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Iris and Ruby

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CHAPTER ONE

I remember.

And even as I say the words aloud in the silent room and hear the whisper dying away in the shadows of the house, I realise that it's not true.

Because I don't, I can't remember.

I am old, and I am beginning to forget things.

Sometimes I'm aware that great tracts of memory have gone, slipping and melting away out of my reach. When I try to recall a particular day, or an entire year, even a damned decade, if I'm lucky there are the bare facts unadorned with colour. More often than otherwise there's nothing at all. A blank.

And when I can remember where I have lived, and who I was living with and why, if I try to conjure up what it was like to be there, the texture of my life and what impelled me to wake up every morning and pace out the journey of the day, I cannot do it. Familiar and even beloved faces have silently melted away, their names and the dates of precious initiations and fond anniversaries and events that once seemed momentous, all collapsed and buried beyond reach.

The disappearing is like the desert itself. Sand blows from the four corners of the earth and it builds up in slow drifts and dun ripples, and it blurs the sharpest, proudest structures, and in the end obliterates them.

This is what's happening to me. The sands of time. (It is a no less accurate image for being a cliché.)

I am eighty-two. I am not afraid of death, which after all can't be far away.

Nor do I fear complete oblivion, because to be oblivious means what it says.

What does frighten me is the halfway stage. I am afraid of reduction. After a lifetime's independence – yes, selfish independence as my daughter would rightly claim – I am terrified of being reduced to childhood once more, to helplessness, to seas of confusion from which the cruel lucid intervals poke up like rock shoals.

I don't want to sit in my chair and be fed spoonfuls of pap by Mamdooh or by Auntie; much less do I want to be handed over to medical professionals who will subject me to well-intentioned geriatric care.

I know what that will be like. I am a doctor myself and as well as remembering too little, I have seen too much.

Now Mamdooh is coming. His leather slippers make a soft swish on the boards of the women's stairway. There is nothing wrong with my hearing. The door creaks open, heavy on its hinges, so that I can see a corner of the pierced screen that hides the gallery from the celebration hall. A light shining through the screen stipples the floor and walls with crescents and stars.

'Good evening, Ma'am Iris,' Mamdooh softly says. The deferential form of address has become so elided, so rubbed with usage that it is a pet name now, Mum-reese. 'Have you been sleeping perhaps?'

'No,' I tell him.

I have been thinking. Turning matters over in my mind.

Mamdooh puts down a tray. A glass of mint tea, sweet and fragrant. A linen napkin, some triangles of sweet pastry that I do not want. I eat very little now.

The shiny coffee-brown dome of Mamdooh's bald head is blotched with darker patches and big brown irregular moles. Out of doors in the harsh white sun I know he always wears

his tarboosh. To see him lifting it in two hands and firmly settling it on his head before going out to the market is to be taken back to the time when the red flowerpot fez was essential wear for every effendi in the city.

Mamdooh is holding out my glass of tea. I take it from him, hooking my fingers through the worn silver hoops of the holder and poking my head forward to breathe in the scent.

'Auntie has made baklava,' he says, encouraging me by turning back the napkin on the plate.

'Later. Go on now, Mamdooh. You must have some food yourself.'

Mamdooh will not have eaten a mouthful or taken even a sip of water since before sunrise. It is Ramadan.

When I am alone again, I drink my tea and listen to the sounds of the city. The cobbled street outside my screened windows is narrow, barely wide enough for a single car to pass, and beyond the angle of wall that shelters my doorway there are only the steps of the great mosque. The traffic that pours off concrete ribbon roads and submerges the modern city like a tidal wave is no more than a dull rumble here. Much closer at hand are shouts and laughter as families prepare their evening meal and gather to eat in the cool dusk. There's a rattle of wheels on the stones and a hoarse cry of warning as a donkey cart passes by, and then a few liquid notes of music as somewhere a door opens and shuts. Hearing this, it might be the same Cairo of sixty years ago.

Some things I can never forget. I must not. Otherwise, what do I have left?

I close my eyes. The glass tips in my fingers, spilling the last drops of liquid on the worn cushions.

Sixty years ago there were soldiers in these streets. Swarms of British officers and men, New Zealanders and Australians, French, Canadians, Indians and Greeks and South Africans and Poles, all in their dusty khaki. The city was a sun-baked magnet for the troops who flooded into it, whenever the war in the

desert briefly released them, in search of bars and brothels. Turning their backs on the prospect of death in the sand, they drank and fucked with all the energy of youth, and Cairo absorbed them with its own ancient indifference.

