

HE

CAN BE

ANYTHING

YOU WANT

HIM

TO BE.

T H E

*impersonator*

A N O V E L

DIANA HAMMOND

THE

*impersonator*

DIANA HAMMOND



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FIRST EDITION

At dawn we leave White King,  
its clouds all colored,  
For passage to Kiang-ling  
in one sun's circuit:

While both banks' gibbons cry  
calls still unceasing,  
Our light boat has gone by  
many fold mountains.

—*Early Departure from White King City,*  
Li T'ai-Po

PART

*one*





Theo had been more beautiful than Jane, more celebrated than Jane, more desired than Jane. But Theo was dead.

A perhaps overly consecrated kind of dead, Jane couldn't help thinking as she and Robert emerged from the musty room with its dark, official furniture, where they had just been married, only to find a cluster of reporters and photographers waiting for them outside in the finicky light of a Paris afternoon. Not one of the journalists was so brash as to ask her, "How does it feel to be the bride of the man who was once married to one of the most exquisite creatures on earth?"

But the question hung—ever so politely—in the air.

Their interest in Jane, even in Robert, was peripheral. They had come because of Theo, the dead Theo, whose face, whose history, could still sell newspapers. Jane's wedding day was evidently to be rearranged by the press into

yet another chapter in the silvery myth of Theo. Jane smiled graciously for the photographers and reviewed with mild dread the tasteless position in which she had been placed.

By the following morning she would have become a figure of idle curiosity to millions. Tried in absentia. Second best. How could a man who had had Theo Buckley for his very own ever hope to scale such heady heights again with a mere mortal? And so on.

Not that Jane Donovan was just anybody. The Donovans had been producing responsible public servants, prosperous eccentrics, philanthropists, and generally upright citizens along the eastern seaboard for almost two hundred years. Coming from a good family no longer meant much, but it did to Jane. It was ground under one's feet. It was continuity. It was backbone. Jane, who had come down on the artistic—thought by some to be flighty—side of the Donovans, was a travel writer whose quirky eye, passion for history, and willingness to take on dubious modes of transportation and unfashionable journeys had begun to bring her recognition for her seriousness and for her flair.

She was exceptionally well proportioned, she had striking off-center good looks, and she had always wanted, more than anything, to be wise. "A Jane Austen girl," her first husband, Tyler, would instantly, if a bit wryly, describe her when asked by *Vanity Fair* on the day after her wedding to Robert what she was like. From which one could only suppose he meant that she was True.

Being married to someone who was True had had its consequences. Nine months after Tyler's own wedding to Jane, they had been at a cocktail party in a rambling West Side penthouse overlooking Central Park and Jane, who had gone in search of a safety pin and a full-length mirror in order to do up a section of hem in her plum-colored silk



skirt, which had unaccountably begun to unravel, walked into one of the bedrooms and found Tyler with his trousers down around his ankles, enjoying the passionate ministrations of one of the female guests, a young film executive from Los Angeles to whom they had been introduced only one half-hour earlier.

Jane had stared—with apparent composure—at the unlovely little tableau, and looking Tyler in the eye had quietly remarked, "You idiot."

She had turned and left the room. She had told her hosts she had a headache, and departed in a taxi. When Tyler arrived home some ten minutes later, she had had a large brandy in one hand and her wedding ring in the other. The fact that she was in love with Tyler evidently did not deter a Jane Austen girl from holding to her standards. She had thrown the glass of brandy at his head, the wedding ring in his face, and filed for a divorce.

In the days, months, and years that followed, Jane would from time to time find herself reviewing this decision, generally coinciding with her birthday, Christmas, and almost always when strapped inside an airplane roaring down a runway for takeoff. These little reviews brought with them their fair share of anguish but had not once included a wish to reverse her drastic action on the night of the party. She had only two regrets. The first was that Tyler had not been, after all, a man of character. The second was her secret shame that she could not be more like other people. In a decade abandoned to sexual license (it was 1979 when she divorced Tyler) her fastidious position was noticed.

Jane could neither tolerate infidelity nor inflict it. Could not. What was it that had made her so primly exacting, so uncharitable? She did not know. She only knew that for her, a promise was, simply, something one kept. Her impla-

capability on the subject was, as she was well aware, a handicap with poignant and even comical implications, including the personal and social embarrassment of having to defend what was generally considered obsolete thinking.

At the time of her divorce from Tyler, friends had tried to get her to change her mind. "Tyler is still out of his head in love with you," they said. "If you were really in love with him, you'd put aside your own ego." "Can't you forgive one incredibly stupid moment at a party with someone who meant nothing to him?"

"I can't," Jane had replied over and over, adding privately to herself, "How can I explain what I've never been able to explain to myself? That I can forgive with my intelligence ten times over. But I cannot ever lie down with him again."

