

# COVERT IN CAIRO by Kelly Oliver

## EXCERPT

This bloody war had taught me nothing was black and white... except perhaps a strong cup of tea with milk, when you could get it.

My mouth was parched, and my bottom bounced on the hard wooden bench I shared with Captain Clifford Douglas, my glorified chaperone. I glanced over at our carriage companions, Miss Kitty Lane—whom I'd known until a week ago as Eliza Baker—and a stranger who leaned against the wooden armrest, reading.

The Egyptian railway carriages were white wooden trollies. Nothing like the black iron horses back home. Deuced hot, too. The soot flooding in through the window was the same, though. British or Egyptian. It didn't matter. We all choked on the same smoke.

As the carriage clacked along the tracks through the desert from Alexandria to Cairo, I distracted myself with Annie Pirie's *The Pyramids of Giza*. Book in one hand, I held a lavender-scented handkerchief to my nose with the other.

Annie Pirie claimed it was under one of these grand pyramids that she'd met her future husband while they were both laid up with food poisoning. Having nursed soldiers suffering from that very same affliction back at Charing Cross Hospital, I didn't find anything romantic about the squalls of salmonella.

Still, there was nothing like the vulnerability of the body to move the soul.

Why not fall in love over a bedpan?

After all, I'd met Archie Somersby when he was convalescing with a shot-up arm. He'd asked me to help him write a letter to his mother. *So sweet. Writing to his mum.*

My cheeks burned. *Oh, Archie.* Would I ever see him again? Did I want to see him again, now that I knew he was a government-sponsored assassin? When I closed my eyes, I could still smell his citrus cologne mixed with the lingering scent of Kenilworth cigarettes.

I dropped *The Pyramids of Giza* on the seat next to me and withdrew a fan from my purse. Even with the windows open, it was beastly hot, and the desert seemed to go on forever. Winter in Egypt was a far cry from the chilly dampness of London or the snow in New York.

No. I couldn't allow myself to think of Archie. Dead or alive.

Instead, I looked out of the window.

Oblivious to the carriage's shaking and clattering, with her legs stretched across the bench seat, Kitty had her nose buried in the latest issue of *Vogue* fashion magazine. Wearing dark glasses, a flowing pink chiffon skirt dotted with tiny roses, a white blouse with pearl buttons, and an adorable sailor hat, she looked the part of a fashion model herself.

Poppy, the girl's Pekingese, had a pink ribbon in her topknot that matched her owner's outfit perfectly. The furry nuisance sprawled across Clifford's lap, her outstretched paw touching my knee. Only because the animal had rescued me from imprisonment in a loo on my last mission did I indulge her encroachment on my person.

Clifford was another matter. Indulging him often tried my patience. Captain Clifford Douglas had been sent along by the War Office to chaperone us, despite the fact I'd already completed *four* missions. And Kitty, well, for all I knew, she was an assassin in petticoats.

While engrossed in his hunting magazine and fantasies of killing, at least Clifford was quiet for a change.

"I say!" Clifford looked up from his magazine.

Blast. I knew it was too good to be true.

"Gezira Sporting Club has fox hunts with English hounds." Clifford beamed. "Do you ladies fancy a hunt?"

My eyes met Kitty's and we both laughed.

"We're not in Arabia for sports." I scolded him. "Hunting." I gestured from Clifford to Kitty. "Fashion... You'd think we were on holiday instead of..." I glanced over at the stranger in our compartment. "Instead of on business."

If it hadn't been for the stranger sharing our compartment, I would have chastised my companions. While I was busy preparing for our mission by studying guidebooks, they were faffing about with pretty dresses, gruesome blood sports, and fussing over a spoiled little dog.

"You can tell our priorities by our reading material." I held up my book. "Mine is written by a scholar and a lady explorer." I nodded for emphasis. "She—"

"If you want to get to know a people," the stranger interrupted, "study their poetry."

I sat blinking at him. His English was heavily accented, but I didn't recognize the accent. And yet there was something familiar about his voice.

"You must read Hafez Ibrahim, poet of the Nile." The stranger opened both his hands in offering. He clasped his hands together in prayer.

“Do I know you, sir?” Clifford dislodged the pipe from his mouth.

There was something uncanny about the man. I too had the uneasy sense of déjà vu.

“You don’t even know yourself,” the stranger scoffed. “If you English can’t make yourselves welcome with arrogant promises of freedom, you resort to armored tanks and Vickers machine guns.” His mustaches quivered.

“Well, I say,” Clifford huffed. “No need to be rude.” He tugged on the bottom of his jacket. Good old reliable Clifford. Quick to defend king and country... and any women within a twenty-mile radius.

“Those hunting hounds were brought here to fulfill your countrymen’s desire to turn every place into their homeland.” When the stranger waved his arms, the loose sleeve of his jacket danced a frenetic jig. “They died from the heat.” His dark eyes flashed. “Let that be a lesson to you.”

“Look here, whoever you are.” Clifford stood up. “This is no way to talk in front of the ladies.”

Good heavens. I hoped Clifford didn’t do something stupid like challenge this fellow to a duel or punch him in the nose.

The carriage swayed and Clifford fell back onto the seat, nearly landing in my lap.

“Now, now.” I patted Clifford’s arm. “The ladies can defend themselves, thank you.”

The stranger held up his book. “Here, you must learn Arabic if you want to do anything but see yourselves reflected in a mirror of your own hubris.” He stood up. “Since Egypt was occupied by the French before the English, you’ll get by passably well with French.” He opened the door to the compartment. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I, too, have work in Cairo.”

As he crossed the threshold, a folded paper fell out of his book.

I reached down and picked it up. The paper was heavy and thick.

“You dropped something,” I said to the closed door.

The stranger had vanished.

“What is it?” Kitty said.

“I say.” Clifford snatched it from my hands and snapped it open. “Why, it’s a map!”

“Heavens.” I gazed down at it. “Not just any map.” I grabbed it back.

A map of the Suez Canal. Marked with a big black X.