

BOOK ONE: Origins, Motivations and Locations

1

Long ago in the happier world of the nineteen nineties, there lived in the ancient city of Marrakech a young man called Radouan *al Uld Billah*; short for *Radouan-Jannat ibn Ibrahim ibn Abbas ibn Hassan al Uld Billah*, who had recently managed to buy a small two-story house hidden in a corner of the Medina; the house of the last great poet of Marrakech, Chair el Hamra, dead now for forty years. The place was sparsely furnished: a trestle table, a long wooden bench and some oaken stools. Nearby a small room contained a cot, an ancient roll top desk, three walls of book shelves stacked with leather bound volumes in Arabic and French and a faded photo of King Mohammed V, the father of King Hassan II. On the fourth wall hung a lute and a drum and beside the desk a *Kanoun*.

Dawn was breaking. The remains of a meal littered the table: empty glasses, wine bottles and a package of Zig Zag cigarette papers. Thin wisps of smoke drifted up from the white ash of a burnt out cooking fire – evoking the memory of an abandoned Bedoui campsite, a more carefree age in which to contemplate timelessness, make love and *maji* with words and song.

Circling the trunk of an ancient lemon tree which grew in the courtyard, a large gray cat with golden eyes, stretched, sharpened its claws on the tiles, and sidled over to a mound of white wool blankets. The *Muezzins* had just finished their calls to prayer and *Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar*, echoed through the city. Mohktar, a strapping youth of sixteen yawned, got up and performed his ablutions, slipped into a white cotton *gandoura*, spread out a prayer rug and knelt down. Still half-asleep, Radouan opened one eye, watched Mohktar skeptically and wished he could spend the whole day there; one whole, uninterrupted day. But it was not to be, of course, for today was April 12th, 1998, his thirty-sixth birthday and within the hour he was due at an old country house in the Bled, the *Ksar* of his friend Baroness Minna. A big celebration, because it was her birthday too, her seventieth, and there would be an exhibition match between his team and one from Argentina.

Mohktar finished his prayers, put a Miles Davis tape on the new sound system Radouan had purchased and made some coffee. Radouan got up, stretched, splashed himself with water from a pail and shaved in front of a small mirror above the tap.

“Now I must go out among the foreigners,” Radouan said at last. ‘Really I would like to spend the whole day here with you - you know that - teach you to play the *Khanoun*, and we could decide what to do here. Look at the dust. I’ve had this place now for more than a year and it’s time to fix it up....everywhere the paint is peeling and there is a crack in the fireplace chimney. But today I have a big match and as I am captain of the team it is important that I be there early so I must leave very soon.’

After slurping their coffee in silence, Mohktar helped Radouan into his jodhpurs, helped him squeeze into his high black leather boots and a white pullover emblazoned with the coat of arms of the team’s owner, an Englishman called Rupert. Then he watched approvingly as Radouan strode around the lemon tree several times, getting used to his uniform. ‘I need something to cover all this,’ he laughed with embarrassment.

Nodding thoughtfully, Mohktar produced a dark grey *Jellaba*, which he threw over Radouan’s head and pulled down over his jodhpurs until only the tips of his boots were visible. Then Radouan pulled the hood over his head, and kissing Mohktar affectionately many times, locked the door behind him and walked down the *derb* to where his car was parked.

At the polo ground he was greeted from every quarter with smiles and waving hands. Over at the small grandstand he could see the Baroness Minna welcoming her guests, directing them to a tent where Bull Shots, Bloody Marys and a full-on English breakfast were laid out. Only his friend Antonia was missing: she was going to miss his birthday because she didn’t want to see her ex-husband Rupert, the owner of Radouan’s Polo team - how stupid, he thought, how unnecessary.

The match was not easy; the Argentines were a formidable lot, well trained to work together, whereas players on the team Rupert had assembled - horsemen from Britain, France and Morocco - didn’t always work well together. In the end, however, Radouan prevailed; broke a tie at the last moment with a long shot and victory was theirs.

Later, around the Baroness' pool, a buffet lunch was served. There were toasts, salutations and a panegyric delivered by a famous poet from the Lebanon. Everyone danced to an orchestra playing hit tunes from the 1970's. And as the afternoon light began to fade and the last of the guests departed, finally Radouan and the Baroness found themselves alone before the tall windows of her suite in the tower room of her *Ksar, Dar Chems*.

2

Silence. Silence of the Atlas snows and of the Sahara beyond. Rustle of leaves in the olive groves sloping away toward Hamra, its dusty walls reflecting the wantonness of the setting sun - *Maghreb-al-Aqsa*, the farthest West, Hamarra the Red City, Maroc City, Marrakech. A thousand years of caravans up from Tombouctou bearing slaves, gold and the old *maji* of the South. A thousand years of travelers from Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Seville and Granada - warriors, brigands, philosophers, courtesans, reformers, troubadours, Sufis and Sultans. A thousand years of storytellers - three hundred sixty-five thousand, two hundred and fifty nights! Ah Marrakech: its secret treasures, its well-hidden pleasures!

Gusts of warm air filled the high ceilinged room. The Baroness slumped down in the velvet cushions of a carved ebony chair; her white hair drawn back in a chignon over high cheekbones, her large violet eyes affirming her former beauty as she inserted a cassette in an old tape recorder, lit up a slender cigarette of kif and hummed along with the famous Egyptian diva Umm Kalthoum.

'With that first glance from your eyes, love and passion they consumed me - set me on fire,
 'But where are they now oh my lover, where? Oh where?
 My lovers eyes have gone. Oh oh where?
 On the day you promised to be with me you traveled away... you promises were really a farewell...
 My peerless, my unique one, my only love.
 Very long became the nights for me, endless nights of torture
 Ah...Ah...Ah...'

You never told me where you went. Where?
 Or when you'd be coming back.'
 When will you come back, oh matchless love?
 When? When? When?''* (1)

The tape ended, and the call of the village *Muezzin* echoed across the olive trees - the Voice of Destiny the Baroness Minna thought. The last hours of her seventieth birthday had ebbed away and it was hard for her to accept that sixty years had passed.

'Impossible!' She whispered to herself, and drew numbers in the air with her cigarette. Sixty years - sixty years since she'd first set foot here in Marrakech and now what? Pouf! Gone like that, like a tourbillon, like a whorl of dust advancing across the desert. Sixty years. All the great moments of her life, of love and tenderness, disaster and despair; all the changes she had seen and survived - it was too much!

Behind her stood Radouan, his hand resting gently on her shoulder looking very smart in white silk pajamas and a new black robe. For twenty years now, since he was sixteen, they'd been celebrating this day together.

She glanced up at him, smiled, patted his hand gently and sighed - Radouan-Jannat, great, great grandson of the Caid *Uld Billah*, the last great freedom fighter of the R'hamna tribe. Radouan, his clean shaven face, bright like a slice of the moon; large eyes that had seen too much, long lashes that appeared painted on with kohl and caused people to stare, hair in jet black ringlets capping a profile from Carthage or Rome - ancient face on a husky warrior's body that could mount a horse on the run - thirty-three generations of equestrian prowess out of Arabi, across Africa to Fez and finally Marrakech.

The day had been a tiring one for Baroness Minna but now, at last, it was over. She sighed, raised her hand and pointed a patrician finger toward the city. 'Ah, mon ami, see those walls? Did you know slaves from Cornwall built them, yes, *habibi*, from Cornwall in England captured by your Corsairs?'

'My Corsairs?'

'Arab pirates, darling... brought slaves here from Britain... blond slaves... had them build the great walls of the city, then bricked them

up inside... those walls are filled with skeletons.' She laughed the raucous knowing laugh she was famous for.

'Iyeh... waha... the skeletons in the walls,' Radouan chuckled, 'yes, people are always finding them. Only fifty years ago Pasha Glaoui was having his victims bricked up there too... very convenient... my father has told me.'

The Baroness looked surprised. 'You mean Thami Glaoui, the last great *Caid* of Marrakech? But he was so civilized.'

'Underneath he was not.'

'But I knew him well...'

'You knew him? You really knew him? Why have you never spoken of him to me if you knew him so well?'

'Well, we have spoken of him... many times'

'Yes, many times but you never mentioned you really knew him.'

'I suppose it never occurred to me you'd be interested...' she sighed, 'I guess my memory is... Ah, to accept the passing of time, it's very difficult, you know, this dwindling of one's faculties.' She blew smoke rings across the room. 'Perhaps now that you're thirty-six you're beginning to understand all this. As to Glaoui... well, it was my father's friend Winston who put us in touch with him. All the other foreigners including us... we all thought El Glaoui was our friend... we certainly had no idea he was bricking up people in walls...'

'How could you have lived here and not known it?' Radouan purred, 'You just didn't want to think about it. He turned Marrakech into a huge brothel, for the French army and their camp followers. How did you meet him?'

'Through Winston, Winston Churchill, of course, but I was only twelve at the time, Glaoui was at my twelfth birthday party... Winston brought him.' The Baroness smiled coquettishly. 'Officially I guess we didn't meet until I was presented to him at a court function when I was eighteen, just after the war, the Second World War.'

'You were presented to him? How? Someone was pimping you to him?'

The Baroness chuckled, and took his hand, 'Really, *habibi!* Now you are joking of course... trying to provoke me as you always do. My father presented me, of course. But then I've never told you exactly how I came to be here, have I?'

'No, I've never asked and you've never told me.'

Because I never think of it, she thought to herself. Was she supposed to remember everything that happened to her sixty years ago, did she want to? The past was gone... finished. She looked up at him. 'Would you like to hear it or would that bore you? Your attention span is getting short like a mouse, not what it used to be'.

'Tell me,' he replied, a note of sarcasm lurking in his voice, and sprawled on a nearby sofa. 'After twenty years with you it would be interesting to know how you got here.'

The Baroness stared at him and laughed, lit another cigarette and gazed off into space.

'I was twelve years old when we arrived here from Tangier where Father and I had been resting for some time after escaping from our home in Prussia. Prussia was an important part of the old Germany. My father was one of the first men in Prussia to understand how dangerous Hitler was, so in 1935 he began to liquidate his estates, factories, etc and convert them to cash. My poor mother thought he'd gone mad and became crazy at the thought of leaving her family, her servants and her old castle. One night she went to sleep and never woke up. There were rumors she poisoned herself, but I doubt it.'

Her jaw set firmly, the Baroness puffed on her cigarette and remembered how heartbroken she had been, how devastated her father - a terrible time of grieving. But her mother's death had given them an excuse to leave; told everyone they were going to a sanatorium in Switzerland to recover from the shock of her mother's death, traveled in a caravan of four cars with three servants, and four beautiful wolf hounds. Because her father was a member of the Prussian nobility, and they knew he'd been selling things, the Nazis were watching them closely. But for the same reason... because of his wealth and high station... the people who should have been watching them were frightened and afraid to search their cars or open their luggage, which was stuffed with bullion, jewels and bank notes.

She smiled at Radouan. 'Of course I was much too young to understand all this. For me it was all a great adventure, something to take my mind off the loss of my mother. My father had telephoned a banker friend who met us just inside the border, loaded most of our trunks in an armored truck and took them to his bank in Geneva where my father thought we might settle down.'

She sighed. 'Then, convinced we were being followed by Nazi agents, he became so paranoid I thought he was having a nervous

breakdown over my mother, but that wasn't it at all. He was a clairvoyant and realized how things were going to play out. So as the winter of 1938 finally ended, we moved on, left Geneva and drove down to the French Riviera where many of our friends had villas. And the next summer when the Nazis invaded Poland, we drove to Toulon where we managed to get our four cars, the servants, our dogs and ourselves on a boat bound for Algeria. A month later we finally reached Tangier... What a journey! In Morocco, my father's words echoed in high places. So when France fell, as Morocco at that time was a French Protectorate, suddenly Tangier was crawling with Nazi agents and we moved south... here, to Marrakech where, I guess, it was Thami Glaoui who secretly protected us, from the Gestapo and Vichy government.'

Radouan gazed at her and shook his head. 'Glaoui was a very hard man for us, especially for the R'hamna who had always fought for our Sultans. When the French exiled Mohammed V, we knew Glaoui wanted to become Sultan but...'

Not wanting to think about politics, the Baroness sighed, and stared out at the darkening sky as the scent of jasmine floated in through the open windows. 'Ah yes' she whispered contemplatively, 'now that world is gone, all my friends gone too and the old Marrakech we knew and loved.'

So that one hardly recognized it any more with that cloud hanging over the city, she thought angrily, the petrol fumes, black coal smoke from hotels... God, how she hated this thing they called Tourism - worse than Communism.

'Ah,' she sighed and settled back in her chair, "How numerous are the cars, how large the fortunes, how bitter the poverty... and how many loved ones have departed from this world"* (2) Soon I will be a skeleton too, like the skeletons in those walls.'

Puzzled and upset by her talk, tears streamed down Radouan's cheeks. 'Jus' you shut up,' he muttered softly, 'No skeleton you... you're drivin' me crazy... why are you saying these things?'

'Because I'm dying, *habibi*... I haven't told you... I've delayed and delayed, but now it is time.' She stared up at him and shrugged helplessly. 'I have an incurable disease and very soon I'm going to die a painful death... yes, my darling'

Radouan was incredulous.

'It's been coming on slowly, very slowly... this condition... I... I didn't want to scare you... postponing it... yes, I have a disease, perhaps two diseases... I've been meaning to tell you but I wanted to be sure. Some degenerative thing... terminal... incurable... diagnosed a few months ago in Paris. You remember I flew up there for a few days? You've heard of this Alzheimer's thing...? Something like that.'

'Yes, of course, I know it,' Radouan said, cheering up. 'You will forget everything. Every time you see me it will be like the first time. That is great! God is Great! - A good way to leave this world I think - no regrets, no awful memories to make you sad. Can we turn on the television now? Morocco is playing Tunisia. It's a very important game.'

The Baroness' eye brows shot up, she tried not to laugh and failed. 'Mein Gott, *habibi*, now it's you who's sounding crazy ... you don't know how difficult it is for me to remember what I did ten minutes ago... I'm saying something very important and you want me to watch a ball game... really... sometimes I don't think you give a damn about me...'