It was a choice based neither on religion nor on any criticism of or deficiency in understanding how the rest of the world accommodated its disappointments and nasty surprises. She had as much passion for Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary as anyone else. She envied her women friends for being more pragmatic than herself and was intermittently taken with those bloodless word separators, the English playwrights of the day who constituted a collective sensibility in which faithlessness was brilliance. This dramatic tradition was of course far older than any of them, but the Restoration playwrights, for instance, had at least exercised the wit and even the taste (thought Jane, whenever she was arguing with herself) to present *The Subject* mainly as farce. The current lot, elegantly *louche*, were up to something else.

Never having committed an infidelity herself, she was forced to accept her lesser status. Perhaps that is why she wrote about temples and large bodies of water—and never about betrayal.

Roberto Elias de Peña (called Robert since his Harvard days), trendy scholar, dilettante, author of two slim but popular books on philosophy for the layman, and former husband of Theo Buckley, had met Jane on a stifling afternoon in 1983 in the fly-infested waiting room of the airport at Abu Simbel. A sandstorm had grounded all air traffic. As was usual in Egypt, no announcements or explanations had been made. It sufficed to note the sudden appearance of soldiers in green cotton uniforms to guard the doors, letting no one out, letting no one in.

There was not much to do except read one's guidebook if one had brought one, order sticky, lukewarm coffee, examine a dusty collection of cheap necklaces, or stare through the walls of pocked glass at the whirling pink Nubian sand. Those who had not found seats walked up and down or leaned against the walls. Most were members of

tour groups who had flown up from Aswan that morning to view the famous rock temples, had duly examined them, and were now anxious to get back to Aswan for a civilized drink.

Robert, who had chartered his own plane from Aswan, now sat on a hard wooden bench, waiting, like the others. He held on his lap the head of the young woman he had brought with him to Egypt. He had been invited to join a Nile party of twelve and had been encouraged to bring along a companion if he wished. He had chosen Susan because Susan was agreeable (at least she was willing to converse on topics other than herself, and had the confidence to dress like a lady, not a circus pony). Nor was she tied down to a regular job that might have prevented her from being available.

True to form, she had not complained about the delay. At the onset of the flying sand and the green cotton soldiers, Susan had sipped daintily at her coffee, not liked any of the necklaces, and was now fitfully asleep.

On a facing wooden bench sat Jane.

Robert examined the attractive, tanned ankles above the laced-up espadrilles, the neat khaki shorts, the plain white T-shirt, the hefty paperback copy of *The Book of the Dead*.

And the face. Not a girl's face. Thirty, possibly more. Evidently not restless. Evidently not bored.

Jane turned a page, raised her head, saw him staring at her. Over the body of his sleeping girlfriend, they began a conversation.

"Heavy reading, that." He smiled, indicating her book. "I vote you the most serious person in this airport."

"The plot's a bit thick" was all she allowed him. But she smiled back and ran her strong, ringless fingers through her short hair.

Bookish. Modest. Sensational legs. Likes men. "I

gather," he said next, "*The Book of the Dead* makes Christianity look like the senior play."

She in turn had been examining him. "The early Egyptians are quite provocative, yes."

"Better jewels? Better sex?"

She laughed. "Better journeys, maybe." She paused. "I'm in love with rivers. I don't know why."

"What part are you on just now?"

"The Ka."

Having meanwhile been appreciating the graceful way her bones were arranged, he dutifully inquired, "Which is?"

"The Ka was an abstract personality endowed with all the characteristic attributes of the individual person it was a part of. But the Ka also had an independent existence. It could go from place to place, separating itself from the body when it wished."

"So technically the Ka is a double?"

"Technically it's not anything we have a word for." She frowned. "It's not the soul, it's not character. For instance, whenever it separated itself from the body, it had to be fed."

"And when the person died? The Ka died with it?" He was totally uninterested in the Ka. Spirits were neither his field nor his taste. But her absorption was charming. Mentally he undressed her.

"On the contrary." Jane noticed the quick discreet downward flicker of his gaze and felt an equally quick stirring of pleasure. "In fact, offerings of food continued to be made to the Ka. With nourishment, it was believed, the Ka would survive."

She had, after a few minutes, realized who he was. The faintest trace of a South American accent. Blurred photographic memories of his aristocratic profile taken with Theo Buckley. In black tie, arriving at a gala. And after Theo

Buckley. In mourning, walking in front of the catafalque. He was older. He would know things she didn't. She liked that. She liked the set of his shoulders. She found herself eyeing the maleness of the way his flat black watch lay against his wrist, and the tiny, fine hairs there.

She wondered if she had been staring too long and hastily continued with the first thing that came into her head. "I suppose what endears me most to the ancient Egyptians is not the panoply of their showpieces—which I find embarrassingly large and cumbersome—but their belief that when we leave this life for the next, we get to take our things." With a grin she added, "It beats all hell out of ashes to ashes and dust to dust, doesn't it?"

He seemed to be considering his answer. He was frowning.

Had she offended him? Was it possible he was religious? Had he thought the sphinx just dandy? She wished he would take off his dark glasses. She wished she had not been *quite* so chatty.

He regarded her gravely. Very quietly he asked, "Where are you staying in Aswan?"

*The Book of the Dead* slid off her lap. He could not pick it up for her because he was holding Susan. Quickly Jane retrieved it and replied as evenly as she could, "I'm not. If we ever get out of here, I'm on a tourist boat to Luxor that leaves at nine o'clock tonight."