After all, this war was just another layer of history in the making, contributing its dust and debris to lie on top of thousands of years of ruins. There is more history buried along this fertile strip of Nile valley than there is anywhere else in the world.

One of those soldiers from sixty years ago was my lover. The only man I have ever loved.

His name was Captain Alexander Napier Molyneux. Xan.

He wore the same khaki bush shirt and baggy shorts as all the others, distinguished only by badges of rank and regiment, but there was a further anonymity about Xan. He was neither flamboyant nor mysterious. You wouldn't have singled him out in a crowd of officers at the bar in Shepheard's Hotel, or at any of the raucous parties we all went to in Garden City or Zamalek, simply because he seemed so ordinary.

The absence of peculiar characteristics was intentional. Xan worked deep in the desert and it was one of his talents to blend into the scenery wherever he happened to be. He rode a horse like the cavalry officer he really was, but if you saw him on a camel with a white *kuffiyeh* swathed over his head and face, you would take him for an Arab. At the Gezira Club he played tennis and fooled around beside the pool like any other ornament of the Cairo cocktail circuit, but then he would disappear for days or a week at a time, and even in the hothouse of Anglo-Egyptian smart society there would be no whisper of news or even gossip about where he might have gone. He vanished into the desert like a lizard darting under a rock.

I loved him from the moment I first set eyes on him.

I remember.

New roads and concrete tower blocks and shopping streets have obliterated much of the Cairo we knew then, but in this evening's reverie every detail of it – and of that first evening

– comes back to me. I have revisited it so many thousands of times, it seems more real than my eighty-two-year-old reality.

At least I haven't lost this, thank God, not yet.

This is how I recall it:

It was an airless night thick with the scent of tuberoses.

There were two dozen little round tables set out in a lush garden, candle lanterns hanging in the branches of the mango and mimosa trees, and beyond tall windows a band playing in a panelled ballroom.

I was twenty-two years old, fresh from the wartime austerity of London, drunk on the glamour of Cairo as well as on champagne cocktails.

Giggling, my friend Faria led me over to a table and introduced me to a group of men in evening clothes. There was a bottle of whisky and a phalanx of glasses, cigar smoke competing with the tuberoses.

'This is Iris Black. Stay right where you are, Jessie, please.'

But the young man with pale yellow hair was already on his feet, his head bent low as he lifted my hand to his mouth. His moustache tickled my fingers.

'I can't possibly sit still,' he murmured. 'She is too beautiful.'

Inside my head I was still the London typist, making do on a tiny wage in a basement flat in South Ken, but I had learned enough in my weeks in Cairo not to glance over my shoulder in search of whoever the beauty might be. Here, in this exotic garden with the band playing and the orchid presented by my evening's date pinned to the bodice of my evening dress, I knew that she was *me*.

'Frederick James. Captain, Eleventh Hussars,' he murmured. And then he released my hand and stood up straight. He was slim, not very tall. 'For some reason, everyone calls me Jessie James.'

His arm crooked and his fist, lightly clenched, rested just for a second on the smooth flank of his dinner jacket.

There were plenty of rather fey young men in Cairo. I had

several times heard the RAF boys collectively described as 'the flying fairies', but Jessie James didn't seem to belong in quite the same category. In spite of the hair and the well-tailored evening clothes, he looked tough. His face was sunburned and there was a shadow in his eyes that went against his playful manner.

'How do you do?' I said.

'Ah, she is so nice, our Iris,' Faria gurgled. 'A good girl, from a diplomatic family. When she was twelve, you know, her daddy was Head of Chancery right here in Cairo. She is practically a native citizen.'

Faria was one of my two flatmates. Two years older than me, the elegant daughter of a prosperous Anglo-Egyptian family, she had taken me under her wing almost as soon as I arrived. Faria was engaged to the son of one of her father's business associates and liked to tell everyone that as she was practically married, she was ideally placed to chaperone Sarah and me. Behind the backs of whoever we were talking to she would then deliver a huge wink. In fact, Ali was often away, on business in Alexandria or Beirut or Jerusalem, and Faria would have benefited from the attentions of a chaperone rather more than we did.

We were drawn into the group. Chairs were brought over and placed at the table as the officers eagerly made room. I accepted a glass of whisky, at the same time looking around the glimmering garden for my escort. Sandy Allardyce was one of the young men from the British embassy. He insisted to anyone who would listen that he was desperate to get into uniform, but so far he was still chained to his office desk. I guessed that he felt uncomfortable in the company of so many men who were actually fighting, and that he dealt with this by drinking too much. His pink face had turned red within an hour of our arrival at the party.