'But it's a very important game, *bibti*, I have to see it... all my buddies will be talkin' about it.'

'The subject is NOT THE GAME, *HABIBI*; we're talking about my disease. I can't endure it... I must find a way out painlessly... sleeping pills... poison... suffocation... whatever, but I need your help.'

Radouan gazed at her incredulously. 'You want me to help you suicide? I can't help you... its *HARAM!* It's against Islam.'

'So is your drinking, but that doesn't seem to bother you,' she sniffed.

'I've stopped drinking'... almost.'

'I understand there's a very good poison made from castor beans,' she whispered, 'called *Ricine* I believe, easy to make, the Russians have it, so does Saddam... it's very fast... I've seen many castor bean plants growing by the roadsides around here.'

'Forget it, you're talkin' madness... you're still YOUNG... you're STRONG! Dwelling on disease is a malediction... for sure if you don't have it you will catch it, and if you do have it, it will get worse.'

'Ha!' The Baroness recoiled, 'After all these years! Now all I'm asking for is a little help... a little compassion, *habibi*, COMPASSION!'

Please, I'm old now... going to die soon anyway... it's not suicide.'

'It is... and you're not going to die... you will just lose your memory that's all... sad thoughts, guilty thoughts... all will go away.'

'Yes, and finally I will lose control of myself. That's what they say. I'll become a mess, darling, disgusting... you won't want to see me. I don't want to frighten people... can't you understand?'

'Don't WORRY; I will stand by you... Always, no matter what happens... you know how much I love you. I WON'T LET YOU DIE! Moreover, I will take you to a place where they will cure you.'

'You mean Sidi Zween, I suppose?' She sighed.

'You know it then... off the route to *Essaouira*.

'Of course; the Saudis go there, I believe. A few have been cured.'

'Many many have been cured.... Radouan smiled hopefully, 'my family... when I was a child they took me there... holy men prayed over me three days for intelligence, strength, health and beauty. You see the result!' She laughed gently, 'I always have, my darling... that's why I want to die in your arms, while I'm still...'

'What did you say?'

'DIE IN YOUR ARMS, damn it....' she stared at him wide eyed. 'Yes... if I die in your arms I'm sure your *Baraka* will take me straight to the seventh heaven... don't laugh, I'm serious.'

They laughed together. Her laughter turned to sobs. He rolled off the sofa and knelt before her. 'Courage, mon ami... *Chajaa*,' and turned on the television set. 'We have a saying in Arabi, 'When you are destined to die, it is a great shame to die a coward.'

They watched the game together. Minna fell asleep and was awakened by yells and cheers from Radouan as Morocco defeated Tunisia 1-0 in the last moments of the game.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes with a scarf. 'How would you know anything about courage,' she said, 'you're much too young.'

'What you saying?'

'About courage, mein lieber freund. Before, we were talking about courage. You were telling me to be courageous about dying. I'm saying you're too young to know anything about that.'

'Are you kidding?' Radouan stared at her pensively. 'I'm not young like before, I'm thirty-six today! Middle-aged... believe me, courage, it has nothin' to do with age, *'bibti*, it's when you must face

something dangerous... something so big you can't run from it.' He stared hard at her. 'Then you get the courage. Courage is facing something that frightens you and saying, *Ila al Jahim*, SO WHAT!'

He got up and paced back and forth, remembering the time when his father became sick and he had to suspend his studies at university to support his family. The whole burden of their lives had suddenly fallen on his shoulders. He was seventeen at the time... the year after he'd first met The Baroness. There was no one else to support them: four younger brothers and three sisters. He remembered how frightened he had been then... could still feel it in his stomach. Within months there was no money and they had to move from their fine house in *Meuassine* where he was born to the place where they now lived near Bab Dukala which they had to share with others... it was a shameful moment. His mother's family began to look down on them, treated them differently... there were times they had gone hungry.

'I swear, on the head of my mother, believe me, when my father became ill, that's when I learned courage.' He stopped pacing and knelt beside her.

'But when we first met, your father, wasn't he alright?' she asked. 'You introduced me to him.'

'Yes but two years later we were nearly destitute.'

'Mein Gott *habibi*, you never said a thing' She rolled her eyes, 'Not a word... never mentioned it... you knew I would have helped you... I can't believe it.'

'I didn't know... I didn't know you that well then... I was afraid you would reject me. Rich people generally, I have seen, they are afraid of poor people... afraid to help them... moreover we never discuss our family affairs with others. I must not sit upon your head with my problems... it is written... you always seemed to have so many problems of your own... all those papers stacked up on your desk.'

The rising moon hung suspended in the eastern sky. 'Will you stay and have some supper?' she murmured, 'I know how busy you always are.'

He kissed her forehead tenderly. 'Of course... what do you think... that I would walk out on you on our birthday before I put you to bed? He went to a bar in one corner of the room and returned with a bottle of champagne. 'Maybe we should have a drink. If you noticed I drank fruit juice all the day.'

They quietly toasted each other, sipped their champagne in silence and listened to the peacocks shrieking in the garden.

'Alone at last,' she sighed, chuckling softly, 'and tranquil.'

'What are you laughin' at?'

'Was I laughing? No. I was thinking of you... of beauty in a man, how disturbing it can be and how many nights I've spent over there in that bed wondering where you were, who you were making love to, inventing tableaux in my mind's eye, vowing never to see you again, never to let you near me... only to melt the next day when you appeared.' She cocked her head and laughed. 'It's true; you know it.' Then she glanced at him with concern and shook her finger. 'The odd thing is when we first met my reaction to you was not positive at all... I mean I was physically attracted to you, of course, but I thought you might be a big problem for me... you were so very young, but you had *maji* from your mother, I know that now... must be hereditary... and you used it and I came to need you like a drug. My impulse was to control you, which of course was impossible. But the problem was I knew you wanted me to try. Ah yes, to try and catch you like some one running after a naughty boy.' She waved her hand and smiled. 'Seems rather silly now, doesn't it? And all the time you continued to see others... have serious love affairs... believe me, On the head of your mother....' she intoned.

Radouan nodded his head seriously 'After all these years you still don't understand. You may feel it, but you don't understand that jealousy is very important – it moves the world. Europeans they want to deny it, but we are saying: Who is not jealous is not in love. Jealousy is delicious. Love without jealousy is like couscous without meat... a waste of time! You can't imagine how jealous I was of you!'

'You, jealous of me?'

'Yes, of course.'

'But *habibi*, how could you possibly have been jealous of a woman more than twice your age?'

'Ha... you don't know? Of course I was jealous of you... so jealous I had you followed night and day.'

'Mein Gott! - had me followed? I don't believe it.'

'It was easy... very easy here to have people followed... to know where they go... everything they do. For thirty dirhams a day... even now you can...'

'Really! But why?'

Radouan laughed, ‘... because I was jealous of the world you lived in and the people you knew... I wanted to be in that world with you... to be seen with you... it was an easier world to live in than mine. But of course that was impossible. I was too young... too rough... hadn’t even the right clothes.’

‘For you, *habibi*, clothes were not important... nobody noticed your clothes.’

‘At that time I didn’t know...’

‘That you were so *zween*? No, you didn’t. That was your charm...’

‘But I knew I had to have different clothes to be with you... clothes are a very important thing... you taught me that, you taught me so many things. What to wear, how to eat properly with knives and forks, how to have conversations with people. I was always afraid you would meet someone who would make you reject me. That’s why I had you followed. You did some crazy things in those days.’

She smiled grimly. ‘You must know everything...’

‘Not everything... but I saved you a few times.’

‘*Habibi*, really, from what? From whom?’

‘Certain people who were getting too close to you... getting’ ready to swindle you.’

‘Just how did you manage that!?’

‘I have my ways,’ he grinned. ‘You must know one thing, *azizati*, twenty years growin’ up in the Marrakech *Medina* and you know a lot... you have many friends and many enemies. I’ve always been a fighter... since childhood I’ve been fightin’. When you’re cute like I was you have to be able defend yourself... its survival... you can’t imagine.’

The Baroness stared at him, ‘Yes, I can imagine. You forget I was an eighteen year old blonde at El Glaoui’s court... sometimes I was not so clever either. Every one was after me. I have to say it gave me a great sense of power but the intrigues, the plots... not the Pasha himself but the people around him. With me he was always like an uncle. He loved and respected my father so he was very circumspect, very correct. Mostly he would tell me long, complicated stories... he was a great story teller... sometimes he would get lost in his story but it didn’t matter.’ She paused to search her memory, ‘and now I think about it I’m sure he must have been in touch with *Maji* too... of the darker sort like Voodoo. The people close to him, his eunuchs, his wives, his concubines, male and female, were

constantly inventing things to discredit me. I never had to fight, physically, but I had to learn to be very clever... keep my thoughts to myself...'

'Which is why you have kept so many things to yourself for too long,' Radouan observed.

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'If you are going to lose your memory you must tell me everything before you forget it... if you tell me the story of your life now... when you begin to forget I can tell it back to you.'

The Baroness winced. 'Interesting thought... but they say about this disease I have... finally, I'll not remember anything from one hour to the next so it wouldn't do much good for you to tell me about myself because I'd forget it immediately.'

'*Inch Allah*, we'll see,' Radouan replied thoughtfully 'All our saints and Prophets have said we must learn to live in the present, and your *Isa*, he said it too. You must absolutely stop worrying and set your mind on other things.'

'But I'm frightened. I was prepared for the serpent but gave no thought to the scorpion... that's one of your sayings, I believe. Talking about this disease makes it less frightening to me.'

'*Inch Allah, Inch Allah*. You... you're becoming like these people who visit astrologers... they believe what is told them and it happens... it's like that. If you make an image in your head of something dangerous it makes an opening, makes it easier for it to attack you... We have to battle our bodies all the time, FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT.'

The Baroness guffawed, really darling, 'If God's will is so important... fate and all that, why should I fight it? What's the point? In one breath you're saying accept, in the next FIGHT! Why shouldn't I accept my fate?'

'Because we can't know what is God's will. Man takes action, then God he decides... intervenes. We are not gods after all. Maybe it isn't your fate to die of this disease... maybe you don't even have it.'

The Baroness was a little drunk now. 'Okay, okay... *Inch Allah, habibi*. But will you think about what I asked you?'

'*Waha*, and be taken off to Jail for murder I suppose... are you crazy? I could find you some sleepin' pills, but I won't be here when you take them... I must be far; far away... otherwise the blame will all come down on me.'

‘So if I choose to end my life, I cannot die in your arms?’

‘No, you cannot. You have to decide. You can choose to fight, but you cannot choose to die. That is the rule. Either you battle this disease you think you have, and I’ll be here for you whenever you need me... or you must take your life alone.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ the Baroness said thoughtfully, ‘meanwhile could you find me some opium?’

‘What?’

‘Opium, opium, *habibi*... THE POPPY... to stop the pain. I also have this pain in my head... it could be a tumor. I’ve never smoked much opium, but I have friends who have both smoked and eaten it every day for many years and lived long pain free lives...’

‘That’s easy enough,’ he said, ‘to get you some opium... meanwhile, I will try to arrange for you to go to Sidi Zween, but as you are not a Moslem there might be a problem.’

Radouan wanted to go. Her talk was depressing him terribly and he was due back in Marrakech. The Baroness looked away. ‘Well... I’ve never told you this before either,’ she drawled, ‘and don’t ask me why I’m telling you right now, but I’m already a Moslem... converted years ago.’

‘What?’

‘That I’m a Moslem... in fact a *Haj*...’ she laughed uproariously, ‘Haj Minna!’

Radouan was speechless. ‘Really tonight you are shocking me...’

‘It happened so long ago I never think about it.’ she shrugged self consciously, ‘And as I said, I’ve learned through sad experience to keep my mouth shut. Before you were born. I was in love with a man from Fez so I converted... even gone secretly to Mecca with him, but I’m afraid I’m not a very good Moslem... any more than I was a good Christian. I don’t keep *Ramadan* and I’ve never celebrated Christmas... Does it make any difference to you? I mean in our relationship.’

Radouan looked serious. ‘Yes, of course, it changes everything... look, it brings tears to my eyes. I would have treated you differently.’

‘Would you have been more faithful?’

'I have always been faithful... I have never deceived you.' Why did you hide it? Are you ashamed to be Moslem?'

'Of course I'm not ashamed. My relationship with the Fassi did not turn out well... it was for his sake I converted... then when everything ended I stopped thinking of myself that way. I've never been what you call a devout anything!'

'You must try. Now you must try!'

She gazed sadly at him and sighed, 'I knew if I told you, you would say that... that's why I never have. You know, sometimes you are like these new Islamists, when it suits your purpose to be so... something of a hypocrite too since you don't go to mosque, don't observe the month of fasting and drink like a...'. She scowled at him playfully. 'I just knew if I told you, you would start lecturing me and ordering me about... I do truly believe in the life of the spirit, in the world behind the world and the ultimate mystery of our existence... holiness and compassion... yes, I believe in all that. But I dislike, I detest, all these organized religions with their self appointed helpers of God... I HATE THEM ALL. Certainly God doesn't need their help... All these religions get made up after the leaders die... made up by the disciples to keep the money coming in and the believers from starving... that's organized religion.'

'You are cynique ma cherie, a terrible cynic.' Radouan mocked her and frowned.

The Baroness shrugged her shoulders, 'Yes, of course I am, especially about this God every one fights over... after all, I've lived through most of the twentieth century!... Tell me, if he's so great, so merciful, so compassionate, why is there so much pain? Why are so many devout people suffering? Why is it the more they suffer, the more devout they become? Religions feed on these people... Sometimes this God he is wrathful, sometimes he is generous, but mostly it seems to me he is just neurotic and one is never permitted to ask WHY?'

'How can you say such things?' Radouan raised his voice, 'You should get down on your knees and PRAY. We are like tiny ants compared to Him. God is Great... since he created everything, the sky, the stars, the mountains the sun... He must be very large... we can't know him... we can't possibly understand his ways or his plan.'

