphics of course but I already had looked up the translation.

'He of the Two Goddesses Who Causes his Two Lands to Live. The Peaceful God Horus.'

Apart from that there was nothing else to see so I didn't stay there for long. The taxi driver was very keen to tell me that there are much better places for me to visit and that I should ask him first before going to any more temples. I obligingly agreed that I would.

I was back home in plenty of time for dinner. I got dressed up to show my neighbours that I really did appreciate all they were doing for me and this time I went to their house via the front door.

"Let's have drinks on the roof first" Carmen said greeting me with a kiss on both cheeks. "The sunset is much better tonight. We will have to eat dinner in the kitchen though. I am not carrying all that food up to the roof. I have followed some of your grandmother's recipes but I have added a little Spanish twist.

I hope you will like it."

I allowed myself to be led up to the roof where I found Carlo twiddling with a small radio.

"Just listening to the BBC" he said. "Your Embassy is no longer advising its nationals to leave. In fact they are saying that according to the improved situation on the ground it is now safe to come here to Luxor. Luxor is calm they are saying and the city is functioning normally. That's all very true but I don't think we will be seeing many tourists here for quite a while. It's nice and peaceful for us without them but the people here don't have any business other than tourism. There are no factories or anything like that so the poor Egyptians down here are really suffering. Now you come and sit down and have a Campari and watch the sunset and tell us all about your day."

I told them a little bit about my grandmother's diaries and why I was still being refused access to the palace and about my trip to Thoth Hill.

"I don't think we have been there have we Carlo?" Carmen queried and without waiting for confirmation she asked me why I had chosen such a remote place.

"My grandmother talked a lot about Horus" I explained, omitting to mention that my father had also had a weird obsession with him too.

"Oh I see" she said somewhat disinterestedly. "Well you can tell us all about that later. Right now we have to go down for dinner or it will be ruined."

After an interesting meal of lettuce soup, chocolate chicken and crême Catalan we retired to the garden with a bottle of local arak. "We are right out of cognac" Carlo explained, "but this will hit the spot."

Once out there I manoeuvred the conversation back to Egyptology.

"I am studying Classics at university" I explained, "and although I know almost everything about Greek and Roman gods I know practically nothing about the Ancient Egyptian myths. Are you interested in it Carmen?" I asked.

"Goodness me no" she laughed. "Carlo and I are not great historians and neither of us is at all spiritual or religious. One god is much the same as another to us. I do know that similar myths appear in the Old Testament and even in the

Koran but I assume that is because those old stories got handed down through the generations and changed only slightly over the years. There are plenty of visitors who come to Luxor though with the express intention of learning more about the Egyptian gods. There are even some who profess to believe in them. Each to his own we say. I think there are some old books that might interest you that used to be in your grandmother's library. I packed them away in boxes and put them under the stairs. We were never going to read them. They should be still there. More arak?"

I allowed myself to have one for the road before calling it a night. I then realized I had forgotten my key and Carlo had to help me get into my house through the window. Access from this side is much more difficult for some reason or maybe it was the arak.

Next day I had a throbbing head and decided to stay in bed and read some more of the classics while I waited for the diary to appear. Tired of tragedy I opted for "The Frogs" by Aristophanes. It's supposed to be a comedy but I don't think we have the same sense of humour as the Ancient Greeks and I ended up falling asleep before I reached the end.

It was just after midnight when I heard someone at the door. It was the lawyer with the diary. Apparently it is perfectly normal in Egypt to call on people at this hour and indeed he looked rather surprised to find that I had already gone to bed. I took the diary from him without inviting him in. He needs to learn that foreigners do not welcome guests at this time of night. I was exhausted but I couldn't get back to sleep. I picked up the diary and saw that it was even fatter than the first one. I opened it up on the title page where my grandmother had written 'Diaries of Nancy Paramour: Volume Two'. -I had a quick flick through the pages. Again it was crammed full of plans and drawings but there didn't seem to be as many photographs in this one. I didn't have either the inclination or the energy to start reading it so having seen what I wanted to see I put it to one side and turned on the television. Someone from the army was being interviewed yet again; this time on 'HARDtalk.' He was saying that the army had no

intention of fielding a candidate in the upcoming presidential elections. I would believe that when I saw it. For the next couple of days at least I could forget all about this revolution and turn my attention back to the last one. At least I knew the ending of that revolution.