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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 TWENTY ONE



January 7th 1955

Simon and Amin have decided between themselves to build more rooms on the piece of land to the left. I now know that they have been talking about this behind my back since New Year and not only did they exclude me from all their discussions they also omitted to even mention it to me. It all started because Simon is not happy with his bedroom. Well the room itself is fine but the location next to the children and above the nanny is not. I half-heartedly tried to give him the master bedroom saying that I would be happy to be near to the children but he rejected my offer straightway because he says he has a better solution. I am glad that he did really because I do need a dressing room and there isn't one with his bedroom. The plan now is to build Simon a bedroom on the left hand piece of land with an office below it and a library across from it. In order to appease me there is going to be another room above the library that I can use as a private sitting room or small studio. I can do all my sewing up there according to Simon. I don't know where he got that idea from. I haven't picked up a needle and thread in years and if Simon thinks I am going to start now making all the cushions myself by hand he has another think coming. Amin has promised to complete everything in three or four months but I know that it will be six months at least before I can move. I am seething.

January 8th

Last night I vented all my anger on Amin. He didn't say much but today he came round early morning with some plans to make a ballroom under the library.

"More time?" I said trying to look disinterested.

"Not really. I have to dig the foundations out for the library anyway so going further down and reinforcing it isn't a big job. Look" he said, putting his arm round me, "how can you have a palace without a room big enough to entertain people? You need somewhere for dances and parties and if you don't do it now you won't be able to do it later and I am sure you will regret it."

I realised I was blushing and tried to look away. This is the first time Amin has

touched me in an intimate way and I don't know if it was that or the idea that I am to have my own ballroom but whichever it was I gave in immediately. It was only after he had left did I realise that we don't have anyone to invite to these grand balls they are planning and that Amin and Simon have managed to get their own way simply by appealing to my vanity. I am such a fool sometimes.

January 30th

I need to go to Cairo to get more things to furnish all these extra rooms but Simon is reluctant to let me go. He thinks there might be a war. War about what I asked him.

"Well it could be Suez but it's more likely to be Palestine" he answered, confirming my view that he knows nothing about any such war. He doesn't want me to go to Cairo because he thinks we will have enough furniture if we take everything out of the villa and put it in the palace. I told him that most of it won't be suitable and I asked him what he thinks we are going to do with a villa without anything in it. We had originally thought of renting it out but that will be impossible if we are going to remove all the furniture. Simon is in no mood to listen to me at the moment so I will have to wait until he is in a more amenable frame of mind if we are going to discuss it properly.

February 28th

Israeli troops attacked the Gaza strip today which is part of Egyptian territory and Nasser did absolutely nothing about it. So much for Simon's war! Let's face it the Egyptian army is not up to a confrontation with Israel.

March 3rd

Nasser isn't so popular now that he is letting Israel walk all over Egypt. The stupid Egyptian people can't seem to see that there is no point going into a battle you know you are going to lose. Nasser is right on this one.

March 4th

Last week an alliance was formed between Iraq and Turkey and the British have signed up to it now. Pakistan and Iran are most likely going to join so Britain will have some strong allies in the region soon.

March 5th

Nasser is not at all happy with this Baghdad Pact. He thinks it's a threat to his efforts to eliminate British military influence in the Middle East. He's right. That is the whole idea of it. He says it will only lead to Arab subservience to Zionism and more Western imperialism. Doesn't he know that our 'Empire Days' are long gone? He is trying to arm his military now and wants to stock up with some modern weaponry but no one is selling him any; not even America.

March 6th

This Baghdad Pact together with the raid in Gaza has shaken the relationship between America and Egypt. Nasser is making no secret that he is considering buying weapons from the Russians now. I suppose he is hoping that faced with the prospect of Egypt buying Soviet weapons Eisenhower will capitulate and sell Egypt what they want. Of course Khrushchev will sell anybody anything if it promotes Soviet influence in the Middle East. He is keen to arm any old third world left-wing government if it helps him to curtail Western influence over here. Nasser doesn't seem worried that the Soviet Union might have designs themselves on the Middle East probably because he's too wrapped up in ending any British influence over here. Simon has his own theories about why Nasser is so angry about the Baghdad Pact; he says it's because Nasser is taking it personally.

"Nasser sees this pact as an attempt by the West to promote the Iraqi Prime Minister as an alternative leader to him. He sees Iraq's inclusion in the Baghdad Pact as an indication that not only us, but others as well including the States, are siding with his archenemy and putting him forward as a candidate for the

leadership of the Arab people. So you see Iraq's friendship with Britain looks to Nasser to be a definite threat to his own plan of seeing Egypt as head of the whole Arab world. It's good news for us that Nasser has grown suspicious of the Americans. It's put an end to the CIA's influence at last. Do you know that the Americans used to view Nasser as a CIA asset because he was on such friendly terms with all the CIA officers up in Cairo? Well he has dropped them all now. They were only using him to push us out of Egypt but Nasser was too vain to see it. Have you noticed that Britain is no longer the only target of Nasser's speeches these days? Since we agreed to evacuate Suez it's either Iraq or Israel who are taking the brunt. He is scared to death that Iraq will persuade Syria and Lebanon into signing up to the Baghdad Pact and erode his influence even more. Jordan might join but you can never tell with them. They have their own agenda of looking after Jordan's interests first and Jordan's interests alone. Nobody can trust them."