'So why should we pray? What good does that do? If all those who pray to God were to perish you think there would be any God

left? Isn't God completely dependent on his worshippers for his existence? After all, he's their invention.'

Radouan gazed at her and replied cryptically, 'If all the ants in the world died there would still be a God. Please don't speak of these things now, *'bibti*, you're tired and upset... You must enjoy... you must see the beauty... embrace the terror of the vastness, the majesty. I know you're afraid of dyin' but...'

'I'm not afraid... I'm ANGRY!'

'But how can you be angry? We will all die. Everything that's born dies, even stars, everything has its day. Time is nothing. In a few years I too will be a skeleton. Where we come from and where we go nobody knows so we must learn to live in the moment... be happy in this moment with simple things... making love, doing good to others, not being selfish.'

A warm night wind redolent with the scent of *Musk-leil* drifted in though the windows and the server brought supper up. Radouan remarked that he was new.

'Haroun is too old to carry these heavy trays.' Minna replied. This is Zouheir from Fez...someone A'hmed found.' She introduced him to Radouan who thought he'd seen Zouheir somewhere before and vowed to check him out. They dined in silence watching one of the late night TV dramas out of Cairo that Minna found hilarious.

Finally Radouan turned off the television and they sat together in the moonlit room holding hands while he told her stories and she fell asleep. Then he carried her to bed, kissed her forehead and, deeply troubled by her condition, drove slowly back to Marrakech.

3

It was late. Radouan parked his car just inside Bab Dukala. The night wind from the mountains had stopped and except for the famous cats of Marrakech, fighting and foraging, the lanes and derbs were deserted and unseasonably warm. Even so, he knew that hidden eyes were always watching and kept to the shadows, arriving after many turns at an inconspicuous wooden door set in a high wall.

Somewhere a lone dog was barking. Farther away the mournful whistle of the night train to Casablanca brought back the sad loneliness of his childhood. Silently he unlocked the door with a large brass key, let himself in and passed through a hallway of crumbling blue tiles, into a large courtyard overgrown with apricot, almond and orange trees twisted together beneath several ancient Cypresses. Moonlight streamed down through the canopy of tangled branches casting ghostly shadows on the crumbling columns of an old *Riad*. From a pile of white blankets atop a battered three legged bed a muffled voice called out in a hoarse American accent: 'Is that you? I've been expecting you... its Christmas Eve you know... eight years now and you've never missed Christmas Eve.'

Radouan's eyes flashed sternly in the dark as they sought out his sister Fouzia hunched over a tajine in a far corner of the courtyard, her beautiful face illuminated by the glow of a charcoal fire.

'YES, eight years now,' the voice continued. 'Always strange to be sitting here alone on Christmas Eve... I keep a calendar you know, in one of the notebooks you bought me'. A pale arm extended itself from a fold in the blankets. 'Here... see, my lad, how I am crossing off the days... crossing them off... the fucking days of my impriz... my entombment here with you... my avenging angel! My jailer! Do you think we might have a refreshing beverage? YOUR SISTER FOUZIA REFUSES TO GIVE ME ONE!'

'Champagne is expensive,' Fouzia muttered loudly from her corner.

'But... Christmas, my dear Fouzia, it's Christmas Eve.'

A once handsome man, his face swollen and flushed, emerged from under the blankets, sat up and sang out of key:

'Oh why should I drink in shade, if I can drink in shine?
 Poor and cursed is every hour that sober I must go,
 But rich am I when I'm well drunk and stagger to and fro.
 Speak shamelessly the loved one's name, let vain

disguise

alone.

No good is there in pleasure over which a veil is thrown.
 For I cannot. No, I will not drink in shade
 If I can DrrrINK IN SHINE...*(3)

'Hot for Christmas in't it... Goddamn!'

‘It’s not Christmas,’ Radouan growled, ‘it’s my birthday. Why are you all wrapped up in those blankets?’

‘Because it’s Christmas... when I woke up this morning I was sure, I looked at my diary... mmm... yes... have I made a mistake? Yes, yes it is your birthday not Christmas at all but Radouan’s... je m’excuse, *melhem*, will you forgive me monsieur Paradise? Here in the Promised Land. Yes! That’s what God said to the Moses, wasn’t it?’ Hands fluttered wildly. ‘Champagne! Champagne, we must have Champagne... IT’S RADOUAN’S BIRTHDAY. On to the fridge with you, Fouzia... somewhere around here, I know you’re hiding it... tell me, *habibi*, will I ever get out of here?’

‘Fuck off,’ Radouan whispered, an’ stop actin’ so crazy... jus’ because you want champagne. Leave if you want to... anytime you want to. Go back to your Boston. What would you do there, jus’ tell me?’

‘Hrumpff!’ A pale face stared at Radouan malevolently. ‘I’d buy a Harley and go tooling around surprising all my old buddies who think I’m dead...’

‘That would cost a lot... where would you get the money?’

‘If I stay here I will die of *Ishk*... blinded by passion... you know that.’

‘If you die of *Ishk* you will become Martyr,’ Radouan replied coolly.

‘Yes, of course, the money problem. All my old friends are millionaires now but me I am nothing... NOTHING and it’s all your fault... very bad man you are, Paradiso... from a clot of blood! YES... WE MUST HAVE FAITH IN THE UNSEEN... Am I to believe as fools do? Such are they who buy the life of this world at the price of the life to come... to come, to come... their punishment shall not be lightened, lightened, lightened, nor shall they be helped.’

‘Here’s Fouzia with a bottle,’ Radouan said gruffly, ‘drink with me and SHUT UP!’ He walked over to a television set mounted on the old mosaic wall, secretly connected to a power line outside, and turned on one of the many porn-channels available to those who owned large satellite receivers. A muscular black man was fucking a succulent blonde - Screams, loud disco music.

‘I will NEVER shut up, you can count on that!’ Nick shouted. ‘After all, I am Nicholas K Brady III. He who honoreth my name shall be rewarded in other *Janna*... believe me... and those who refuse will be punished in the land of no return... yes... BY THE PERPETUAL

SATISFACTION OF ALL THEIR DESIRES FOREVER AND EVER...
HA!

Radouan glared at him and bared his teeth. 'You're makin' me nervous again I'm gonna have to punch you!'

'Go ahead. It's not me, it's you who are crazy, you lunatic... you who refuse to believe in me, you INFIDEL! Ha! Merry Christmas...err... Happy Birthday.' Nick raised his glass and toasted Radouan. 'My eyes are the eyes of flies you know and countless other insects. Nothing escapes them, my spies, wherever you go, whatever you do I am watching you day and night. From the eyes of mosquitoes that attack you in your sleep to the eyes of the cockroach who crouches in a corner watching you piss... I am seeing you and you can't hide from me or shut me up. If you try to harm me my angelic bodyguards will invent new more delicious tortures to perform on you... yes, yes... oh YES! Are you prepared for that, my darling? Or will you surrender and admit that I, Nicholas K Brady III, am your master. GO ON, PUNCH ME AND SEE WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU! I want you to just admit it, that's all, and grovel a little bit. Groveling will do wonders and kissing of the hands and feet will be especially rewarded.'

Radouan refilled Nick's glass, 'To the Prophet *Isa*, Merry Christmas,' he said embracing him, holding him in his arms, patting his back.

Calm for a moment, Nick disentangled him self. 'We spent our first Christmas here in a tavern, didn't we? Ah yes... and after twenty-one years, here we are still drinking together. You smelled of horse sweat and orange blossoms... you... you still do.' He looked about wildly. 'Where is Prospero?'

'Pero? He's in Rabat taking the final exams for his law degree.' Radouan returned to the TV and switched channels.

Turetting, Nick spun around the courtyard like a dervish. 'Always remember, *al zeen*, this world is a bridge... Do not linger upon it too long. No, no! We have strict laws here: rules, regulations and ingenious punishments for ruffians like you... by dedicated I mean DEDICATED disciplinarians. I wouldn't fool around if I were you. My spies, they stand up and cry out, WHO GOES THERE? IS IT YOU, *HABIBI* RADOUAN? Is it you? Come closer Paradise it's so dark it's getting so dark... please come closer.'

'You really want to leave?' Radouan looked at him sadly.

'What?'

'Leave... leave this place, you just said it.'

Nick sighed. 'Yes I do, I really do... the sooner the later... I mean better.'

'After eight years here you think you can make it on your own?'

'I don't want you sporting... damn it... supporting me any longer,' Nick stammered, 'especially in a style to which I am deconstructed... damn it... unaccustomed.'

'Listen *mahboul*...' Radouan pleaded with both hands, 'you taught Pero and me... you taught many boys here in the Medina to speak many languages - English, German, Spanish and Italian. In our tradition, students, they take care of their teachers, we won't let you escape so easily.'

'I may hate a thing although it is good for me, and love something although it is bad for me. God only knows... have I not always been your willing prisoner?'

Radouan laughed cynically, 'You aren't a prisoner, and you're not even that... you're nothin'... FINISHED! You wanted to disappear and we have disappeared you. From the face of this earth you have vanished. You know it! Except for Pero, Fouzia and me, you no longer exist. You must surrender and embrace Islam. Then only will you be happy and calm.'

'I know deep down inside you think you can do anything to me because I'm *kafir*. Believe me; I have embraced Islam too many times!'

'Do not joke like that it is a sin... you must embrace Allah and Mohammed his Prophet... say: Allah is one, Allah who liveth on without father and without son, and like to him there is none... say it!'

Nicholas K Brady III jumped up on his bed and declaimed in Arabic: Allah is the patron of the faithful, He leads them from darkness to light, and He is forgiving and lenient. Follow the bright star of morning and he will reward you. Woe is me for I have not followed the bright star... woe is me, I have followed a dark star and am eternally damned, drowned in the muddy waters of *Jahannam*, the nether world... the black hole... woe is me. Mr. Nick Brady... hey Meester, can you give me a life, some happiness in this gloomy world? Radouan? Radouan?'

'I am here, right here.'

'Two sable haired *Hourris* I shall you wed for the hour of my doom is drawing near... The moon is cleft in two and I shall see you married ere I depart.'

*

Radouan switched off the TV and resigned himself to accommodating Nick's madness. '*Inch Allah...*' he murmured, 'Grace is in the hand of God. He bestows it on whom he will. God's grace has no limits.'

'Why do you not prostrate yourself when you enter my presence...why?'

'Because I am created from Fire,' Radouan purred, 'I cannot bow down to anyone.'

'It is you who led me to Sin, *al zeen*, and because of that it is inevitable that I obstruct your wishes... sad but true, *al fahl*, you are my nemesis... I've known it since the first moment I saw you. And I am yours.'

'I AM NOT OF THIS WORLD.' Radouan intoned.

'Yes. Maybe I'm the only one who knows that. What you are exactly I do not know but many times I have the impression I have seen you before ... yes in another life, another world... are you a messenger?'

'I am God's messenger and no other... ' Radouan replied steadily, 'believe in me and I will save you. I am descended from Marabouts.'

'You? - You are descended from tormentors who revel in driving their victims mad. IT'S YOU WHO MUST REPENT, NOT ME... I, Nicholas K Brady III, I will what I will, but I am merciful to those who believe in me. With thine eyes, *al zeen*, with thy tongue and strong limbs thou seduced me. Yes it is you who are *SHAITAN*... not me as you would like to think. Messenger thou may well be, but of destruction... yours as well as mine... And Fouzia, here, she must also repent.'

Nick fell back on his bed and passed out.

Fouzia jabbed angrily at her cooking fire with a stick 'Tonight he is more crazy than ever, my brother,' she grumbled.

'The full moon excites him but he is not crazy, my sister, he is tryin' to recite *Qur'an*. That is good.'

'That is not good, it is Sinful... he is drinking. You are both drinking. When I was a child I remember he was not crazy, but now he is... and it is you, my brother, who have made him so. He is right! You must let him go back to his America.'

Radouan strode across the courtyard and squatted before her. 'You mus' remember one thing my sister, officially he is dead. Can you imagine the problems Pero and I would face if we tried to make him legal? We could say we found him after eight years, wanderin' on the edge of the desert, somethin' like that, but if he did go back someone would have to go with him... at least until he could function. He has no money. Trus' me, he will not leave this place easily.'

Fouzia gazed at him steadily. 'You think you are wise, my brother, that is your mistake, you are *haram!*

'Bein' wise does not make a man *haram.*'

'Tell me why you must support him. Why?' Fouzia said sharply.

Radouan stood up and paced back and forth, 'Because I am not infidel, no matter what he says. Because after leavin' Marrakech he came back; left his wife and children and came back here because some fatal attraction existed between us like earth and moon... strange, because now we fight all the time and he feels guilty because once years ago he yielded to his passions. It was out of his control... of mine too... it was God's will.'

'Believe me, my brother, this is so,' Fouzia said and poked at her cooking fire, 'He is your father and your mother in one person... our own parents were too busy having children to take much notice of you. For him you are the son he never had, his son, except that fathers and sons do not usually...'

'You know that ended years ago.'

'For you maybe but not for him. Also now he is getting very expensive... all this champagne... you feel guilty you cannot satisfy him, so you spend all this money.'

'At customs I have a friend, it doesn't cost me much. Really it's not your problem. I don't want to speak about it. Do you need anything, maybe a new *jallaba?*'

Tucking some loose strands of hair under her head scarf Fouzia stared at him, 'Believe me, my brother, I am not jealous of the money you spend on him but he is a big problem for me because it's me who has to stay here caring for him... I am his servant!'

'Everyone in our family must help out, you know that. Maybe our little sister can relieve you from time to time, but I'm not sure she's old enough... she's very young.'

Immobilized on his bed unable to get up, Nick came awake again and began to rave: 'And Shaitan said there was the promise that God made you... I too made you a promise but I could not keep

it. I had no power over you but I called and you answered. Do not now blame me, BLAME YOURSELF, Yes, Yes. You had better be good, better not shout for Santa Claus is coming to town YES ... He knows when you've been naughty he knows when you've been good... YES, THE DAY OF RECKONING FOR MANKIND IS DRAWING NEAR WHEN WE SHALL BE ASKED OF ALL OUR BUSINESS HERE. What can we plead? What can we pledge? What arguments allege when we are called to render our account on Reckoning Day? Yet we persist in unbelief and listen with ridicule to each fresh warning our lord gives us. OUR HEARTS ARE SET ON PLEASURE... God knows my heart has not been set on pleasure but on PAIN. Just put your hand under your arm, then pull it and it will come out White! DISASTER! DISASTER!