'So you lived here as a young girl?' one of the officers asked. The man next to him clicked his lighter to a cigarette and I glimpsed his face, briefly lit by the umber flare.

'Just in the holidays. I was at school in England most of the time.'

Faria was laughing extravagantly at a joke made by one of the others, her head thrown back to reveal her satiny throat and the diamond and pearl drops swinging in her ears.

Jessie leaned forward to command my attention again. 'Are you looking for Sandy? I saw you dancing with him.' He had noticed my anxiety.

Gratefully I said, 'Yes. He brought me to the party. I ought to go and find him. He . . .' I was going to add something about the orchid, I was already fingering the waxy tip of one of the petals.

Then the man with the cigarette moved his chair so the light from one of the candle lanterns threw his face into relief. There was a blare of music from the band and a burst of applause as a dance finished. I looked at him and forgot whatever remark I had been on the point of uttering, not that it mattered. Cairo party conversation was profoundly superficial.

The man's eyes were bright with amusement. He was dark-haired, dark-skinned. He might have appeared saturnine if there hadn't been so much fun in his face.

He leaned across the table. I saw the way his mouth formed a smile. 'Don't dance with Allardyce. And if it's a choice between Jessie and me – well, that's not really a choice at all, is it?'

'Ale*xan*der.' Jessie pouted.

'Not now, dear,' the man said. He drew back my chair and I stood up, he put his hand under my arm.

'Xan Molyneux,' he said calmly. We walked across the lawn together, under the branches of the trees. The heat-withered grass smelled acrid, nothing like an English garden. I had never felt so far from home, yet so happily and entirely not home-sick.

'I'm Iris.'

'I know. Faria did introduce you. Is she a friend of yours?'

'Yes. We share the same flat. Sarah Walker-Wilson lives there too. I suppose you know her?'

I can't bear it, I thought. Every man in Cairo adores Sarah. In the six weeks since I had moved in, Sarah had not spent a single evening at home.

Xan inclined his head until his cheek almost touched mine.

'The three flowers of Garden City,' he murmured. Garden City was the quarter of Cairo where we lived. I wasn't sure if he was making a joke or not.

We reached the dance floor. Xan's expression was serene and he was humming the tune as he took me in his arms. He didn't enquire whether or not I thought it was a jolly band, or if I was going to Mrs Diaz's shindig in Heliopolis tomorrow night. We just danced. He was a good dancer, but I had had other partners who were better. It was more that Xan gave the steps and the music and me all his attention, which made spinning round a crowded floor to the tootling of an Egyptian band seem singular, invested with a kind of magic. Laughter shone in his face and the pleasure that he was obviously taking in this precise, isolated moment radiated out of him. I felt energy beating like a pulse under the black weft of his coat, transmitting itself through my hands and arms and singing between us, and an answering rhythm began to beat in me. We both felt it and we were swept along, becoming more absorbed in the dance and each other. We looked straight into one another's eyes, not talking but communicating in a language I had never used before.

That first dance seamlessly ran into the next, and the one after that.

I stopped being drunk on champagne and whisky, and grew intoxicated with excitement and the music and Xan Molyneux's closeness instead. I saw the bandleader glancing over his shoulder at us, and some other couples were eyeing us too, but I didn't care and Xan was looking only at me. We had exchanged hardly more than a dozen words but I felt that I knew him already, better than anyone I had met in Cairo.

I also felt a clear, absolute certainty that from now on all things were and would be possible. Happiness became wound

up with anticipation to a point of tension that was almost unbearable, and it made me suddenly giddy. As Xan swung us in an exuberant circle I tripped and overbalanced on my high heel. A hot skewer of pain stabbed from my ankle up my calf and I would have fallen if he hadn't wrapped his arm more tightly round my waist.

'Are you all right?'

I drew in a breath and blew it out hard to stop myself howling.

'Just . . . twisted it.' The dancers formed a circle round us.

'Here, I'll carry you.' He slid his other arm beneath my thighs, ready to lift me off my feet. At that moment I saw Sandy. He came steaming through the dancers towards us, crimson in the face, the studs popping out of his shirt front. His eyes seemed to swivel in opposite directions.

'What's going on?' he shouted. 'Molyneux. You . . . what d'you think you're doing?'

'Helping Miss Black to a chair,' Xan drily replied, straightening up. 'She has twisted her ankle.'

I took a step away from his side and nearly fell over, Xan immediately lunged to my rescue, and we almost toppled in a heap. As we struggled to right ourselves in a tangle of arms and legs I laughed up at him, in spite of the pain in my ankle, and I heard a wounded bellow from Sandy. He came flailing at Xan and caught the collar of his evening coat. Xan let go of me and twisted round to face Sandy who planted a wild punch on his jaw.

