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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 THIRTY



I am back in Luxor and still no nearer to finding a builder. I toyed with the idea of employing a team of individual specialists and overseeing them myself but Carlo said that wouldn't be sensible because one job affects another and I need someone who knows what they are doing to look after the entire project. Carmen speaks to me nearly every day about approaching Mohamed Fawy and it looks more and more likely that I will have to do it. If I could only read the final part of the diary before speaking to him I would be better placed to make a decision but it's no good me dreaming about that because the lawyer is adamant that it won't be happening. To keep myself busy and fool myself into thinking that I am making progress I go across to the palace every day and try to do what I can. I have put most of the furniture into the ballroom and what I couldn't get in there I put in the dining room. Islam has done a sterling job of cleaning the place up and it looks much better already.

I still have plenty of time on my hands and have started following the political situation again. I see the Egyptians are back to playing their name game. The last protest march was called 'Correcting the Path' and it was a massive demonstration even though all the Islamist parties stayed away from it. I have no idea why that was and no one can tell me.

By the beginning of October I was completely out of options and Carmen suggested inviting Mohamed Fawy for tea at her place and then I could pop over and meet him as if by accident. This all sounded a bit too clandestine for me but Carlo thought it was a good idea so I eventually gave in and agreed.

When the day came I was very nervous. I don't know if it was because I was about to meet one of my Egyptian relatives at last or because I know I am a terrible actress and was about to play a major part in this ridiculous charade of Carmen's. Anyway I went next door purportedly to borrow some sugar, (the old excuses are always the best) about an hour after I had been told Mohamed would be coming but unfortunately I arrived there at exactly the same time as he did. Carlo answered the door and looked completely phased by the change of plan.

"Ah Mohamed, late as usual" he stuttered ushering us both into the house. "Have you two met?"

I almost laughed because Carlo is an even worse actor than I am and his words were coming out sounding incredibly rehearsed. Fortunately Carmen appeared out of the kitchen and saved the situation.

"Oh hello Nancy, have you come round for something special or is it only a social call. We are about to have tea so come and join us if you have time. Carlo and I were just talking about that demonstration last night. Over twenty dead and hundreds injured; terrible isn't it. It looks like the army turned on the protestors for no reason. What do you think about it Mohamed?"

Poor Mohamed had barely sat down and was already being put on the spot but he didn't seem all that bothered.

"I try not to think about Carmen" he answered dolefully. "I was not in favour of the revolution and I never wanted to get rid of Mubarak, but as we have done it I am quite happy to let the army take over. If you want the honest truth I think most people would say the same. The army are doing their best to make the country safe and they are preparing for elections as fast as they can but these things take time. Egyptians have no patience. I personally don't care if there are no elections because I am not convinced Arabs know how a proper democracy should operate. Look at what is going on now for instance. The elections are only a few weeks away and we have only just got to see the new reforms and I have no idea about each party's manifesto. I only know that we have two big Islamic parties standing and another lot who are made up from Mubarak's old National Democrats. I am fed up of hearing about it and I don't watch the news much so I'm probably not the right person to ask. I have better things to do with my time than worry about things I can do nothing about. "

"Yes, I know you must be a very busy man. Have you much work on at the moment because Nancy here is looking for a project manager. She has inherited Djourff Palace and wants to renovate it; isn't that right Nancy?"

"Yes" I muttered. This wasn't the way that I had intended to go about approach-

ing Mohamed but as the expression on his face hadn't changed maybe this direct line of asking would give me an idea of how the land lay.

"Your grandfather built it didn't he Mohamed so probably Nancy couldn't get anyone better" Carmen continued, being far pushier than she should have.

"Yes" Mohamed replied, "but I have never been in there and know nothing more about the place than anyone else does. I can take a look if you want Nancy and maybe give you an estimate. I do have a lot on at the moment so I can't do it this week."

"Well that's settled" Carmen said answering on my behalf. "Lucky you came round Nancy. What was it you came for by the way? You never did tell us."