Nick jumped up and looked wildly around, 'I am that disaster... you want to know what disaster is, just look at me... just wait. On that day we shall become like scattered moths and the mountains like carded wool...'

Fouzia burst into tears.

Nick collapsed back on his bed and passed out.

4

Resolved to satisfy his sister's curiosity, Radouan spoke to her in measured tones: 'Listen to me now, my sister; I am going to tell you the whole story which I have never spoken of before... Ecoute moi... listen carefully.'

'When Nicholas first arrived here twenty years ago, I was sixteen at the time and he was twenty-five. He wasn't married then or even engaged. I used to see him at Cafe France... when he was in Marrakech he was always there. Probably you never knew I was selling cigarettes at that time, one by one, to get money to feed you...

you were just a baby then. Nick, he would order a coffee and sit there studying Arabi. He spoke French and so did I, but I wanted to learn English. Sometimes he would say things to me from his lesson books and I would correct him and ask him to say things back to me in English. He came and he went, but he was always alone, always stayin' in some cheap Residence in Guilez.'

'Several years passed and I was hungry for English. There were many English here in those days... I knew it was a key that would open doors for me. Father was getting weaker by the month and the burden of our family was landing on my shoulders, but believe me I never seduced him! He would invite me for coffee at his room around five in the afternoon and we would drill each other in Arabi and English and give each other assignments. Sometimes we would walk down to the big square for somethin' to eat and when the weather was fine we'd walk out into the country to a palm grove and get drunk.'

'Our father was the first one to give me wine when I was a small boy so by the time I was seventeen I was used to it. I liked drinkin' because it wasn't hashish. Everyone I knew was smokin' hashish and kif, frying their brains, hobbling their legs. Wine relaxed me, I enjoyed it and I learned faster. Then one evening when we were really drunk, Nick and I, we made love, and soon after that we made love when we weren't drunk... strong physical love for many months... it was like a huge storm, like the *Chergui*. Many a time since have I made love, but it's never been like that first time! So strong, until the storm passed and we became like friends. But then he became a jealous friend and we began to fight and suddenly one day he left town without sayin' good bye... jus' left and I thought, well, that's over and probably a good thing.

By then I had learned enough, and was fluent in English, Spanish and French, that I could work as a guide and mix with foreigners, especially the English and Americans who were more generous. I began to meet important people who helped me and still do.'

'Then, just as I had almost forgotten him, he turned up again. One day I was passing by Cafe France and there he was, sitting with a woman and a little girl... his wife and child! The moment I sat down at their table I knew his wife disliked me... it was like that! Instant hatred because she had guessed immediately that there was some old story between Nick and me and maybe it was out of control.

Chatterin' on and on like a pigeon, she tried to make conversation and I kept glancin' at Nick and thinkin,' 'you've exchanged me for something of no value.' She wasn't even pretty... but she was rich. A rich woman from a place called Massachusetts and they were stayin' at the Mamounia for two weeks.'

'The next day Nick, he rented a room in the place he used to stay and we met there sometimes before lunch, and sometimes very late at night. We didn't make love... I jus' couldn't... so we talked. I told him I felt humiliated that he had taken up with this worthless female. She had a way of lookin' at you that made you feel like shit... it was a trick she had, and the only thing that interested me about her was watchin' to see how she did it. Mostly it was by saying NO to everything. She didn't work at it, it was just her nature... jus' disagreed with everything anybody said and politely complained all the time. Her behavior was completely unconscious and came from deep inside her: a belief that she was a superior being from a superior culture surrounded here in Morocco by animals. To her we were all animals... some of us were pets and others were predators.'

'As I said, by that time I had become well acquainted with some important foreigners so I didn't care. To me she was nothin. The two weeks Nick was here passed very quickly and he returned to America with his daughter and his wife who was pregnant with another child. Again I thought... well, that's finally over. But no, six months later, at the beginning of Ramadan, he returned here alone and began talkin' about droppin' out or maybe jus' disappearing. Again he rented a place and expected me to be there *fi moutan walihi*, at his bidding, tried to boss me around. I saw he had taken on some habits of his wife and tried to avoid him. After some time he told me he had decided to leave her but was afraid she was going to make a big scandal; keep the children and take all his money. Should he stay and let it happen or go back and fight? If he stayed he would have to disappear which was what he wanted to do, but if he did that he would soon be broke. He was so upset and nervous I was afraid he might kill himself. His passionate nature had overcome his intellect and he began demanding that I give an account of myself for every moment we were apart... Crazy!

'Then one night he admitted his jealousy and told me he couldn't stand it any more. That was the first time he ever spoke about it... admitted he was... said he had prepared a poison from some plant and was gonna drink it unless Pero and I helped him to

disappear; said we owed him that for everything he'd done for us. We were shocked because he had never spoken to us like that before... never negotiated... so I knew he was losing it... but by this time I was fed up so I told him to drink his poison, I wasn't going to help him disappear. So he drank it, *Ch'dak J'mel*, which he had bought in the souk and brewed up.

'Immediately, he became malade... tres malade and started seein' things. I ran out and found an old woman I knew, a specialist in poisons, and brought her back to his room. By then his body was rigid... he couldn't move but his mind was racing. The old woman, she gave him something, a powder and many glasses of warm water that made him vomit and shit. Then finally it was over. The woman said he would live, but he would never be the same again.'

Radouan sighed and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. 'So now, my sister, you know everything. This place here where we are sitting had been empty since 1950's when Pero's family moved to Jerusalem where Pero was born in 1962, the same year as me here in Marrakech. Then in 1969 they came back here because Pero's father and mother are both Sephardim and became upset by all the fighting there between the Arabs and Jews and homesick for the tranquility of Morocco; so they came back to Marrakech and bought a villa here in Gueliz. That's when I first met Prospero. We were both six years old, going to school at the Arset Lamaach in the Mellah where Pero's uncle, Manuel Segrati, was the Director... they had another uncle, Joel, living here in this *Riad* but he was a bachelor and let it fall apart. Then in 1976, Pero's mother and father and his two sisters moved to Casablanca where his mother's family had several businesses and needed Pero's father to run one of them. But Pero, he loved Marrakech and stayed on here with his uncle because his friends were here; we were all in school together and members of the same sports club. Then when Pero was seventeen his uncle died of an overdose from drinking *Mahia* at the *Mazar* of a famous Jewish holy man Issac Abou Hssira, down in *Tafilalet*. The holy man had been famous for drinking *Mahia* and dancin', so those who came on pilgrimage there did the same thing and that's how Uncle Joel, as we called him, died, dancin' in the moonlight in Tafilalet drunk on *Mahia*.'

'So Pero's family was happy to let him stay on and look after this property while he finished high school and went on to Marrakech University. We were classmates from the age of six until he left to

study law in Rabat. So he gave me the key and I was lookin' after it. Pero would come over on weekends and when Nick tried to poison himself we brought him here.'

'We thought he would recover quickly but he didn't. First, when we brought him here, he was down on his hands and knees barkin' like a dog. We thought it was an act, but it wasn't and for almost a year he was pantin' an whinin' jus' like a dog... can you imagine how horrified we were? Pero and I took turns guardin' him...it was awful but we were scared of being discovered with an American who had no visa; moreover, one who had been poisoned. We knew we'd be blamed for everything and thrown in jail forever. Then one morning we woke up and he had stopped bein' a dog and became our Patron... just like that, like a Pasha suddenly there he was orderin' us around like we were servants. You mus' remember that time because tha's when I asked you to help. We were so frightened he would escape and go to the police we kept him drunk...remember?

Fouzia nodded.

'Then his wife, she hired investigators who came to Marrakech to find him. remember?'

Fouzia nodded again. 'Yes, I remember, they came to our father's house looking for you... we hid you in that secret place...'

'Yes, and after some time they gave up looking and went away, but we had to start givin' to our neighbors here to keep them quiet and still do. It's not cheap. Some people know he's still here.'

Fouzia shook her head. 'They have never seen him ... how can they know?'

'The other boys who studied with him, they know...'

'Never.'

'What people really think' Radouan declared earnestly, 'is that we are livin' with a *Djinn* and doin' *maji*... tha's what they say.'

'Then they fear us...that is good, no?'

'That is not good! If they fear us too much they will want to destroy us... believe me it's like that... a big worry for me.'

'This is why you must send him away, my brother... now that you are going to be married, let him return to America...'

'How do you know I'm going to get married? Who told you that?'

'Our mother, of course.' Fouzia giggled.

'Our mother wasn't supposed to tell anyone. I haven't seen the girl so how can I know?'

'But our mother has decided.'

'Whoever she has picked out, if I marry her, I will bring her here to help you.'

'*Inch Allah, Inch Allah*, my brother.' Fouzia smiled for the first time, 'Do not worry...now I understand the whole problem I will not desert you. If you marry and bring your wife here I will stay here until she becomes used to him.'

'As you like... our mother tells me she's a good cook... this girl... have you seen her, tell me?'

'She is only fifteen and somewhat plump with a big *zouk*, which should please you. She has firm breasts, a pretty face, round with pink cheeks, large eyes like yours and a very tender expression on her lips.'

'She must learn to serve Nick. I will teach her not to be afraid of him. I must spend less time with him... these days I seem to make him worse.'

'There is one problem my brother. At the moment although they are very poor, her family, once they were very rich. They are proud and would never let their daughter live in this ruin.'

'For now we could live at home with our father in my old room... let her come here and work with you during the day. Don't worry... I am looking' for money to make repairs here...so is Pero. Maybe someone will buy this place for me as a wedding present.'

'Who?'

Radouan pouted, 'Don't ask... and remember I haven't yet agreed to marry this girl... when I see her I will agree or not agree. Because I'm the one who must pay the bride price and live with her, the decision must be mine.'

Although the old *Riad* in which Radouan and his friend Pero were hiding Nick Brady III was only a stone's throw from the house where Radouan's family lived, so hidden was the route between them that only someone born there could find his way. Arriving at a large

door painted blue, Radouan let himself in to a tiled hall that led to a small courtyard. To the right a narrow tile staircase rose to the first and second floors where Radouan's family lived.

It was past midnight but so unseasonably warm no one could sleep. His two younger sisters Salwa, twelve, and Majaa, eighteen, were sitting on one side of a long narrow room, while his four younger brothers, Hamid, thirty, Othman, twenty-five; Ali, twenty and Hassan, fifteen, sat opposite them. Between them sat their father in a wheel chair watching television on the family's new eighty-four-channel satellite hook up which Radouan had given them a few months back. From the kitchen his mother brought him some brochettes of lamb which she had grilled over a charcoal fire. Radouan ate in silence as the Iraqi singer Kadeem mesmerized his audience, in an hour long special from Cairo, singing of the plight of Iraq since the Gulf War and the wrenching changes buffeting the Arab world. Still his popularity derived as much from his reputed success with women as from his voice and lyrics. Several heads of state had given him expensive sports cars and a Saudi prince had recently gifted him a Lear Jet!

As he ate, Radouan observed his father, his sunken face, reflecting the light of the flickering TV screen. His father had been a stern disciplinarian, perhaps too stern and too traditional, but Radouan preferred to remember all the good times they'd had together, before his father's reproductive drive had overwhelmed the family and plunged them into poverty, trips to the coastal towns of Oualidia and Safi; to R'hamna the family's ancestral village, or Ourika in the Atlas foothills, Radouan in front of his dad astride a big Harley Davidson, racing through the night to the next tavern where they were sure to meet some friendly girls who would cheer them up. His father, Ibrahim, was a famously handsome hell-raiser around Marrakech following in the footsteps of his father, one of the grandsons of the famous R'hamna Chief Uld Billah. When the French left in 1956 and Mohammed V ascended the throne, Ibrahim was pensioned off as a Phantom Fonctionnaire for services rendered during the struggle for independence - which left him time to compose lyrics for local musicians, write credibly good poetry under the tutelage of Chaiir el Hamra and spend his nights carousing with his friends or reeking vengeance on his enemies. Until his lungs and kidneys gave out from inhaling too much kif and the red dust of Marrakech and eating too much majoun. Years ago the doctors gave him three months to live, but Radouan's mother had kept him alive

with herbs and charms; alive enough for her to give him three more boys. Now he sat in the house all day, afraid to go out, barely able to talk – waiting to die.

Radouan finished his third brochette and washed it down with a Coke. The emission from Cairo had ended and his brothers and sisters filed out one by one, diligently kissing their father's hands and forehead. The old man fell asleep, leaving Radouan alone with his mother whose face, though lined, was still the beautiful face of his boyhood memories. If Radouan had '*Baraka*', as everyone said, it came from this woman, a descendant of Sufis who traced their lineage back to Damascus to one of the Companions of the Prophet. Nesting her self on a carpet with some pillows like an odalisque, his mother spoke to him gently. 'I have arranged for you to meet a girl I hope will suit you,' she said, 'day after tomorrow at nine in the morning, Hamid, Othman, Salwa, you and I, we will go there... Do you agree? Unfortunately, your father, in this heat, he will have to stay here.'

'Yes, of course, my mother, if you say so. Where does she live?'

'In Ain Itti, you know it... a terrible place. Once her family was very well off but her father is a spendthrift and now they are poor... *Inch Allah*... That is why they live in Ain Itti. But it's a good family and I'm sure this girl will bring you luck, great happiness and many children.'

'Fouzia tells me she's fat.'

'She is only fifteen... a little baby fat... *chouia, chouia*, but she is very strong. You must be tender with her. I am sure that as your bride and wife she will soon slim down.'

'She's very traditional, I suppose'

'Although she does not read or write, she can recite the whole of the *Qur'an*; quite an accomplishment for one so young, but she is not a fanatic and is very eager to learn. You will be able to educate her, teach her to read and write French and English if that is your wish.'

