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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 FOUR



Now I have read all three of the diaries I can see that my grandmother was not a well woman. She was living in a fantasy world most of the time and I have no way of telling truth from fiction. What upset me the most was the effect she had on my father. She was clearly very selfish and she put her own feelings above all else without stopping to think how she was destroying the lives of everyone around her. How she could profess to love Amin yet let him bear the consequences for her own evil actions beggars' belief. I wonder if Mohamed knows that his grandfather was convicted of a crime he did not commit and is telling him going to alter our relationship. That's something to think about but I know I will have to tell him sooner or later and only time will tell what his reaction will be. I am no nearer to knowing what became of my mother either. I always felt that she had made her own decision to leave but where she went and why she didn't send any messages after she left I am still no wiser. The diary hasn't helped much and in many ways has done exactly the opposite. There are many unanswered questions but after coming to the conclusion that there is no way of finding the answers I decided to forget about the past for the moment and concentrate on the present. My immediate concern is to complete the hotel and there will be plenty of time to look into my ancestry after that. I have more or less decided to sell the hotel anyway. It is going to be years before the tourism industry gets back to what it was under Mubarak and I am sure it will never be the same again. Egypt is never out of the news these days and not in a good way. At the beginning of the month Mubarak was sentenced to life imprisonment because of his failure to stop the killings during the revolution although he and his two sons were acquitted of corruption charges because of something to do with the statute of limitations having expired. There was supposed to be a constitutional assembly voted in to draft a new constitution but it never happened because dozens of parliament members walked out saying that the Islamists were trying to dominate the panel. If Egypt becomes an Islamic state tourism will be affected forever and selling a luxury hotel isn't going to be easy if that happens. Anyway it hasn't happened yet. The military are still well and truly in

charge and they have re-imposed martial law and given their officers the right to arrest civilians at will and try them in the military courts. They say these measures will remain in effect until the new constitution is in place. The Council of Armed Forces are choosing the people who are going to write it now that parliament has been dissolved but meanwhile there is an interim constitution which from what I can see gives the armed forces the power to do whatever they want. According to this interim constitution, a permanent constitution must be written within three months and be subject to a referendum fifteen days after that. When a permanent constitution is approved, a parliamentary election will be held to replace the dissolved parliament. This doesn't sound as though it will take only three months; it could take years and as long as the army is running Egypt confidence in the country has some chance of being restored.

Work on the palace is slow now that the temperature has soared. Mohamed is spending far more money than my budget allows and if he carries on I will have no option other than to bring him in as a partner. We never talk about it but I get the impression he thinks I have already accepted him as a partner in the hotel although I haven't formally agreed to anything as yet.

By the end of the month when Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood was sworn in as Egypt's first democratically elected president I started to panic. Although President Obama encourages a lot of rhetoric about the Islamic World and the West being in harmony everyone knows this is a naive and simplistic viewpoint. The reality is nobody from Europe is prepared to go on holiday to a country that is operating under Islamic law no matter how noble it sounds to say that they are. I was hoping Ahmed Shafik would have won the election and the country could go back to a democratic version of the Mubarak days but sadly he was defeated, albeit by a very narrow margin. Anyway that's the end of the armed forces running the country and all I can hope for now is that things settle down and the tourists come back. I am not hopeful; not only because of the fear from the Islamists but also because the country is completely polarised. The new president said he was going to overthrow the military's edict that dis-

solved the elected parliament and he tried to call them back but the constitutional court immediately negated his decision to do that. It's hardly a way to get anything done and with two distinctly opposing sides countermanding each other's every decision Egypt is at a standstill right now.

In August Mohamed and I went to Cairo to see a furniture restorer and an expert in stained glass. The price for all this work is staggering and Mohamed doesn't seem to care. All he wants is the best regardless of the cost. This desire for excellence in his work does not extend to him spending money on his personal comfort. We stayed in a very basic hotel on Pyramids Road but I have to admit that once I got over my initial shock at the state of the place I had a great time. There was a fantastic night club on the roof with an out of tune band and overweight belly dancers and a rather seedy disco in the basement where I danced the night away with Mohamed looking on disapprovingly. Whenever I start to enjoy myself Mohamed always tries to make me feel I am doing something wrong and this culture difference is beginning to get me down. Apart from that we managed to get along very well and we did a lot of work while we were in Cairo without having any major disagreements. While we were up there the new cabinet was announced and there are only six Brotherhood members in it out of the thirty five so that looks like a move in the right direction.