'Leave my girl alone,' Sandy shouted, but having landed his awkward blow the belligerence was visibly draining out of him. He gazed around at the circle of onlookers but he couldn't see any ready support. His big, shiny red face seemed to crumple inwards, oozing whisky from every pore. I watched miserably, balancing on one foot, wanting to tell the sticky air – but for Xan to hear – that I wasn't Sandy's girl at all, and feeling ashamed of the impulse.

'You know, I really don't want to hit you back, Allardyce,'

Xan drawled. One hand slipped into the pocket of his coat. He sounded amused, not at all perturbed. 'It would make such a mess.'

'He's right, it would,' another voice chipped in. Jessie James had appeared, with Faria beside him. Her sharp eyes took in everything. She held out her arm and I leaned on it as Sandy caught hold of me on the other side. His hand was hot and damp, and there were little glittering rivulets of sweat running from his hairline to his stiff collar. He jerked his head at Xan and Jessie, but he was already in retreat.

'It's not funny.'

'Are we laughing?' Jessie innocently asked.

Sandy turned away from them and muttered to me, 'C'mon, s'get another drink. Be all right.'

Faria clicked her tongue. 'No it won't. I'm taking Iris home. Can't you see she's hurt?'

The band started playing again and the other dancers turned away, losing interest.

The next minute I was hobbling into the hallway, supported on one side by Faria and with Sandy weaving on the other. A huge crystal chandelier dripped diamonds of light over our heads. I felt rather than saw Xan and Jessie at the back of our ungainly procession as Lady Gibson Pasha came surging towards us, both hands outstretched as if to catch me. Our hostess wore a gold turban and a collar of egg-sized emeralds.

'My dear, my dear girl, you poor thing. You must put your foot up, we need an ice pack.'

She was clapping her hands, calling at a passing servant to bring ice. I wanted to stay near Xan and to get as far away from Sandy as possible. I was also longing to get home and lie in a dark room to disentangle the chaos and amazement of the evening.

'It's nothing, really. I'm so sorry, Lady Gibson. Just a silly sprain.'

'Daddy's car and driver are here,' Faria said. 'We'll go home. I'll make sure Iris is looked after.'

Sandy vehemently nodded his head. He had gone pale now. Another servant was at hand with Faria's little swansdown bolero and my mother's Indian shawl, which was my evening wrap. With Lady Gibson's instructions floating after us we hobbled out of the front door. Amman Pasha's chauffeur was waiting at the steps with the big black car. He opened the door and I was handed into the expanse of cream-coloured leather. Sandy collapsed beside me, gasping and tugging at the ends of his tie to undo the bow. Faria slipped in on the other side.

The car began to roll over the gravel. I twisted round to see through the rear window and caught a last glimpse of Xan and Jessie standing side by side at the foot of the steps, black head and blond, watching us go. I couldn't really see Xan's face, but I thought he was still smiling.

'God,' Sandy groaned. 'Bloody hell.' He screwed his black tie into a ball and stuffed it in his pocket before letting his head fall back against the seat cushions.

'We'll drop you at the embassy,' Faria said coolly and leaned forward to give the driver instructions in Arabic. We swept over the Bulaq Bridge and I saw the broken mosaic of yellow and white lights reflected in black water as we turned south past the cathedral.

Faria yawned. 'Oh dear. I completely forgot to tell the poet we were leaving. Whatever will he think?'

It wasn't a question that required an answer. Jeremy – known as the poet – was the most fervent of Faria's admirers, a thin and mournful young man who worked for the British Council. Ali was away and Jeremy had been her escort for the evening. He would think what he presumably always thought: that the exquisite and careless Faria had given him the slip again.

Sandy had passed out. I could hear the breath catching thickly in the back of his throat. Whisky fumes and Faria's perfume mingled with the smell of leather and the uniquely Cairene stink of kerosene and incense and animal dung. Faria took a Turkish cigarette out of her bag, clicked her gold lighter and inhaled deeply. I shook my head when she held it out to me.

The pain in my ankle was intense and the faint nausea it engendered made my senses keener. I let every turn of the route print itself in my mind, the black silhouette of each dome against the fractionally paler sky, the hooked profile of an old beggar patiently sitting on a step. Every detail was significant and precious. I wanted to absorb each tiny impression and hold it and keep it, because tonight was so important. I never doubted that.