'And if I say no?'

'My son that is your decision. Already I have interfered enough in your life; kept you from becoming a musician and singer of songs... made you go to University... Now I am only trying to help, maybe to tempt you. She has all the signs and marks of an unusual girl, in fact

she is a very distant cousin through your father's family, and her name is Hafida, which means Keeper.'

'A very important name,' Radouan replied, 'and is she wearing *hijab*, the veil?'

'Outside, of course...what do you think?'

'I think I would like someone more modern... most young women her age are not covering themselves.'

'That is up to you, my son, after you marry her she will do what you say.'

'And if I wish to marry a second time?'

His mother stared hard at him: She herself had been only fifteen when she gave birth to Radouan and they both knew she was his father's second wife. 'It is well known,' she smiled enigmatically, 'that when men take second or third wives the women start doing *maji* on each other. To take a second wife you must have money to set her up in a separate establishment. Even then, you do not necessarily avoid problems. These days it would cost a lot of money... are you planning to make big money?'

'I've been making big money for some time now, my mother, but it all goes to support this family and all our less fortunate relations. Now Hamid and Othman have jobs, I will have enough for this marriage, but don't worry, not enough for a second wife... not yet.'

'But some day I think...'

'That's in the hands of Allah, not ours.' Radouan stood up and stretched. 'I'm going now...' He bent over and kissed his father's hands and forehead, 'and you, my mother, good night.'

'You will not be sleeping here?' his mother smiled seductively. 'Then, do not forget, nine in the morning, day after tomorrow... we must leave early or we will die of the heat... where are you going at this late hour?'

'To the *Hamam*... I need to bathe, then I will feel cool.'

'You always say you are going to *Hamam*.'

'You know me too well, my mother... but I enjoy bathing and it clears my brain.'

The Muezzins were chanting the dawn call to prayer. Radouan walked briskly through the deserted souks of the Medina to the Place Jamaa el Fna where a few stragglers were still eating at the food stalls, had a large glass of orange juice, cruised past an empty Cafe de Paris, and made his way through *Derb Darbachi*. On nights like these when the wind died and the heat from the buildings radiated out into the still night air, he longed to leave Marrakech. Every corner, every doorway evoked ghosts of the past: fights and assignations, lost loves, broken dreams and precious moments gone forever. The urge to run and not look back was strong... it would be so easy just to leave. Or would it? At thirty-six, maybe it was already too late for him. He felt his mother's love, her jealousy, closing in on him. Yes, maybe the proverbs were right, women, even mothers, were to be regarded with caution.

Arriving at a small tiled doorway, he ducked into the changing room of a *Hamam* owned by Ibrahim, a friend of his father's youngest brother, J.W. to his friends, short for John Wayne for the battered cowboy hat he always wore which some rock star had given him years ago.

Stripping down to his shorts Radouan made his way into the hottest of three vaulted chambers where he found J. W. massaging the back of an old man. They spoke in English.

'Thought I would find you here,' Radouan said

'I was expectin' you... always come on hot nights like this...'

'When I can't sleep...'

'When you come here where it's really hot, then you go out outside you feel cool, you are able to sleep.'

'Right.'

J.W: forty-five, athletic build, clean-shaven, almost handsome except for a lantern jaw and a strangely vacant expression in his eyes. J.W. was nine years older than Radouan and from the same tribe. In forty-five years he had only left the Marrakech Medina three times: once to the mountains, once to the seaside and once to the Sahara where he was so overcome with spatial aphasia that when he returned to the Medina he never left again. As a teenager in the late 60's he lived through the Hippie scene in Marrakech smoking hashish and kif with the likes of Ginsberg and Burroughs... later with Jimi Hendrix and Jagger. At his family's riad near Sidi Bel-abbes he had

the largest collection of recorded music in Morocco. There were tapes and CD's of famous Arab singers like Farid El Atrach, Umm Kalthoum, Abdel Halim Hafiz, Ismahane, Mohamed Abdelwahab; rare recordings of the Lute master Haj Juniis; recordings of European operas like Turandot, and Der Rosenkavalier. All the French Chanteuses from Yvette Gilbert to Edith Piaf were represented. There were 78 and 33rpm's of early American Blues and Jazz from Ma Rainey to Billie Holiday and Dylan; the crooners from Russ Colombo and Bing Crosby to Frank Sinatra and Elvis, and a vast collection of Rock and American Country Western music. In the *Hamam* day after day, year after year, J.W. had seen and heard everything, become wise, and was often consulted by younger men like Radouan.

'What's wrong?' J. W. said dousing Radouan with hot water. 'You look pissed off.'

Radouan's eyes narrowed and lip curled up over his front teeth. 'It's my mother... she's pressurizin' me again... this time she's actually picked out the girl. I'm supposed to meet her day after tomorrow. Fouzia says she's fat!'

'Well you don't have to accept her... that's up to you, isn't it? What about your English woman?'

'You mean the German one?'

'No, the English one, Lady whatever her name is... Toni. What about her?'

'What about her?'

'Aren't you going to marry her? She just divorced her husband Rupert, no?'

'How do you know all this?' Radouan began scrubbing himself with a loofa. 'Her husband Rupert is my friend. He owns the team I play with. She's arrivin' tomorrow night.'

J. W. rolled his eyes, 'Radio Medina of course'

'Marriage with Toni?' Radouan shrugged. 'My family would never approve or even recognize it... I must marry someone my mother approves of.'

'She's jealous of you and will never approve of anyone.' J.W. whispered. 'That's why I've never married, 'But why do you have to get married... look at me I'm alive and well. Take my advice, remain single and count yourself lucky. A Moroccan woman if you marry her and give her your eyes, she will say you are blind and want a divorce! Tha's how it is... you know it!'

'Then if I marry Toni, I must also marry this girl my mother has chosen.'

'You're afraid of your mother?' J.W. drenched Radouan with hot water.

'Probably; once we were too close, you know that. She looks weak but she isn't... I can't say no to her. She can make things happen to you if you cross her. If she found out about Toni she might try to do something against her.'

'But you have to marry Toni, she left her husband for you. It was mentioned recently in one of those French magazines. Maybe your mother knows and that's why she is pressurizin' you.'

'Never thought of that.'

'And if you marry your Toni and then marry this girl, what will Toni say?'

Radouan looked surprised. 'Does she have to know? Do either of them have to know?'

'Maybe not, many of our customers have wives in different places who do not know each other.'

'You want to hear the real problem?'

'What?'

'I will tell you the real problem. Toni is fifteen years older than I am and this girl Hafida is twenty-one years younger. I guess I want someone my own age.'

J.W. grinned. 'Believe me; a girl of fifteen will drive you wild with pleasure. On the other hand the Prophet's first wife was older than he was and a widow too. Take my advice... marry your Toni first, then Hafida. A woman your own age will come along - and give you more trouble too.'

'Toni, I like her a lot,' Radouan replied, 'we have great times together, great sex, but I'm not physically jealous of her so how can I really be in love? And I'm not sure I'll be jealous of Hafida either.'

'You want someone to be jealous over?' J.W. was incredulous

'OF COURSE WHAT DO YOU THINK? My problem is I've never been jealous of anyone... over love.'

J.W. sighed. 'Then you're lucky. It takes too much energy to be jealous... It's better not to be jealous and be free.'

'Then you will never really know love, Radouan smiled sadly, '*Laysa man samiaa ka man aacha* - He who has only heard (or read) will never be like one who has experienced.'

7

The next evening found Radouan behind a newspaper standing in a corner of the arrival hall at the Marrakech airport, baseball hat pulled down over dark glasses; a disguise he hoped would render him invisible - too many eyes watching, too many tongues wagging.

Even though he had gone over the problem with Toni many times, she still insisted he meet her there - which annoyed him because she was certainly able to get from the airport to her place in Hivernage on her own. Really what she wanted was for people to see them meeting there; big deal, big mistake! In a place like Marrakech, plagued by intrigues, if he was seen too much with her, linked with her by certain persons, it could mean trouble for both of them.

Moreover, she was arriving in her late father's company plane and would be escorted by a police officer who was well known to him; a good friend of his mother's youngest brother! Think about that! About this guy telling his gossipy uncle who would probably tell his mother he was meeting an English woman who had arrived in a jet prive! Think about the possibility that his Uncle's friend might try to touch her, or stare at her in a certain provocative way as he guided her through immigration and customs... perhaps even taking her into his office on some excuse.

His mind obsessing over these problems as he pretended to read L'Opinion, he suddenly discovered he WAS jealous of Toni and really would probably kill, at least hospitalize any guy who got near her. This scared him a little. But J.W. was right about the Prophet's first wife, Khadija, who had been older than Toni when the Prophet married her. Was it not good to love older women, to give them pleasure, to keep them feeling good and laughing so they would not destroy the good feelings of others? Yes, of course, especially if you were *zween*. After all, you must use what God has given you, especially if you have nothing else to fall back on.

The airport was filling up with people waiting for the arrival of a flight from Paris. Trying hard to concentrate on the crossword puzzle,

Radouan's mind wandered back over fifteen years to the days when he first met Toni at a small gathering at the Baroness' place. By then he had known the Baroness for three years and for some reason she thought he had the makings of a good horseman, told everyone he was a natural and made all the facilities of her stables available to him.

The day he met Toni, Minna had arranged a small party and a riding competition by way of showing off his skills to certain Moroccan equestrians. Several members of the Royal Family and a number of rich Europeans were there - among them Toni and her husband Rupert. Radouan and three other boys had competed for prizes and it was obvious to everyone the Baroness had discovered a great talent, someone to be watched and cultivated. He remembered when they were first introduced, Toni had short hair and he thought she was a boy; Rupert's son, or maybe his cute boy friend he wasn't sure, but they exchanged some serious glances. Later when he asked Minna to explain things and discovered Toni was Rupert's wife, he remembered his surprise at the pleasant sensation that rippled through his body and a premonition that somehow Fate had intervened to change his life.

A few months passed and although they had seen each other occasionally and exchanged more glances, nothing had happened. Until one weekend when Rupert asked him to play on his team in a polo match arranged by a cousin of the King. There she was in the stands cheering him on! He became reckless with anxiety and the desire to win and played very well, scoring all but one of the goals. After the match Rupert was so pleased he invited Radouan for a drink with the other players at the Mamounia hotel where it soon became very clear that by encouraging a friendship with Rupert, he might soon be making love to his wife. Yes, he had to admit it. Even though he liked Rupert he had led him on. Still nothing had happened, *Inch Allah*, and it was not his style to push things. But then, later that year just near the end of Ramadan, Toni had appeared alone in Marrakech. One day in the Big Square they met accidentally and she invited him up to her penthouse flat in Hivernage. But as he was trying to observe Ramadan, the month of fasting and abstinence, he could not permit himself to touch her until after the sun had set. How well he remembered the two of them there on the terrace of her penthouse, nervously waiting for the big cannon to go off, signaling the end of the day's fasting and the beginning of love making and

wine. And how, before she returned to England, she told him she'd never been in love before. It was cold, raining most of the time and they had never left her flat...

A mob of package tourists had lined up at Passport Control and he moved to a spot where he could watch them; at the same time keeping an eye on the other exit at the Police Post where VIP's were usually processed.

Again his mind wandered back over the events in his life that led him to be standing there at that moment. If it hadn't been for crazy Nick teaching him English he would never have been able to communicate with Toni. Yes, everyday he should get down on his knees and thank God for sending Nicholas K Brady III into his life. If only Nick could have understood that his heart was big, that he could love many people in many different ways and that possessiveness was too exhausting. Passion and possession the great confusion! For Nick it had ended in exile and self-destruction, a terrible thing, the thought of which made Radouan feel guilty and depressed.

Through the large windows of the terminal he watched as Toni's jet taxied in; unmistakable because of the paint job: maroon with a golden stripe from the cockpit to the tail emblazoned with the logo of her father's company. Last year they had flown in it to Paris for a week - but that was an embarrassing episode he wanted to forget.

Soon she was entering the waiting room preceded by two of her Jack Russell terriers on leashes and a third, the mean one, Gerald, in her arms. How he hated, these sly little creatures. How he wished he had the guts to sell them to a woman he knew in the *souks* who made *maji* with dead dogs.

The package tourists gawked as Toni, escorted by his uncle's best friend, approached him smiling and shook his hand heartily as though greeting someone she didn't know very well. At least she understood the problem, or sensed there might be one. His uncle's friend, the immigration officer in charge of VIP's, embraced him warmly and they exchanged formal greetings and salutations along with searching glances. After some meaningless conversation they walked out to Radouan's car and loaded her luggage and the Jack Russells in the back.

On the drive to town, she began looking him over in a patronizing way as if she'd never seen him before, jabbering on about everything and nothing at the speed of light. Although he sensed she

was far, far away from him, he was always captivated by her alert green eyes and quirky aristocratic behavior, which somehow saved her from ever boring you.

She asked him stupid questions about her flat: had the new fridge arrived, the breakfast room been repainted, not really communicating at all, not even that she was happy to see him!

Then he remembered she was always like this when she'd been in England; speaking to him in the voice she used for servants. And even when she would finally relax, still sometimes her voice would slip back and forth between one reserved for close friends or lovers, and the voice of a chirping mistress politely ordering him around. 'Yes ma'am,' he would sometimes reply, which would bring her down to earth and she would apologize. By then, of course, it was usually too late.

Over the years, however, because he loved her for all the great times they'd had, and understood all the problems she'd faced with her father, he tried to excuse these painful moments. After all, that's the way she'd been brought up, as the grand daughter of an Earl, daughter of a very rich man, and the wife of a peer.

At her flat she noticed several things out of place and groaned, smiled thinly at him and said she supposed he'd been entertaining people there again. 'You do know how I hate your bringing people here,' she winced.

'I don't,' Radouan replied and knew she was picking a fight.

'Why do you refuse to come to London when I am there? Really! If we could just be together all the time it would...'