Simon is looking at this very superficially but I didn't tell him so. He likes to think he knows what is in everyone's mind and he believes everybody is vain and selfish like him. Nasser is much too clever to get himself embroiled in petty jealousy games like this. Instead of taking sides with any one of the superpowers Nasser is playing them off against each other. It's obvious; I mean even we are scared of the Russians.

March 31st

It has come out that the Americans have been plotting to replace Britain as the pre-eminent power in the Middle East. We all knew that they were doing it behind our backs but it's the first I've heard that it was an actual policy! They were planning to have their own pact called the Middle East Defence Organisation with all the same members as the Baghdad Pact only without us. Nasser didn't want to be a member but his pals in the CIA offered him a three million dollar bribe if he would join. It is widely known that Nasser took the money but still refused to join. Nasser would like to have his own Egyptian-dominated

defence organisation which he rather condescendingly agrees might be informally associated with the United States. He couldn't join theirs he said because it would be yet another tool of Western imperialism only American this time instead of British. It all fell through in the end but it's nice to know that the Americans were hiding this up their sleeve. And we think it's only the Arabs who are disloyal and untrustworthy!

April 5th

Another three months have passed and I am still in the villa. Amin is working on the gardens now and I told him to leave them and finish the rest first but he says he can't because the three fountains Simon has commissioned need a water supply to them and he doesn't want to dig up the house again after he has finished it. Words fail me. I don't understand why when I sit with Amin almost every evening he never tells me anything unless I ask him a direct question. Perhaps it has something to do with the way they view women in their culture. I sometimes wonder why I love him when he is so backward in his thinking. We do love each other though but we still don't talk about it; it's a strange relationship. I am going to build up my courage and confront him one day. I'll leave it until the palace is completely finished and who knows when that will be.

April 24th

Nasser is attending a conference in Bandung. That's somewhere at the other side of the world. It's some African Arab thing so no Western countries are there.

April 28th

According to the newspapers Nasser was treated like a celebrity at this conference. Of course he had been cosying up to all the leaders of the third world countries long before he even got there. If they hadn't already met up with him in Egypt before the conference Nasser called on them on his way over there to crawl round them.

Once he got there he adopted a policy of mediation between the pro-West and the pro-Soviet factions by addressing what he said was the problem of the oppression of colonialism in Africa and Asia. He spoke on the need to avoid all international defence alliances and instead supported the promotion of self-rule and nationalism. He got a lot of support from China whose Premier recommended that Khrushchev treat Nasser with kid gloves and if possible should try to secure him as an ally. I thought that a bit odd because Nasser is definitely no Communist. Simon says that it's because a lot of people are looking to Nasser now as someone who is capable of doing a lot of damage to Western interests in the Middle East and that would indirectly benefit the Communist movement. I don't think this conference actually achieved anything other than to place Nasser centre stage as one of the youngest global leaders and the one with the biggest mouth.

May 6th

Nasser is back in Cairo and more full of himself than ever. He is presenting a whole new image and seems a lot more self-confident after this boost to his ego. When he got back to Egypt a few days ago he was welcomed home by crowds of people lining the streets and he has been widely heralded in the press for his achievements in the conference. He has a new foreign policy now which he calls 'positive neutralism' and which I call doing nothing on the surface whilst trying to play all sides off against each other under the table. He is still speaking a lot about defence pacts being nothing other than veiled colonialism and Arab disunity being a consequence of British meddling. He never explains that though. No wonder; it's obvious to everyone that Arab disunity comes from their inherent jealousy of each other and has nothing to do with us at all. I think he is trying to get the Saudis on his side which shouldn't be difficult as their rulers are already hereditary enemies of both Jordan and Iraq. That's Arab families for you!

May 30th

We are moving into the palace tomorrow. Simon cannot find a single excuse why we shouldn't. We are taking most of the furniture from the villa for Simon's private rooms but I have nothing at all to put into my studio. I am still banned from leaving Luxor due to Simon's irrational fear of war.

June 2nd

Maybe it was worth the wait after all. The palace is much more comfortable than when I inhabited it the last time and all the electrics and plumbing are functioning beautifully. Even Mamdouh and his wife seem happy here. The upper gardens are finished but there is still a vast are of uncultivated wasteland between them and the Nile. We can get round to doing something with that later but right now I want to enjoy living in a house that no longer resembles a building site.

August 3rd

I had secretly been planning a house warming party but as soon as I told Simon he made me cancel it. He said this is no time for parties seeing as we are on the brink of war. I can see no sign of this war that he believes is coming but has no evidence for and I think this time his gut feelings have got it wrong.