We stopped near the embassy gates and shook Sandy awake. He groaned again and muttered incoherently as he flopped out into the road. The car swept on. Over the top of the embassy building, behind the flagpole with the limp folds of the Union flag, I could see the tops of huge trees shading lawns where I had been paraded for tea parties as a child. I liked to slip away and gaze at the Nile beyond, slow olive-green, flagged with the sails of feluccas.

Later I lay in bed with the wooden shutters latched open and watched the sky. My bandaged ankle throbbed but I didn't mind that it kept me awake. All I could think of was Xan, whom Faria had hardly noticed and who had left me stricken with desire from the moment I saw him. Shivers of laughter and longing and anticipation ran through me as I lay there, slick with sweat, under my thin cotton sheet. On that first sleepless night I never doubted that Xan and I would meet again. I would tell him I wasn't and never had been Sandy Allardyce's girl, and we would claim each other. That was exactly how it was meant to be.

How simple, how innocent it seems. And how joyful.

Garden City was set beside the Nile, an enclave of curving streets with tall cocoa-brown and dirty cream houses and apartment blocks deep in gardens of thick, dusty greenery. Our apartment belonged to Faria's parents who lived in a grand house nearby. There were wood-block floors and heavy furniture, and every room had a ceiling fan that lazily circulated the scalding air. There were big metal-finned radiators too, that

occasionally emitted hollow clanking noises and dribbled rusty water. Faria never noticed the heat and her black hair stayed like a glossy wing instead of frizzing in the humid blast as mine did, but she was afraid of feeling cold. When she was going out at night she always slipped a little bolero of white feathers or a silk velvet cape over her bare shoulders.

My room was a narrow, high-ceilinged box at the end of a corridor away from the main part of the flat. The furniture was on a humbler scale and there was a view from the window of a jacaranda tree in the next-door garden. I didn't know Faria and Sarah very well but they were lively company, and I was pleased to have such a comfortable place to live. It was even conveniently close to where I worked, at British Army GHQ, just off Sharia Qasr el Aini. I was clerical and administrative assistant to a lieutenant-colonel in Intelligence called Roderick Boyce, known to everyone as Roddy Boy. Colonel Boyce and my father belonged to the same London club and had hunted together before the war. A letter from my father, and an interview during which my prospective boss reminisced about my father taking a fence on his big bay mare, were enough to gain me the job.

The morning after Xan and I met I got up early to go to work, as I had done on every ordinary day since I had come back to Cairo.

In the stifling mid afternoons the streets cowered under the hammer blow of the sun out of a white sky, but at 8 a.m. it was cool enough to walk the few streets between the flat and the office. That day, with my heavily bandaged ankle, I had to take a taxi. Roddy Boy looked at me as I half hopped to my desk, supported by a walking stick belonging to Faria's father.

'Oh dear. Tennis? Camel racing? Or something more strenuous?'

'Dancing,' I replied.

'Ah. Of course.' Roddy Boy chose to believe that my social life was much more hectic and glamorous than it really was. 'But I hope your injury will not impede your typing?'

'Not at all,' I said. I rolled a sandwich of requisition forms and carbon paper into my machine and forced myself to concentrate.

When at last I came home again Mamdooh, the *suffragi* who looked after us and the apartment, greeted me in his stately way: 'Good afternoon, Miss Iris. These were delivered for you an hour ago.'

'Oh, beautiful.'

There was a big bunch of white lilies, gardenias and tuberoses. I buried my face in the cool blooms. The intense perfume brought back last night even more vividly, candlelight and music and cigars and Xan's face. Mamdooh beamed. He was pleased for me; usually the bouquets were for Sarah.

I sat down awkwardly and opened the envelope that came with them. There was a plain white card with the words *I hope your ankle will mend soon*. It was signed simply *X*. That was all.

Mamdooh was still standing there in his white *galabiyeh*, waiting for more. Faria complained that he was too familiar and that what time she came in at night was none of his business, but I liked the big man and his broad smiles that were always accompanied by a shrewd glance. Mamdooh missed nothing. Faria's mother was probably aware of that too.

'Just from a friend,' I said.

'Of course, Miss. I will put in water for you.'

The flat often looked like a florist's shop. Sarah and Faria didn't even ask who my bouquet was from.

I admired my flowers and waited, but a week and then another went by. The whole month of June 1941 crawled past and I heard nothing more from Xan.

In my outer office at GHQ I typed reports and delivered signals for Roddy Boy, and chatted to the staff officers who hurried in and out to see him. As a civilian I was on the lowest level of clearance, but because of my family I was judged to be safe and many of the secret plans that flew in and out of Roddy Boy's office crossed my desk first.