'You know very well why I have to remain here,' he replied, taking her by the shoulders, 'my family depends on me... many other people too... Moreover, you know I don't like London. I'm a Marrakchi; London is very dull for me. You should also remember when your Oxford was still a swamp and your Bastard William had just come over from France, our Karaouine at Fez was already a great university and in Marrakech the Koutoubia had just been built. Here in Marrakech after six hundred years in the same city... really we are very different from you, and you should understand that to us you Europeans... we think of you as very new people... rough edges ...lived in caves not long ago...'

'Now you're changing the subject,' she whispered irritably and disentangled herself from his hold, 'as you always do when you don't want to face up to something.'

'Face what?'

'That you do bring people into this flat when I am not here... as everyone else in Marrakech does.'

'On the head of my mother, I swear I never do! To me this place is like a *Zaouia*...I honor it!'

'But when I'm gone you see other people... you can't deny that.'

Radouan grinned. 'I'm not a eunuch after all... you know I enjoy myself from time to time when the opportunity arises ... it's like that... I can't help it.'

God, how his evasiveness did irritate her... how true it was, she thought, a woman could be happy with any man as long as she didn't love him. 'I don't want you seeing other women,' she blurted, 'I don't like...'

'*Inch Allah... Inch Allah,*' Radouan nodded coolly.

'No *Inch Allah!* I want promises. I want you to be frank with me.'

'Frank?'

'Open.'

'You want me to be open?'

'Yes.'

He thought for a moment. 'Mmm... OK, I'll be open. My mother has decided that now I'm thirty-six I must get married. She has picked out a girl for me. I am supposed to meet her tomorrow. She's fifteen. Of course, my mother knows nothing about us... maybe... sometimes I think she has heard. What am I supposed to do?'

She listened to him with a smile of resignation and sighed condescendingly. 'Darling, you've been saying things like this for years... when ever you want to hurt me or make me jealous. You know very well, we're going to get married soon. Why do you do it? Who's more important, your mother or me?'

Radouan paced back and forth, hands in his pockets, gazing at the floor. 'My mother, of course, what do you think? With us, mothers pick out the wives for their sons; it's our way of life. My mother is still young and powerful and I can tell you she can be *tres difficile*... I can't go against her. She sees the future. She can heal people and make them sick. She knows *Maji!*' Anyway, my sister Fouzia tells me the girl is fat so I will probably reject her... how can I be seen on the streets with a fat girl? The whole Medina would be laughing at me... even knowing she is inside my house, my friends will laugh behind my back and try to provoke me! It's a huge problem.'

Toni melted and put her arms around him. '*Habibi...* poor darling, don't be depressed... you must certainly turn her down... this girl. Refuse! Just refuse! Then, of course your mother will start all over again, but maybe she'll get bored with the whole project. If you'd come to London with me all this could have been avoided.'

'If you loved me as you say you do you would stay here in Marrakech and not go off traveling all the time. Sometimes I think you have a boyfriend up there in London. You... you have everything... I have nothing! I come from a tribe that was nearly exterminated a century ago by one of the Sultan's Viziers! Exterminated! - Then swindled out of its land and mineral rights. We are powerless and I must stay here and protect my family, my friends and relations who are depending on me.'

'And clients like me!'

He couldn't believe her, 'Yes you of course! But why do you want to call yourself a client when you are my beloved?'

Suddenly overwhelmed by confusion, she broke away from him and paced back and forth in front of the glass doors facing the terrace, 'I think you're awful, I don't think I want to see you any more!' she stammered. Why did returning to him always leave her such a nervous wreck, suspicious and feeling victimized?

Radouan scraped his throat. 'If you want to see yourself that way... as a CLIENT ... well that's your problem... RIGHT NOW I WOULD LIKE TO PUNCH YOU. You know I don't think of you like that. You make friendship sound like a business deal. You... you must stop traveling to London. Every time you come back from there it's like this!'

'This time you know very well that it was unavoidable. My horses and my children are up there.' She sighed with the weary resignation of one who bore the burden of great wealth... How could she explain to him the tyranny of her father, that maverick captain of industry who had driven her sweet mother to drink and suicide? How could she explain how he had traumatized her life?

Radouan shrugged his shoulders. 'You have people there to look after your horses...'

'But they miss me...'

'And your children...' he laughed cynically, 'I suppose you think they miss you. Now they are away at school and messed up you're worried, but you've never been much of a mother to them so what do

you expect? You should stop interfering in their lives... as for the horses you can easily bring them down here.'

'Bring them here?'

'Yes why not? Your horses are not at school! You can bring them here. On the coast, north of Rabat near Larache, they keep many horses, you know that.'

'Would you live with me in this flat then?'

He studied her for a long time, 'Are you crazy? If this were London would you have me livin' in some flat with you? What would your friends say?'

'Of course not, you'd have a flat of your own.'

'See... there's your racism again: you think I can live with you, unmarried, here in Marrakech, but in London I would have to live elsewhere.'

'Oh God! - Then I suppose we can never live together... is that what you're saying? Tell me... WHY HAVE I GONE THROUGH THIS BLOODY DIVORCE WITH RUPERT IF WE ARE NOT GOING TO GET MARRIED AND LIVE TOGETHER?'

'I don't know why you got your bloody divorce. Why did you? I never told you to get one.'

'That's a lie and you know it! For years now you have been after me to leave Rupert.'

'I never said get a divorce.'

'No, of course you're NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR ANYTHING... always blameless... when in fact you engineered the whole affair... little by little you did, made fun of poor Rupert... put him down until...'

'Until what?'

'Oh I don't know, until I couldn't stand him any more. I guess.'

'And..?' Radouan asked menacingly.

'And then suddenly he became your best friend... your buddy.'

'We are team mates tha's all...' Radouan replied.

'Stop drawling like that. You know how I hate it! PLEASE, *Habibi*, please hold me in your arms. I love you. PLEASE, do let's stop talking like this and go to bed.'

Radouan tilted his head and gazed at her, 'Not tonight.'

'NOT TONIGHT!' she shouted, her eyes narrowing, 'Oh! You mean I've come all this way to be with you and now you're leaving... I won't have it!

'My father is very sick, I only left him to come and meet you... now I must return to my house and carry him up to the roof and sit with him...'

'I've heard that one before...' she said defiantly.'

'You're tired, you need sleep too.'

'I need YOU, not sleep. You do know that. You've got something cooking I can feel it... off on some wanking expedition I'm sure'

'A crow in a bush, you: wauk, wauk, wauk...' He shouted at her and cracked his knuckles, 'Can't you see I'm trying to control myself? I'm leaving now before I punch you... because I love you and I don't want to hurt you. Good night.'

I won't allow it...' she screamed 'Radi, please!'

Radouan reached the door, she lurched after him 'I'll see you tomorrow at the Mamounia, lunch...1:30...'

'Tyrant, she rasped dismissively, tyrant, tyrant!'

'*Brid min zouk jouatt*, Cold as a fisherman's ass,' he growled and wrenching the door shut, locked it and escaped down the stairway. Why was she always like this with him, always determined to provoke him? Hadn't he looked forward all day to seeing her? Then she had to spoil it by accusing him of entertaining his friends in her flat; when the only times he went there were to get AWAY from his friends ... his responsibilities... to rest and be alone and yes... to think of her and dream.

8

Outside on the street, Radouan climbed into his car and headed for his father's house in Bab Dukala. Just inside the big gate, however, he accelerated on a short cut to the parking lot near the Prefecture on *Riad Zitoun Jdid* and proceeded on foot to the house of the dead poet. Chaiir al Hamra.

In the courtyard, the gnarled old lemon tree cast eerie shadows on the floor tiles. Standing there mopping his forehead, he

unbuttoned his shirt and breathed deeply, his muscles relaxed and the waves of bitterness subsided. Emerging from the shadows, the cat sidled up to him, purring loudly, followed by the smiling eyes of Mohktar who embraced him warmly, helped him out of his clothes, produced a small stool and buckets of water and began to scrub him.

Mokhtar, 'The Chosen One'; orphaned when his family was swept away in a flash flood near their mountain village a few years back. Radouan had brought him to this old house, which he'd secretly purchased a few months back and locked him up here, bringing him groceries and supplies until he was fit enough to handle himself.

When he was finished, Mokhtar doused Radouan with buckets of cool water, dried him with a towel and brought a fresh pair of shorts. Radouan turned off his cell phone; they spread out a carpet under the lemon tree and made love. Afterwards, gazing up at the moon while Mohktar slept in his arms, Radouan thought about jealousy, and asked himself why he was keeping Mokhtar locked up. Could it mean he was jealous of him, could it mean he was in love? Impossible because he was not a *Luhah*! It was for the orphan's own protection he was keeping Mokhtar under lock and key.

The following morning when Mokhtar brought him coffee and some barley bread, he sat down and told Radouan he would like to go out and make money.

'Pas encore,' Radouan said tenderly.

Mokhtar pouted.

'Makin' some money means sellin' your self to the highest bidder," Radouan continued. "I know... and you are right, believe me, you could make a fortune. But I won't allow it. You're too young and it's too dangerous out there for a country boy like you... in a few years you would be dead... Trus' me, I will see what I can do for you. I have a friend, a kind old lady who lives in a *Ksar* off the route d'Ouarzazate... known her since I was your age. She might let you work there and be sure the other servants didn't trouble you. I will speak to her. You could also be my eyes and ears out there. She is old and sick... no tellin' what tricks people may be playin' on her when I'm not around... There is an old servant out there, A'hmed who swindles her daily, and there is a new one Zouheir who needs watching. I try to protect her but I'm a busy guy. You could help me by watchin' and listenin'. Think about it and I will speak to her...'

'*Waha Siddi*,' Mokhtar nodded dutifully.

'Do not worry... be patient... you have your life before you... I want it to be a good life! Be happy for now that you have food in your stomach... jus' look how much weight you've gained... and nice music... and someone like me to look after you.'

Mokhtar kissed Radouan's hands impulsively 'I will wait...' he whispered, 'you saved my life... you are my mother, my father, and my friend... I will always love you.'

The boy's declaration unnerved him. They embraced. The boy kissed him hungrily and Radouan wished he could skip lunch with Toni.

9

It was April 14, 1998, a date he would never forget. Outside, the heat was intense, the traffic horrible and as he made his way to Bab Dukala he ground his teeth and remembered those lines of Mafuz that Minna had been quoting.

Arriving finally at his father's house, he avoided his mother, changed into his best linen suit, donned a pair of new dark glasses and was only a few minutes late as he strode through the lobby of the Mamounia to the restaurant where he found Toni waiting for him her eyes hidden behind dark glasses beneath a wide brimmed Panama.

'Sorry about last night,' she murmured, 'I don't know what... it was all my fault what got into me... when I'm tired you know you were right I was exhausted and I've decided you are also right about my getting out of England. Now my Father is gone I can finally pull up stakes and leave... bring my horses down here. You can have my flat. I have some land near Minna's place, quite a large piece... I'll build a house out there.' She rambled on.

Radouan who disliked sudden changes found her exuberant mood disturbing. 'Pull up stakes,' he asked, buying time, 'what does it mean...pull up stakes?'

Toni cocked her head, 'I suppose it means pulling up the stakes that hold your tent up and moving on. British Army slang I reckon or Bedoui. What do you think of my plan?'

'I couldn't live in your flat; it's too exposed... the guardian, the concierge, and the maids - all gossips. I have to live in the Medina somewhere, maybe some old *Riad* I could fix up.'

'What about the country then, you could certainly live out there, we'll build a special *riad* for you and your friends...'

'Now you're jokin' me.'

'But I'm not, I'm serious.'

'Yes, of course, I could live like that, but I have responsibilities, people to look after every day here in Marrakech...'

'Couldn't you commute?'

'Forty-five minutes drive.' Radouan fanned away the smoke from her cigarette. 'Can't you stop smokin'? In restaurants it's disgusting and very bad for you.' He stubbed out her cigarette. 'You're beginning to smell like an ashtray... what did you do this morning?'

'I got up rather early,' she replied, angry at him for harping on her smoking habit, '...played a few rounds of golf. Then I came back here and worked out in the gym, had a sauna and massage... they miss you at the gym, said to say hello.'

'Who said to say hello?'

'The usual bunch... moaning and groaning...'

'You're attracted to that trainer Boujemaa... but you'll be disappointed, he's a *Louat*... swims on the other shore.'

'Boujemaa doesn't interest me at all.'

'Then it must be Lahcen. You're always starin' at him.'

'Everyone does stare at him and why not, he's got a spectacular body and adores being stared at...so do you.'

'Now you're provokin' me, *habibti*.'

'I'm NOT provoking you, just telling you the truth. Lahcen has a beautiful body... you have a beautiful body and you both like to be admired... why not?'

'You must not look at Lahcen' Radouan whispered, 'absolutely I forbid it! Returnin' Lahcen's gaze, to him it's the same as lettin' him fuck you... believe me to him it's the same! His mind is like that, very antique, very primitive. You must keep your eyes lowered when you're around him. He's *Saharoui*... he has *maji*... If you ever brought him home you would have huge problems...'

Toni took off her dark glasses and stared at him. 'Really, darling! Do you think I'm mad! Of course I wouldn't bring him home.'

'Oh... but there are many other places you could take him I'm sure. I forbid... I absolutely forbid you to see him again; you must change gyms.'

'But I like the gym here,' she said calmly watching his flashing eyes. How handsome he was when she teased him and he became angry. 'It's one of my favorite gyms in the world,' she replied, 'in one breath you're telling me you're going to get married, in the next that I have to change gyms because I might... just might... happen to glance at Lahcen. Soon you'll be telling me you're too busy to see me. If you think I'm going to sit around waiting for you like some veiled concubine,' she shrugged and lit another cigarette, 'you're seriously mistaken.'

'If I ever catch you with Lahcen,' Radouan rasped menacingly, 'I will kill both of you or arrange for him to disappear from Marrakech forever. You think I'm kidding? Jus' try. Try and see what happens... I will make a huge scandal I can tell you... huge! And put out that cigarette immediately... you don't even see that you've lit another one... put it out!'

'I suppose I should feel flattered you care so much about my health,' she stared at him and slowly ground out her cigarette in an ashtray.