I felt stupid saying "a cup of sugar" so instead I told her it was nothing more than a social call and I needed to get going now because I hadn't realised she had visitors and anyway I had things to do. After fixing a time with Mohamed for next Monday I made a hasty retreat hoping that I could trust Carmen not to say too much after I had gone.

Once back home I pondered on this development of having a member of my own family working for me. Mohamed hadn't said anything so maybe he didn't know the whole story of his grandfather and I wouldn't have the embarrassment of discussing it with him. Or maybe he did know and just hadn't wanted to speak about it. I started wondering if this Mohamed resembled my grandfather in any way because if he did I could understand why my grandmother had fallen for him. Mohamed is a good looking man in a pharaonic kind of way. Not so much classically handsome but he has something many women would find attractive. I can't put my finger on what it is exactly although it might be his eyes. They are so full of expression that they seem to draw you right inside of them and whenever anyone is speaking he looks directly at them as though what they have to say is really worth listening to. Other Egyptians I have met don't tend to do that; they are always more interested in what they have to say themselves than listening to anyone else.

Over the next week I put Mohamed right out of my mind and refused to discuss

him with Carmen who from the way she talked you would have thought she was looking for a husband for me rather than a builder. When he turned up late the following Monday and wanted to rush round the palace as fast as possible I began to doubt that he was the right man for the job after all. When he asked me directly how much money I had I decided he was far too inquisitive and I didn't need someone like that. When he saw my face he must have known he had said something wrong and immediately embarked on a rather pathetic justification for it.

"I need to know" he explained, "if you want a perfect job doing or not because if you don't I will get you someone else. I don't do cheap work. You will need somewhere between fifteen and twenty million Egyptian pounds, possibly more, to put this place right and when you have finished I doubt the place will fetch more than twenty five. Are you prepared for that?"

I was about to tell him that none of this was his business and he was only here to give me a quote when he jumped into his car and drove off without giving me a chance to say anything. He hadn't given me any idea when he would be coming back which I thought was very rude but whilst I wanted to forget all about him and look for someone else something told me that underneath his arrogant veneer he did know what he was doing.

As I heard nothing more from Mohamed for the next two weeks I thought he must not want the job for some reason and I started asking around for someone else. I couldn't find anyone better and was just about to call Mohamed back when at the beginning of November he turned up with his quotation.

"I think eighteen million will cover it" he said. He had brought me no paperwork and no individual costings so I had no idea how he had reached this figure of above two million dollars which sounded like a lot of money to me.

"How do you know?" I asked. "Shouldn't I have some sort of itemised list with this? I can't just take a number out of the air like that."

"I know from experience" was the only answer I got.

This unprofessionalism gives me the impression that Mohamed is not particu-

larly clever and I was just pondering on that when as if from nowhere he came up with a brilliant idea.

"I have been thinking" he said. "If you turn the palace into a hotel you might get your money back. Either that or you could run it yourself. You would need maybe another four million Egyptian to do it because you would have to put in more bathrooms and change some of the furniture but I think it would be worth it. You'll never sell it as a house unless you are very lucky and some rich Arab comes along which I don't think is likely do you."

I told him to go away and I would think about it and let him know. On the surface it seems a good solution but if this revolution carries on there won't be any tourists to open a hotel for. The clashes in Tahrir Square are becoming violent again and the Security Forces are back to using tear gas to control them; hardly a good environment for tourists.

By mid-November the number of protestors in Cairo was back up to what it had been when the revolution first started ten months ago and the demonstrators were once again being beaten and shot at. A journalist on Al Jazeera news reported that the Egyptians were now threatening another general strike. All this seems somewhat premature because elections have been scheduled and I don't see the point of demonstrating because they are not free and fair before they have even taken place. There may be more to it that I don't understand and I may have missed something because recently I have been more concerned about the upcoming auction of my paintings than Egyptian politics. I only check into the news every now and then and usually only the BBC which doesn't give all the details.