When we got back to Luxor work on the hotel began progressing a little bit quicker and I forgot all about my fears of not getting guests until there were some ridiculous protests early in September about an American film called the 'Innocence of Muslims.' I haven't seen it but from what I understand Salafists don't approve of it and made a big fuss trying to get it banned. I don't see why the Islamists can't just boycott the film and leave the rest of the world alone to watch it if that's what they want but it seems like they can't. Some of their demonstrators scaled the walls of the American Embassy and tore down the American flag replacing it with the black flag of the Islamic movement. One Salafist Muslim cleric issued a fatwa and called on the Muslim youth in America and Europe to kill the director, the producer and the actors and anyone else

who helped or promoted the film. Another one publicly tore up the Bible and threw the torn pages onto the street. This all made big news on CNN and Egypt was once again declared an unsafe place for travellers. If this is what having an Islamic government means I have to wonder how I can possibly run a hotel in a country like this. Meanwhile on the other side the Supreme Administrative Court issued a ruling supporting the right of former members of the National Democratic Party to run in parliamentary elections. I think they might have dissolved part of the parliament again saying something about unconstitutional elections but I am not sure about that. The People's Assembly seems to be in and out of power every few days and I can't keep track of it.

The country is becoming more and more divided into two opposing factions and I doubt their problems will be solved by the time I complete work on the hotel. There is still no constitution and doctors have gone on strike now but for what I don't know. Morsi has ordered a pardon for anyone who has already been convicted or who is still under investigation or on trial for unlawful acts committed in the name of supporting the revolution which means a lot of dangerous felons could soon be back on the streets. On the other hand twenty four of Mubarak's allies who were supposedly responsible for the 'Battle of the Camels' during the February of the revolution last year were acquitted and a nationwide protest was called for. In order to defuse the public's anger over the acquittals in this Battle of the Camels case President Morsi ordered Egypt's prosecutor general to leave his position but he point blank refused to step down. All this brought about more clashes in Tahrir Square between critics and supporters of President Morsi with the liberal activists ending up by accusing the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to take over the country. Finally Morsi backed down from his decision to remove the country's prosecutor in order to avoid a confrontation with the judiciary. All this was reported in the local press as a 'misunderstanding which has now been resolved' although the international news stations made it into something much bigger.

Throughout November secular groups continued to walk out of the consti-

tutional assembly because they believed that it would impose strict Islamic practices while members of the Muslim Brotherhood continued to deny these allegations. Protesters returned to the streets still demanding political reforms and the prosecution of officials blamed for killing demonstrators during last year's revolution but there were also a growing number who were out there to protest against Morsi and the increased influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. By mid November the protests had turned violent.

On the twenty second of November Morsi issued a declaration finally dismissing the prosecutor general. The decree which he said was done to prevent the courts from dissolving the Constitutional Assembly was not received well. Protests were held outside the court building where ElBaradei called for immediate withdrawal of the decree. On his Twitter feed ElBaradei wrote 'Morsi today usurped all state powers and appointed himself Egypt's new pharaoh' which I thought was a bit extreme until Mohamed went through with me exactly what is in Morsi's declaration that angers his opponents to such a degree.

"He has given himself the power to to legislate without judicial oversight" Mohamed explained. "Nobody will be allowed to review his acts until a new parliament is elected so any constitutional laws made since Morsi assumed power cannot be challenged, appealed or cancelled by any governmental body. On top of that he is the only one who is allowed to appoint a public prosecutor from now on. He wants to re-open the investigations into the killing of protestors last year which most people have no objection to but he has authorised himself to take any measures he likes to preserve the spirit of the revolution. It is very ambiguous but if you read it carefully you will see that Morsi has given himself more power than Mubarak ever had. ElBaradei is right; we have a new pharaoh running Egypt now."