'Yes, of course you should. You should be happy to have me for even a few hours a day... or a night. You don't understand how lucky you are.'

'Oh but I do... I know.'

'I don't think you do, talkin' about Lahcen that way. He's nothing... he's *kharia*.'

As they argued and baited each other a striking young woman with honey colored hair sauntered in on the arm of an older man in a rumpled linen suit. Soon they were seated at a nearby table; positioned in such a way that the young woman could stare at Radouan while talking with her luncheon partner and Radouan could return her glance over Toni's left shoulder.

And stare she did, convincing Radouan that either she must have seen him before somewhere, or she was interested in him and prepared to receive his advances.

Toni toyed with her food and went on about the house she planned to build. The entrance would be Sa'diyan, the courtyard

paved with mosaic tiles from Fez, both she and Radouan would have separate quarters with courtyards and pools, and the stables would be copied from the ruins at Meknes.

Finally Radouan interrupted her.

'Eat, you must eat. All you do is sit there pushin' your food from one side of your plate to the other, and bahhing like a sheep. You think to be thin is attractive but for us it is not. You've lost weight. It's not healthy and when so many people are hungry you must not waste food.'

'Someone will eat it, I'm sure.' she smiled grimly, 'I had one of those power drinks after my work out. Really, I'm not very hungry.' She reached in her handbag and found another cigarette.

'I forbid you to smoke that cigarette.' Radouan hissed. 'Already you have had two cigarettes since we sat down... take it out of your mouth at once.'

'Everyone in this country smokes,' Toni observed defiantly, 'It's one of the reasons I like it here... even in London now they're trying to make all these rules against it... rules, rules and more rules!'

'In this the Americans and the English, they are very wise. In America it is not allowed to smoke in a restaurant... that's good... I like it.'

'Americans are extremists...'

'Jus' put it away, s'il vous plait... relax and eat your food.' He was looking past her now, just past her left ear, focusing on the honey haired blonde who was now caressing her thigh beneath the tablecloth, sipping a martini and watching him. It was obvious she wanted to do something, but how? *Inch Allah!*

Just as he had mentally put his fate into God's hands, Toni replaced her cigarette in her handbag and got up.

'Where are you going?' Radouan protested. 'Sit down!'

'I'm going home... not really all that hungry. I want to smoke a cigarette peacefully and have a long nap.'

Exasperated, yet excited that God's will had worked so fast, Radouan walked her out though the lobby and put her in a taxi.

'Call me around seven or just come and wake me up,' she said.

'Order supper for us then, have a good snooze and try not to smoke. I'll see you around nine.' He kissed her on both cheeks and waved as the cab pulled away.

Back at his table, Radouan noted the expression of relief on the blonde's face as he sat down again. Her luncheon companion, now

quite drunk, was experiencing difficulties with his soup. The blonde looked disgusted and glanced furtively in Radouan's direction. Taking out his cell phone, he pretended to talk while staring steadily at her. Slowly she rose, made excuses to her companion, and went off toward the rest rooms. Her walk left the waiters spellbound. Still talking on his phone, Radouan fumbled in his wallet, scribbled something, counted to a hundred, walked through the lobby and positioned himself at the entrance to the ladies room. When she came out, he smiled and handed her his card on which he had written in French, English and Spanish the following message, 'Call this number as soon as you can. I want to see you!'

10

The afternoon slipped by. He drove over to the Planet Club gym and worked out, his cell phone beside him, waiting for a call from the blonde that never came. Was she spending the afternoon thinking of him while that old man slobbered over her?

After working out, he walked home, looked in on his mother and father, changed out of his suit into a light *Gandoura*, and stopped by the *Riad* where he met his friend Prospero who was just leaving. They embraced. '*Salaam Alaykoum*' '*Alaykoum Salaam*' '*Labas*' '*Hamdu'lah.*'

'You're back. How did your examinations go... congratulations?' Radouan said.

'Not finished yet.' Pero sighed, a twinge of concern on his studious but handsome face. 'I'll know more in a few weeks, you can congratulate me then... but listen, we have to do something about Fouzia... she's threatening to poison Nick and bury him in the courtyard. Can you imagine what would happen?'

'I know... She's going crazy. I spoke to her the other night but... he's too much for her...we'll jus'...'

'They're making each other crazy.'

'He's constantly provokin' her...'

'But who else is there to look after him?'

'There's our friend Abel's sister, she knows about Nick.'

'Abel's sister is too tender...Nick would destroy her...we need someone solid and strong, some country girl.'

Radouan smiled broadly. 'My wife to be!'

'Your wife to be?' Pero stared hard at him. 'You're joking!' 'Or maybe you're not... What's up?'

'My mother again...' Radouan mumbled, 'but this time it's serious... she's decided on a certain young girl, only fifteen... R'hamna, one of us. I haven't seen her yet but Fouzia has... says she's very plain.'

'But could you bring her to this ruin? Wouldn't her family object?'

'Her family is poor. She has five other sisters and they will be happy to have someone feeding her.'

'So when do you see her?'

'Tomorrow... tomorrow we go for a formal visit...I hope they will not have the *L'adoul* there... I want to delay as long as possible but maybe I shouldn't. Meanwhile, I want to start making some repairs here. You think your family would sell me this place?'

'Yes, of course... happy to get rid of it... you have the money to buy it?'

'Maybe... maybe someone will gift it to me for a wedding present... *Inch Allah*.'

'Just don't fix it up too much then... I know my father, if it looks better than he remembers, he'll want more money.'

'We could move in as it is no problem... if her family comes to visit us we can hide Nick in the *Douiriya*... in the cellar. Remember, we hid him there before when his wife sent those spies... I'm just coming to sit with him for awhile, but I'm gonna be busy tonight. Could you come back and keep Fouzia company? I don't like to leave her alone with him when she's so stressed out.'

'In fact I have no place to go,' Prospero smiled, 'I'll just stay here and watch TV with him until he goes to sleep, then I'll study... my last examination is next week.'

'Soon you'll be a real Avocat! *Mabrouk!* Congratulations.'

'Thanks. All I need now are some clients.'

Radouan heaved a deep sigh 'Me... I think I'm trying to do too much at once... but things are workin' out. Where's Fouzia.'

'In her room.'

'And Nick?'

‘On his throne,’ Pero laughed. ‘I saw one for sale cheap the other day so I bought it for him... thought maybe he’d be happier if he could sit on something like that.’

Radouan entered the courtyard, circled the weed choked garden and found Nick slumped on his new - used throne, his large watery eyes peering out cautiously from beneath the tattered blankets and scraps of old clothing.

A muffled voice rasped from underneath. ‘Painful it is to be born... will we also forget the pain of death? Death, the destroyer of delight...’

‘Why are you talking this way again?’

Nick threw off his blankets. ‘Because I’ve decided definitely that I must leave this place; it’s beginning to spook me. You are not what you seem to be. There’s something inside you, something dangerous for me... some kind of *djinn* locked up inside you that wants to break out... they do, you know, want to break out. I mean... I feel this creature is after me... not that it’s your fault... you’re always you, you never change. It’s the *djinn* which inhabits you who hates me! Is that crazy?’

Radouan groaned. ‘Ah... again you plunge the dagger in my heart and twist it. Believe me there is no reason for you to think like this. We are friends, old friends... there is no *djinn* inside me’

‘You won’t admit it will you... you refuse to believe.’

Radouan sat down beside him and spoke gently, ‘There is no way... no reason for you to think of these things... your mind has been fucked up by the *Ch’dak J’mel* but you are getting better. Believe me, you are... you are better than you were...’ He gestured at the courtyard. ‘You need exercise. This garden, like your mind, it is filled with thorns and weeds. But the old trees give shade and they would look very *zween* if someone would jus’ trim them up. Think of all the repairs that we need to make here. It’s time you interested yourself in these things. Did you say anything to Fouzia about dying?’

‘Why are you here?’

‘To see you, *habibi*... I’m on my way to sit with my father.’

‘I wish you would sit with ME from time to time... you never come anymore... some nights it gets very... you know thick with spirits wailing and crying... some terrible things must have happened here... terrible and bizarre. If I do some work will you try to spend nights here from time to time?’

'Yes, of course, but right now my life it's *bezzaf*... we need money. I must find it to keep us all alive.'

'And tonight after sitting with your father I suppose you will be off somewhere making someone feel like giving you lots of money?'

Radouan tried to change the subject, 'I'm supposed to get married soon.'

'What does that mean? Who's the unlucky creature?'

'One my mother has picked out.'

'Ah ha, the witch... a regular Jocasta... And what about that English woman you've been seeing for years, Toni... whatever she's called?'

'What about her?' Radouan said, 'She's an old friend.'

'Ah yes, like me I suppose, disposable, and your mother's choice?'

'I haven't seen her yet but Fouzia has. If I marry her I may bring her here to live, she will be serving you. We will all live here together.'

'Torture, *habibi*... more torture,' Nick rasped. 'Can't you see this is an idea put into your head by that *djinn*...? I'm sure your young wife would imprison me somewhere in the *Douiriya*... I can see it happening. You say Fouzia has seen this woman?'

Radouan looked away, embarrassed, 'She is not really a woman, she's only fifteen.'

'FIFTEEN!'

'Fouzia says she's very plain and somewhat fat... a strong good humored country girl, with rosy cheeks - like a young cow!'

'Heifer.'

'What you say?'

'HEIFER, HEIFER... a heifer is a young cow... lo, the Goddess, yes maybe it's her!'

'I thought you said *Kafir*...she is not that, she is a good Muslim, she can recite the whole of the *Qur'an*.'

'Why do I always feel so rotten when you come here these days?'

'Because you're always sayin' mean things to me... then you feel sorry and feel rotten...that's why.'

'Where is Prospero ... I thought I heard his voice?'

'You didn't see him? He was just here. I met him at the door, he's here on business for his family but he's going to spend the night with you.'

'You think they'll ever come and claim this place...his family?'

'No.'

'How can that be? Surely they won't just leave it.'

'They have many other properties. They're running away from this place because they want to be modern.'

'Lucky for us.'

'Don't worry, in the near future someone's gonna buy it for me... soon it will be ours, yours and mine, I promise you.'

Nick is overwhelmed. 'You're OUTRAGEOUS, you really are!'

Radouan stared proudly at him. 'You think so? Since before we first met I've been supportin' myself, you know... I'm a very practical guy. I want you to work on this garden. I will give Fouzia some money. She will get you everything you need. Start slowly, *chouia, chouia*. Pull up the weeds and trim the trees. As your energy comes back you will be able to work harder and harder. You're not old. You act old but you're not. Dig up the soil in the garden, dig deeply; there may be treasure under there. I will bring exotic plants and we will make a fountain... it's always good to hear water splashing and we can have birds and maybe a monkey or two. What do you say?'

'*Inch Allah*. My energy is low but I'll try.'

On the way to his car Radouan telephoned Toni.

'You're late!' she said anxiously, 'You said you'd call at seven and it's already nine.'

'You said I'd call at seven. I said nine. What are you doin'?'

'I'm in my bath.'

'See... you aren't ready at all. I've been with my family. Problems. Just now gettin' in my car...'

Tooling out through Bab Dukala, Radouan made a left toward Toni's place in Hivernage. A few minutes later, just as he pulled up in front of her building, his phone beeped.

'Hello, is this Radouan?' A seductive female voice was speaking French.

'Yes, who are you?'

'I am Delphine, Delphine Benne. You gave me your card at lunch.'

'Yes,' Radouan replied, trying to control his excitement, 'because I want to see you, where are you?'

'At Hotel Maison Arabe.'

'Too bad. I was just nearby. Now I'm in my car on the other side of town going to see a client. Can I come over later?'

'How much later?'

'Three hours...maybe less.'

'I have to work tomorrow; I'm a model on a shoot. I must go to work very early tomorrow morning... the light you know...' Her voice drifted away to a whisper.

'Then sleep now and I'll come very early in the morning. What time do you go to work?'

'Half past eight.'

'Then I'll be there at five exactly, OK? If you go to sleep right now that will give you eight hours.'

'You're sure you can't come right now? We could have dinner together.'

'Believe me, I would really like to come right now, you can't imagine, but I can't. This client I'm about to see is very difficult and I'm already an hour late. Let me come at five.'

There was a long pause. He thought she'd hung up. 'OK,' she said at last, 'I'll set my alarm.'

'Tell the boys at the desk that you're expecting me. Write it out... my name... just as it appears on the card that I gave you. Tell them I'm working with the camera crew and will be coming to wake you up and prepare you for your shoot.'

'You'll really come?'

'Of course, jus' wait and see.'

'You won't be late, will you?' she said sleepily, 'Everyone here seems to be late...'

'I'm never late,' he replied.

She clicked off. As he got out of his car Radouan discovered her voice had excited him mightily. All the better for Toni he thought as he ascended in the elevator to her flat where he found her in a robe relaxing on the terrace. He bent over, kissed her and massaged her shoulders. 'I was sittin' with my father and fell asleep... sorry.'

'You look very *zween* tonight in your white *gandoura* ... almost angelic. What a pity we aren't the same age. I'd give you a run for your money.'

'Runfoymoney; what's THAT... some disease?'

'It means I'd make you very jealous.' Toni sighed, 'Instead you make me jealous... But I've concluded that in fact I'm not really jealous of you as I once was, as a lover I mean... no, it's something worse and much more basic... its because you're in your prime and I'm not, not any more. Isn't that shameful? I have to confess it... I mean really I'm ashamed of myself for even thinking that way.'

'What does "inyoprime" mean?'

'Oh gosh...' Toni looked puzzled, 'well it means... fit... When you walk down the street, or anywhere, people notice you, stop and stare, smile across rooms at you. In the big square young men come up and brush against your thigh. I remember when we first met; I had that... the power to attract. I know what it's like and I know I don't have it any more. But when I'm with you, *habibi*, I feel it again and I guess I'm jealous of your life here in this marvelous old city because mine is so boring.'

'Strangers in the night...' Radouan crooned embarrassed by her confession... 'it's so enchantin', lovers at first sight exchangin' glances... da da da da da'.