The elections were held towards the end of the month on the exact same day as my paintings were being sold at Sotheby's. As I was on the telephone the whole day with my Uncle Julius I had no time to follow the goings on in Cairo. Disappointingly the six Reynolds made a total of only just over a million so after paying the commission I have even less than one million left. The fake Hogarth did not reach its reserve and was not sold. Calculating everything I have at

today's exchange rate I have twelve million Egyptian pounds. Even if I sell the other painting I will still be short of money. There are some pieces of furniture in the hotel that I can't use and all the vintage clothing but at a guess they will only bring in another half million at the most so I still won't have enough. I need to speak to Mohamed to see where I can economise. I called him but he was busy so I turned on the television to see that all the news channels were predicting a landslide victory for the Islamic parties. Turnout had been high and there were no reports of irregularities apart from some campaigning outside the polling stations which is apparently not allowed.

It was a few days before the official results were announced but as predicted the Moslem Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party took almost half the seats and the Al Noor 'salafist' party took another quarter which means the Islamists will have a strong majority in Parliament. Despite the Egyptians having held their first democratic elections in years they are still not happy. There is a lot of controversy over the new reforms and the only thing that everyone agrees on is that the president's term in office will be limited to two four year terms.

I still haven't spoken to Mohamed about his hotel idea so I tried calling him to tell him I thought I would go for it.

"I was going to come today" he said "but everyone has been busy with the elections and I didn't have all the prices for you. The last one from the plumber came a few minutes ago so I will see you tomorrow morning."

Next day I waited until six in the evening and had just about given up on Mohamed when he showed up with a tiny piece of paper with his final quotation of twenty two million. When I told him I only had twelve he wasn't impressed.

"You can't make a hotel with that" he said. "Maybe we can rebuild it as a house and leave all the furniture restoration until later but you will definitely have trouble selling it. The villa should bring you four million so you could try selling that. You won't be a lot short then."

"I can" I told him, "but not before I complete the restoration work on the

palace. It's a long story but basically my grandmother will only release the properties for me to sell after I have finished the work. Like you say, even if I do sell the villa I will still be short. Can't you cut back anywhere?"

"No" he replied curtly. "I can't cut back anywhere. What I can do is wait for some of my money if that helps" he offered, "so do you want me to start or not?"

"Yes start" I agreed rashly knowing the work had to be done but not knowing how I was going to get the rest of the money together to pay for it. If Mohamed really is prepared to do the work and let me pay him after the hotel is sold there is no point worrying about it and getting myself all worked up.

Carmen and Carlo went back to Spain for Christmas leaving me no one to talk all this over with. My lawyer still wouldn't release the third volume of the diaries to me because I didn't have what he called a professional estimate nor did I have the money in an Egyptian bank account. The opening of a bank account in Luxor proved to be incredibly difficult despite my having a substantial amount of money to deposit there and it wasn't until after the New Year that I had the bulk of my money in Egypt and was able to give Mohamed the six million deposit he was asking for. The second I handed it over I started getting cold feet. There were no tourists coming to Egypt these days not even at Christmas, their peak season. There was nothing I could do except hope that once a president and government were in place, order would be restored and the tourists would come back. I thought things were moving in the right direction when the elected representatives of the People's Assembly met at the end of January and the armed forces gave them legislative authority and partially lifted the state of emergency but the tour operators were still not recommending Egypt as being a safe place to come on holiday.

The work on Djorff Place began and Mohamed came every evening to see it and to talk things through with me. "This is what it must have been like with my grandmother and Amin" I thought, "although unlike her I'm not about to embark on an affair with my builder."

Well that's what I told myself anyway. For all his annoying little ways I do like

him and I enjoy talking to him and if I am honest I find him attractive despite my repeatedly assuring myself that I don't. An affair with my project manager is the last thing I need. Not only is he an Egyptian and a relative his culture is so far removed from mine we could never be compatible. He also has a very controlling nature and wants everything his own way despite it being my property he is working on. I find this extremely irritating and even more so because he is nearly always right.