In his lap, Susan was beginning to stir. "You'll be making the usual stops? Kôm Ombo? Edfu?" Robert asked Jane quickly. "What is the name of your boat?"

And it was done.

Legend has it that when Napoleon's army first came upon Karnak, the legions fell strangely silent, slowed to a com-

plete halt there in the white hot desert, and—to a man—presented arms. Five days after meeting Jane, Robert had his first look at Karnak and less than an hour later asked Jane to marry him.

His proposal did not seem all that impetuous to either of them. Since Abu Simbel, each was fairly certain that something momentous in their lives had happened. To Robert, Jane had appeared in the form of fresh deliverance. Jane was exactly the sort of woman he wanted in his life. The Susans of this world were pleasant, practiced, and they knew the score. Robert had sensed instantly that Jane did not know there was a score, or if she did, had never deigned to subscribe. This unwitting purity sharpened his desire. He loved the way she looked. He loved the generosity of her spirit, her intelligence. Her very presence at his side promised to unmuddle the muddles of the past. Every moment they had stolen on their way down the Nile—from Susan, from Jane's rigid itinerary—had increased his determination to have her for his own. He would have a wife again. He would be happy.

They sat at sunset under the bleached, striped awning of a wispy café on the riverbank, looking across to the other side, where the Valley of the Kings lay.

"Marry?" Jane gave him a cautious but good-humored stare. "Why not sort of live together. And see."

"I've already seen." Discreetly, under the plastic tablecloth, he slid his hand under her wide cotton skirt. They exchanged a look of congratulatory lust, each thinking of the narrow bunk in her single stateroom on the vile tourist boat where two days earlier they had had exactly twenty-five minutes to exchange their initial carnal vows.

Robert caught his breath like a boy. "What is your answer?"

The watery melon disc that had hung slightly out of

focus over Luxor all afternoon sank out of view. Behind them, the lone waiter smoked, dreamed, rattled little cups and little saucers on the baby-blue plastic bar. Three stern blasts came from Jane's boat. She picked up her purse, her sunglasses, a few parcels.

"I must go, or the chief purser will shoot my foot off. Unlike your tony yacht, we on the Sheraton boat must obey the small print on the backs of our tickets."

He also rose, put some money on the table, glanced at her, but said nothing more.

"I'm vamping," she said contritely. "For time."

"I know." He took her arm.

They walked along the little croisette, poignant with its dusty historical litter of abandoned dreams. Baked for centuries, peeling, corrupted, done for, rosy Luxor remained a stubborn romantic. A mangy horse and carriage clip-clopped by. A spindly, flowering tree bent in the hot breeze. At their backs was the knowing stillness of Karnak, which had gone—for the moment—the color of saffron. The great stones of the temples that held the city's blood secrets were still, in the early evening, warm to the touch and would remain so long into the darkness.

"Why not in Paris, on the way home? I have friends with the embassy," Robert was saying. "I could telephone them from Cairo. Ask them to make the wedding arrangements." He smiled at her. "You remain the only obstacle."

She smiled back. Men. They were never so alive, so absolutely clear as when they were determined to have you. Cavemen cartoons did not lie. Really, it was charming. What had her life been like five minutes before meeting Robert? She could scarcely remember.

She had come to Egypt to write about the Nile. Conscientiously steeped in its history, she had not counted on its wiliness. "Just here," she had written in her notebook a few



days earlier, "the west bank is parrot green with fake-looking palm trees as artfully arranged as in those overcolored nineteenth-century paintings that are suddenly going for so much money. The sky is tipsy on fruit punch. At the water's edge, a dry, biblical bush casts the only smudge of shadow to be seen anywhere on the landscape. As we round a bend there is another river still life. A woman gowned in black stands on the bank, eyeing her buffalo. She does not look up as we glide by. She doesn't believe in me, I don't believe in her. The only real thing is the hot swish of the river."

Yes, there was only this. There was only the tourmaline water, and the flat yellow barge that was going by, and, buried centuries beneath the sands, wall paintings and jeweled chariots. There was only Robert, who was now saying, "What will you do tonight? So I can imagine you doing it?"

Jane, looking at the river, felt the inevitability, the excitement. She tried to speak casually.

"Have a drink in the bar with the couple from Verona. Take a walk on the deck. Go below and make notes." She paused. "Think of you. Think endlessly of you."

She had made up her mind. There was a healthy amount of child in Jane, enough for her to want to claim as her due this golden favor from the gods. She had always liked to entertain questions of destiny. Newly minted lover that she now was, she embraced the happenstance of their meeting at Abu Simbel as having been designed by an unseen hand.

Time for a passionate, mature love *bien fait*. The wayward, enchanting Tyler had been chosen by a breathless girl. A wiser, glowing Jane would now have the seasoned Robert, man of the world, with the handsome brows.

At the foot of the gangplank, quickly, with only a few minutes to spare, they made plans. In Cairo, Robert's companion would be packed off. He would book a suite high