"There is no point having such a beautiful ballroom if we are never going to use it" I argued but when he countered with "Have you got any friends to fill it with?" I had no answer. I don't have more than a handful even if I include all of Simon's colleagues and I was relying on Barbara Valentine bringing down a crowd of her friends from Cairo. It's very sad to have to admit that after all this time in Egypt I don't know anyone well enough to call them an old acquaintance let alone a close friend. As soon as Simon lets me out of Luxor I am going to Cairo and Alexandria to remedy this terrible situation.

September 5th

Nasser has ordered the tightening of the blockade on Israeli shipping and restricted the use of airspace over Aqaba. "Is this in preparation for the war that Simon is expecting?"

September 21st

The Israelis are putting extra troops on the Egyptian border. Nasser is still trying to buy weapons from the West but is getting nowhere. There won't be any war if the Egyptian army has no arms to fight one with.

September 27th

Nasser has surprised us all and concluded a huge armaments agreement with Czechoslovakia. He is really showing himself off now as the great Arab leader who defied the West. If the balance of power between Egypt and Israel is more or less equal this could bring the possibility of war much nearer. This Egyptian purchase of arms has sent shock waves through the West. The Soviets must have had a hand in it and Britain is enraged by the increase of Soviet interference over here. This is an ominous development threatening to put an end to our influence in the Middle East. (That last bit is Simon's thoughts on the matter not mine).

October 1st

I had yet another fight with Simon today about him incarcerating me in Luxor. "There is no war happening at the moment" I argued "and Cairo is absolutely devoid of street riots. The whole country seems to be in love with Nasser these days and there is barely a demonstrator to be seen."

"This is the calm before the storm Nancy" he argued back, "and we have no idea when that storm will come. We only know that it is brewing. It would be very foolish to put yourself at risk for the sake of buying a few pieces of furniture. Egypt and Israel are in an arms race and France is supplying Israel just

as fast as the Eastern Bloc is supplying Nasser. The influx of all this advanced weaponry alters the balance of power on almost a daily basis. Israel was edgy before but since this Czech arms deal they are shaking more than an earthquake of magnitude eight on the Richter scale. They think Egypt has made some sort of secret alliance with Jordan and Syria and they believe they haven't got much time left if they want to make a successful hit on Egypt's army. The Americans have offered to intervene to try and solve the problem between the Arabs and Israel and have even tried bribing Nasser. They are offering to finance the High Dam if in return he will make some gesture towards peace. They expected that competing for Nasser's loyalty would be expensive but they weren't prepared for him to turn their money away so they were shocked when Nasser told them he was unable to accept their offer. It would mean siding with the West he told them when the country has a policy of neutrality. Of course this is completely irrational because the alternative is a war with a very unpredictable outcome. Unless of course Nasser isn't looking for peace at all. When Nasser's priority is to promote Egypt as the world's number one anti-Zionist state and himself as the leader of all the Arabs peace is hardly likely anyway. Who knows what the truth is. I've heard that Nasser is an intensely secretive man who usually keeps his true opinions to himself. People in his own government say he has changed since becoming President and he makes most decisions on his own without consulting them. If they don't know what's going on then how can we, so the only thing to do is prepare for the worst and stay out of the way. We don't want to be caught shopping in Cairo when war breaks out."

How can I hope to reason with that? The man is paranoid.

December 1st

What's the use of a diary when I have no life to write about? I don't even see Amin every day now that most of the work has been completed. I know he must want to see me but either he has no excuse to give to his wife for why he still needs to come here every night or more likely he is protecting me from Simon.

He knows if Simon were to find out about us I would be packed off back to England immediately. Maybe he thinks coming here too often would make Simon suspicious. It wouldn't; Simon is not very intuitive but Amin probably doesn't know that. Not that there is anything to be suspicious about. There is nothing physical in our relationship. Despite never speaking about it our love for each other does exist I'm sure of it and it might be possible for someone other than us to see it. Not Simon though; as I said he is not very perceptive. I am thinking about commissioning a new building; maybe a gazebo or a summerhouse. Amin would have to come every day then.

December 10th

Britain has asked Jordan to join the Baghdad Pact and although we know King Hussein would like to he thinks it will put his throne in danger. That Voice of the Arabs radio station is a real menace. Every time they get a whiff of Jordan allying themselves with the British they come on the air within minutes with their calls for demonstrations. There have been some protests today because of them and maybe there will be more tomorrow.

December 28th

I can't believe it. After all the fuss Simon made about me wanting to go to Cairo he is now taking me to Alexandria next week. I would have thought that if there is a war Alex would be a far worse place to be than Cairo. Anyway it's all arranged. We are booked into the Cecil Hotel. I know Simon would have preferred to stay with Lord and Lady Valentine but that is out of the question and I told Simon so in no uncertain terms. I am very excited because Amin says I should be able to find even better quality antiques in Alex than I did in Cairo although he says I should be prepared to pay a bit more for them.