It was the first day of February when things got out of hand. I remember it because it was the same day as the disaster at Port Said football stadium where a large number of people were killed. Mohamed came very late that night and I had already drunk half a bottle of wine with dinner and was starting on my third beer. Instead of talking about the work as he usually did he started speaking about how attractive he finds me and because I was feeling lightheaded from the alcohol I was completely taken in by it all. These Egyptian men certainly know how to flatter a girl with all their romantic talk. No wonder so many English women fall for them and it looks like I am to be no exception. We ended up in bed together which after he had left and I had sobered up I realised was the most stupid thing I could have done. I am now very ashamed of myself and dread having to face him. The man is working for me for one thing and for another I now believe he hasn't the slightest idea that we are related. I had better try to continue on as normal and forget it ever happened and hope that Mohamed will do the same.

I was out of luck; Mohamed was not about to forget it. In fact the whole sordid incident appeared to have some deep significance for him. When he came round the next evening he said he thought he was in love with me. He apologised for last night and told me that this would not happen again; he would not be sleeping with me again he said unless we got married! Honestly these Egyptians do not understand that we Europeans do not look upon every brief sexual encounter as a prelude to a lifelong commitment. Getting out of this wasn't going to be easy and after speaking to him for hours on the subject I am not sure that I want

to get out of it. I know I had promised myself not to sleep with Mohamed again but now he is denying me the opportunity to do so I suddenly want to. This has now become a tricky situation as Mohamed seems to think we are in a relationship and all I wanted was a fling. How I have got into this mess beggars belief. The next three months saw a lot of work done on the palace and saw our affair becoming much more of a reality. I just drifted into it without realising. I wanted sex which he wasn't giving me and I think that was part of the attraction. I am sure if we sleep together again I will come to my senses and drop him although how that will leave our working relationship I dread to think.

As the country prepares for presidential elections the tourists have slowly started to come back, albeit not in large numbers. I have nagging doubts that I will be able to sell a hotel in this climate let alone operate one and towards the end of March I finally expressed my fears to Mohamed.

"What if I can't sell the palace?" I asked him. "I might end up owing you a fortune and you could be waiting a long time to get your money."

"Yes I know that" he answered, "and I think the best thing would be for us to go into partnership. If you can't sell it and you have to run it yourself you will be in trouble. You can't speak Arabic and getting all the licences as a foreigner won't be easy. An Islamic government could bring in new laws at any time and you won't know how to get round them. If you put the property in joint names and I put in the bulk of the money for the restoration work I think that would be fair and you will be safe. We are getting on very well together and even if nothing comes of our personal relationship I think we would make excellent business partners."

I am not so sure about this. Mohamed is very controlling and not that easy to work with. I can't put half the property in his name anyway because it isn't even in my name yet. I told him this but he didn't seem concerned.

"I trust you" he said. "I am sure you won't cheat me. You are English not Egyptian."

I have to marvel at how almost all foreigners think all the English are honoura-

ble. They never believe that we have our own share of cheaters and liars just like everyone else. I told Mohamed to give me some time and I would think about it and let him know.

In April when the Administrative Court suspended a constituent assembly previously appointed in March without giving any clear reasons and the Brotherhood claimed it to be politically motivated it looked like there could be more trouble. The tourist numbers dropped off again and although everyone tells me it is because the summer season has started and it is too hot I am not totally convinced. Even the complete lifting of the decades old state of emergency has done little to allay my fears. I am seriously thinking of taking Mohamed up on his offer but that will mean telling him everything about our grandparents.

I called the lawyer again. I need the full story before I do anything. After speaking with him and showing him my bank account he came to the palace and took a look at how the work was going. As he was leaving he handed me the last volume of the diary.

"I am satisfied that you will do what your grandmother is asking so I will let you have this. Please do not let me down."

I could have kissed him. I will read this at once and then I will know what I should do about Mohamed.