The next day protests erupted all over the country over Morsi's declaration while he and his supporters defended it by saying it was only a step on the path leading Egypt to freedom and democracy. The judiciary did not agree and promptly went on strike. Shares on the stock market plummeted as once again Egypt

became headline news. Five hundred people were injured, a fifteen year old boy was killed and three women claimed to be victims of sexual assault during the ensuing riots. Every day numbers in Tahrir grew and it was though the country had gone right back to the days of the revolution. The people were demanding that Morsi either withdraw his declaration or resign. I read Morsi's response in TIME magazine in which he stated; 'If we had a constitution, then all of what I have said or done last week, will stop. When we have a constitution, what I have issued will stop immediately'. It sounds reasonable on the face of it but when you read between the lines you can see Morsi is nothing more than a tin pot dictator who is way overstepping his position. Meanwhile the protests went on and dozens of police officers, backed by trucks firing tear gas, arrested numerous demonstrators, some of whom they beat up pretty badly. As the protests mounted over Morsi's decision to grant himself sweeping powers until the constitution was ratified in a referendum, the panel writing the constitution completed their deliberations and readied themselves for a vote. The new constitution included Sharia law as the main source of legislation and made Islam a state religion. Liberals and Christians accused the Islamists of trying to impose their own vision on a country where the people are not all Muslim as well as limiting freedom of speech and refusing to move forward with establishing equality between men and women. Human rights groups and international experts agreed that the constitution was full of holes and ambiguities and once again thousands of Egyptians took to the streets.

In the middle of all this Mohamed asked me to marry him.

I do want to marry Mohamed despite our cultural differences but I have to tell him everything about my family first and see if he still wants to marry me after that. For this I needed to give myself time so like my grandmother I promised to give him my answer on New Year's Eve.

A lot happened in Egypt during the first week of December. Morsi announced that there would be a referendum on the new constitution on the fifteenth and his supporters came out in force trying to rally support. In retaliation several



thousand of Morsi's opponents congregated in Tahrir Square to oppose the draft constitution and what they described as Morsi's power grab. Human Rights activists then accused the government and members of the Brotherhood of paying people to beat protesters and sexually assault women. Judges announced that they would refuse to perform their customary role as election supervisors which would effectively block the referendum but despite the Judges Club strike the Supreme Judicial Council said 'no; judges would be supervising the constitutional referendum'.

The demonstrations became even more violent. The headquarters of the Freedom and Justice Party was badly damaged and protestors marched on the Presidential Palace, calling it 'the last warning.' After cutting through a barbed-wire barrier near to the Palace the police once again began firing tear gas at them.

All kinds of conspiracy theories were rife and it was difficult to know what to believe. A complaint was filed charging all the former presidential candidates plus ElBaradei, the Wafd Party president and the head of the Judges Club with espionage and incitement to overthrow the government. The person who filed the complaint claimed that the so called conspirators had met with the former Israeli Foreign Minister and agreed with her to fabricate a crisis following which they all got together at the Wafd Party headquarters to execute this pretend 'Zionist plot.' I didn't believe a word of this and nor did Mohamed who told me we were far too busy to waste our time worrying about a lot of false allegations anyway. Actually I wasn't that busy because Mohamed in his usual fashion had completely taken over so I had plenty of time to watch the goings on in Cairo and worry about how it was all affecting the future of tourism.

Towards the end of the week more demonstrators were out and many of them were demanding the 'fall of the regime.' The protestors vastly outnumbered the police who after deploying tear gas beat a hasty retreat. On seeing that there was no police presence Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood held counter protests at the Presidential Palace, clashing with anti-Morsi protesters in street battles that saw seven people killed and hundreds injured. This was becoming worse than

the original revolution now and no one seemed to know what to do. Morsi met with Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, chief of the Egyptian Army, to discuss how to deal with the situation and how they could stabilise the country while at the same time protect the ethos of the revolution. Morsi went on the air and publicly criticised the opposition for trying to incite violence against his legitimacy and inviting his opponents to a common dialogue. This they rejected because Morsi remained determined to press forward with the referendum which was what had plunged Egypt into the crisis in the first place. The only thing the government did was to impose a curfew which hadn't worked during the revolution and I didn't think would work now. By the end of the week Morsi had become increasingly isolated even within his own government. Opposition leaders continued with their refusal to negotiate with him until he cancelled his November decree and called off the referendum on the constitution. The Egyptian newspapers were reporting that all those suspected of protesting against the Muslim Brotherhood were being tortured in a secret facility run by the Brotherhood in Heliopolis which I assumed to be another conspiracy theory although Mohamed told me it was more than likely true. Morsi was determined to go ahead with the referendum 'even if it meant imposing martial law to secure the streets' he said although he did eventually annul his November decree and replace it with a modified version. Despite this annulment the general prosecutor, the one who had previously been dismissed, was not reinstated so the opposition continued on with their protests. In response, the Alliance of Islamist Forces threatened to hold rival demonstrations in support of the referendum and the president under the slogan 'Yes to legitimacy'.

In the end the referendum went ahead in two stages; the fifteenth and the twenty second of December. After all the protests nearly two-thirds of voters supposedly supported the new constitution although the turnout was very low which is shocking after all those demonstrations. The election commission announced the result live on Nile TV and explained that Parliamentary elections must now take place within two months.

Shortly after the announcement Morsi appeared on television to say that 'the Egyptians voting against the constitutional referendum were within their rights, because the Egypt of the revolution, Egypt's people and its elected president could never feel annoyed by active patriotic opposition. We don't want to go back to the era of the one opinion and fabricated fake majorities' he said. He then went on to add that 'there have been mistakes here and there, and I bear responsibility, but no matter what the hardships of the past were, I see it as the pain of birthing the new Egypt. It is truly the dawn of a new Egypt, which has risen and is now shining.'

Of course Obama had to say something. In a statement he noted that many Egyptians had voiced deep concerns about the substance of the constitution and the constitutional process and he ended it by stating that 'President Morsi, as the democratically elected leader of Egypt, has a special responsibility to move forward in a way that recognises the urgent need to bridge divisions, build trust, and broaden support for the political process.'

I doubt Obama has a clue about how things operate in Egypt. Hardly anyone here believes the results of the referendum but nevertheless it seems that Egypt is about to become a full on Islamic state which does not bode well for tourism. I needed to speak with Mohamed because if he wants to withdraw his offer of marriage or worse still cancel our business arrangement altogether I will have to think hard about what I can do. On the morning of the last day of the year I sat down to have a serious talk to him and put him completely in the picture. "I know I said I would give you my answer tonight but before I can properly answer you about our future together there are many things you need to know about me" I started cautiously. "If after hearing them you no longer want to marry me I will understand."

"Go ahead; I'm listening" Mohamed said, not appearing to take what I was about to say very seriously, "but I doubt you can tell me anything that will make me change my mind. We all have past history but we all move forward from it. We can't hold our past actions against each other. Anyway I'm listening so

please get on with saying what you have to say and then we can forget all about it."

Ignoring his debonair attitude I started my story.

"Well firstly and most importantly you need to know that we are related; your grandfather was also my grandfather."

"What absolute rubbish" he interrupted.

"Please let me finish and you can have your say later" I continued annoyed at his unwillingness to accept anything I was saying. "It's all there in my grandmother's diaries. You can read them yourself if you want. Anyway as I was saying; your grandfather and my grandmother had a long affair during the time the palace was being built. Eventually Simon, my grandmother's husband found out. Instead of asking for a divorce Simon threatened to have my grandmother committed to a lunatic asylum. When she heard that she went into a panic and shot him leaving Amin, your grandfather to take the blame. My grandmother left the country swearing to come back once Amin was released from prison. He never was released; he was hanged for a murder that had actually been committed by my grandmother. Soon after my grandmother left Egypt she realised she was pregnant with Amin's child and before he was hanged my grandmother wrote to him and told him. He did write back to her but I don't know what he said because my grandmother destroyed his letter. That's it in a nutshell. If you want the details you will have to read the diaries for yourself."

To my disbelief Mohamed burst out laughing.

"And you believe all this do you?" he asked.

"Of course I believe it; why shouldn't I?"

"Because none of it is true" he argued. "I am going home now and I will be back later on today to prove it to you. We can have another of these little talks this evening. After that we will go to the party at the Gezira Garden as planned and I will propose to you as planned and you will accept, also as planned. I would like to read your grandmother's diaries though to see how she managed to convince you of all these lies."

"Take them" I said thrusting all three of them into his hands. "I would love you to disprove them but once you have read them you will see that you can't. We can go to the party tonight but I think we should delay making any decisions until you know what you are getting into."

"We'll see" he replied smiling. "I'll see you later; let's say about six o'clock."