She smiled up at him, 'Falcon eyes... yes you are... a hunter high on the chase... admit it!'

'Wonderin' in the night what were the chances... da da da da da... Yes, you're right... In another age I would have dressed in women's clothing, everything covered but my eyes... entered the Sultan's harem and made love to his wives.' He knelt down and gazed at her thoughtfully, 'It used to happen like that, believe me. But if we were the same age, you know we'd be fightin' all the time... as it is you are a little older, but wiser and kinder than I am. Don't think I'm not grateful for all the ways you've helped me out '*bibt*i, I jus' can't say it most of the time... you've taught me alot... like when you took me to Paris.'

Toni smiled at him fondly. 'You went mad in Paris, I couldn't believe it.'

Radouan frowned, 'You were afraid someone who knew you might see us together.'

'Just as you are afraid someone will see us here together in Marrakech.'

'I'm not afraid! It's impossible for me to be afraid of anything. It's for your own protection that I don't like to be seen with you. Guys would know you're seeing me, that maybe you like Arabs, and start comin' on to you... playin' tricks on you...swindling or blackmailing you.'

'Why?'

'Out of jealousy, of course, because you're famous! Believe me, until yesterday I never knew how famous you are...'

'Who told you I'm famous, that's ridiculous?'

'Never mind, I know.'

'I suppose you saw something in one of those tabloids,' she sighed, 'Listen, appearing in there is not being famous, it's infamous... scandalous.'

'Infamous?'

'Famously bad...notorious!'

Radouan hugged her 'Yes, you are one bad, bad girl. You PLAYGIRL!'

'If I'm a playgirl then you are a playboy!'

Radouan laughed. 'No, no, me no playboy me highly skilled worker! Jus' because sometimes I enjoy my work doesn't mean I am playboy. I don't play around. You forget how many people depend on me.'

'Never ever do I forget that... believe me.'

'But we are more alike than we are different, *habibati*.' He held her hand. 'Both of us we love the night... all those red evenings together in strange places... prowling like the cats... late at night to walk through the derbs and see everything that's happening... explore and do crazy things... you liked that. I know it.'

'That's what I miss,' she whispered, 'Does it mean one is getting old... or are the times changing?'

'Maybe we should move to a country where no one knows us... maybe Argentina or Mexico.'

She shook her head thoughtfully. 'You know you would never leave Marrakech... We'll take long vacations and come and go as we

please but we must make our base here.... Are you hungry? I had some brochettes sent over from Mamounia, they're in the oven.'

'Your oven, *habibti*... I wanna roast my brochette in your oven... look...'

'Are you spending the night?' she said, ignoring his gesture.

'Of course...why would I come to see you at this hour if I wasn't spending the night?'

'Sometimes you do leave in the middle of the night.'

'Sometimes I have important things to do, my darling... like tomorrow morning I must go to the Mosque very early to pray, and before that to *Hamam* to purify myself. So I must get up by four thirty or five. Come, let's... I'm not hungry let's go to bed... all this yak yak... I wanna make love and sleep with you in my arms. Come!'

12

For the past three days, the chanting of the *muezzin's* calling Believers to arise and pray, had awakened Delphine around four in the morning.

'Just as well,' she murmured to herself, stroking her breasts and wondering whether this Radouan would show up.

Slipping out of bed, she showered, donned a terry cloth robe, brushed out her long honey colored hair and sat down to apply minimal make up. Make up and wake up, yes... Wake Up! WOAH! What was she doing examining her lips and her eyes in the mirror when...what was it about him?

She'd tempted him there in the restaurant, she knew it, but really it was his companion, Lady Antonia Howard, who had interested her, spotted her right away. And when her boyfriend stared back at her and rubbed his knees under the table... Was she insane? Calling him...What a crazy thing to do? Was it his eyes, so bright, so dark? Or was it his mouth with that strange smile?

All afternoon she'd been trying to recapture him in her mind's eye but could not; yet she could not forget him either - which was why

she had finally telephoned him she supposed. The feelings he had aroused in her were strong and confirmed her intuition that they were destined to meet... or something. She could have chosen not to go to the ladies room but she had to face it; she went hoping he would follow her.

And now, how can she explain to him that she can't do anything until her shoot is over? Three more days: seven pages in Vogue, French, English and American Vogue and she has to look good, look perfect, not tired and fucked up! If all went well, soon she would be ascending the staircase of fame and fortune to the realm of super models - quite a different future than the one which faced her when she was studying Psychology at the University of Toulouse. Yes, she has to look great because this is her big chance, not let her passions interfere just because some fabulous looking guy wanted... but what did he want?

Her travel clock ticked away. She calmed herself by straightening up her room. Then just before five, there was a soft knock on the door, she counted to twenty, opened it a crack and saw a saint in a long white robe standing there in the dark, the whites of his eyes shining.

She stood aside. Radouan ambled in, and casually brushing past her, had checked out her suite. Then he turned and they fell into each other's arms.

'I have to be out of here looking great by seven thirty', she whispered.

'Let's not waste any time then.' Radouan purred and kissed her.

'Really, I think I have to put off doing anything with you until my shoot is over.' she said, 'I have to look rested.'

'How long will that be?'

'Three days, I'm afraid.'

'Three days!' He laughed softly. 'What are you talking about? In three days the world could end! *Inch Allah!* We never know. But don't worry, I will see you are ready and believe me your photographs will be the best of your career...you'll see.'

Rehearsing this moment since he first saw her, he slid his hand down her back. '*Zouk zween, ouridoo nahoui, zappi amer bil mani* he whispered in Arabic. 'You want it, I know it.'

'Really, you have to leave right now and come back in three days,' she replied nervously, 'maybe you'd like a drink at the mini bar?'

'On the head of my mother,' he whispered hoarsely, 'believe me, if I leave you now I will never come back!'

'That's your decision, not mine; she tried to smile; 'only three days, it's not a lifetime... Right now I mustn't look tired, like I've just been fucked or something... the cameras, you can't fool them.'

'What is your age?'

'Twenty four.'

'In two hours you will look eighteen again.'

'That's what you say. Please, you're just making this harder.'

Although trembling with anger, Radouan released her and walked to the door. 'You're makin' a big mistake,' he said. 'Why did you call me back? Why did you let me come here? You know we're fated to meet, you know that, now you're spoiling everything.'

13

Walking briskly to the *Hamam* at Bab Dukala, Radouan had a quick bath, went to the Mosque to pray that he would see Delphine again, and tried to obliterate the anger and remorse he felt at the way she had treated him. 'French women were never satisfied', his friend J.W. once said, 'when they say yes, they mean no, and when they say no they usually mean yes!'

After praying he picked up some croissants and drove to Toni's place where he quietly let himself in, prepared some fresh orange juice and coffee and brought it in to her. 'You're awake.' he smiled, setting down the tray.

Toni made a face. 'Where were you? I woke up at six thirty and you weren't here?'

'I told you last night I had to go to Mosque... special day.'

'Kiss me,' she said lazily.

Radouan kicked off his *babouches*, threw off his *gandoura* and crawled in bed. Even though he had bathed and prayed, he was still excited from his encounter with Delphine. Certain juices had accumulated that had to come out; otherwise, all day long he would

be nervous and that would not be good because in two hours he was meeting his mother and going to see his bride to be, Hafida!

In bed, he kissed Toni passionately for almost an hour and finally guided her hand to his *zahp*. She went wild; they fell off the bed and finished on the floor. When she surrendered to him like that she became the person he really loved. '*Oridouka*,' he whispered softly. '*Oheepouka, Antajouka*.'

'*Waha sidi*,' she smiled up at him.

'We've been fighting too much'... I wanted to show you how much I really love you.'

Toni sighed and looked around the room. '*Habibi*... look at this mess, the breakfast tray fell off... the orange juice.'

'Don' worry, I'll get you more orange juice. What will you do today?'

'I have golf at Amelkis, then a work out at the gym... Shall we lunch here?'

'As you like, but attention, '*bibt!* Remember what I said about Lahcen: if I ever catch you together... I'm serious. Staring is the same as...'

'You've said all that before,' she smiled '... stop obsessing... let's not spoil such a glorious morning.'

'Promise me you won't look at him.'

'I promise, now what about lunch?'

'Really I should have lunch with my family, it's Friday... but I'll try and get out of it. Call me around midday to be sure. I have some papers to file with the Municipality.'

'I'll be working out then.'

'That is why I want you to call me. I want Lahcen to hear you speaking to me. And what about tonight?'

'I'm dining at Trattoria with an architect from Casablanca... you must join us or come by.'

'Why?'

'To discuss plans for our country house, of course...'

'Who is this architect... how did you meet him?'

'His name is Ben' Sleem... something... I've forgotten his name. I'll have to call the people who recommended him....'

'Attention!'

'Attention to what?'

'You must be careful of these architects, they're all swindlers... jus' pay attention and don't commit yourself until we talk it over...'

there will be negotiations... I know all their tricks. Where did you say you were meeting him?’

‘Trattoria in Gueliz, I should think... why?’

‘I’ll probably have to sit with my father for some time. They say it makes him feel better. We don’t talk much, jus’ sit... sometimes I hold his hand... sometimes I massage him. I should be back here by midnight. You won’t bring your architect back here will you?’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because he shouldn’t know about me. If you’re going to negotiate with him it must look like you are doing it, not me. If he happened to meet me here and saw this place... your Picassos, the Matisses... the price would go way up.’

14

Living among foreigners most of his life had made Radouan punctual. No one else in his family was, so of course when he arrived, no one was ready and he had plenty of time to change from his *gandoura* into a suit; not one of his best suits to be sure, but one that would fit the occasion: meeting ‘The Keeper’. Because his mother thought marriage would stabilize him. Ha! As if marriage to a fifteen year old girl who recited the *Qur’an* night and day was going to do that! He too could recite the *Qur’an*. After they were married, would she want to sit around reciting *Qur’an* all the time?

And now like a meteor falling from the sky, Delphine had entered his life and he was certain he would see her again. *Inch Allah*. He had to find out where her shoot was taking place and go there, or return to her hotel that evening and wait for her. He repeated her name as he knotted his tie and selected a pair of shoes - not his best ones as he would probably be walking through the dirty rock filled lanes of Ain-itti, a poor quarter outside the Medina where ‘The Keeper’ lived - Hafida Senhaji, Senhaji being her family name. An illustrious R’hamna family now lost in the rubble of a suburban

slum. According to the *Sharia*, if a family arranged a marriage for a son, they bore the responsibility for what happened. Radouan closed his eyes, 'So be it,' he muttered, '*Inch Allah.*'

Downstairs, his mother and Hamid, the eldest of his four younger brothers, and his sisters Majada and Salwa were waiting. Another brother, Ali, had gone to get a taxi for them at the end of the lane.

His mother handed him the *Kalb*. He'd forgotten about the *Kalb*! Now he would have to carry this two and a half kilo column of sugar, like a big white *zahp*, past the neighborhood coffee houses past all the guys sitting there who had known him all his life. And they'd be gossiping and cracking jokes at his expense, mouthing phrases of malediction, laughing at his marriage to this poor fat girl! It was embarrassing

Continuing to repeat Delphine's name, he strode down the *derb* carrying the *Kalb* out into the busy square just inside the big gate, and after a twenty minute drive they arrived at the area where Hafida lived.

Making their way through the rutted lanes they came to a small unpainted cement house. It was hot. In his dark suit Radouan was soon sweating. Hafida's parents came out and greeted them. The father was gone on *kif* and the mother looked determined. In the open door behind them Hafida appeared. She was wearing a pale yellow viscose caftan and Hermes knock-off scarf. The way she lounged against the door- jamb observing them with her large eyes, one finger poised on her lower lip amused him. She was not as cow-like as Fouzia had said and really, the way the material of her caftan clung to her strong young body excited him. The face was plain: rosy cheeks, an unlined brow, but the smile was something else.

Hafida! The Keeper - what did it really mean? He moved toward her and handed her the *Kalb*; the sweet *zahp* that someday she might get. Hafida lowered her eyes, accepted it, and retreated inside where she had prepared sweet meats and tea. This was her final examination and every nuance of her manner, every morsel of her sweet meats, and every sip of tea would be scrutinized and evaluated.

Personally, Radouan would have welcomed a strong Jack Daniel's on the rocks.

His mother talked quietly with Hafida's mother and father about when the *L'adoul* would be called, and where the ceremony would

take place. Or should they be modern and go to the *L'adoul's* office? Who would decide about the twelve witnesses? How much money would be in the *Dot*, the bride-price which Radouan must bring to her family? How much would be held in reserve as a cushion for her in case of divorce? Who would read the *Fatiha* before Radouan and Hafida exchanged rings; and who would give the wedding party and where?

As Hafida's family, the Senhajis, were nearly destitute, even though they claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammed through their uncle, they had little leverage. Yet all through the tea ceremony they went on talking and bargaining with his mother, hinting artfully that although now they were poor, their lineage was very strong and should be respected as bringing good luck.

No one listened to what anyone else said.

Happily, Hafida's brothers and sisters came out of hiding and soon everyone was laughing and getting to know each other. Radouan relaxed and began to enjoy himself and although his head was modestly lowered, he followed Hafida's movements furtively with his eyes. How quick she was with her hands, how sumptuous her young thighs as they moved under her caftan.

Her parents were telling his mother they had already spoken to a *L'adoul* and his partner who were ready to come to their house on the next full moon - of course the ceremony would take place right there in Ain-itti, why not?

It was what Radouan had expected. Every girl's family wanted the formalities with the *L'adoul*, which according to Islamic custom unites a man and woman in marriage, to be conducted as soon as possible after this first meeting. Before the man has time to think, before he gets drunk, changes his mind, finds a different girl or runs away. Fortunately, for once, his mother was vague and said she would have to discuss the matter with her husband before things could be finalized.

Radouan watched as Hafida bent over and poured tea, presenting her beautiful young *zouk* to him in a provocative way. Driven by his practical nature, however, he wondered how much she must eat and tried to calculate the cost of feeding her for the rest of her life. When she began producing children regularly, life would get expensive. Would he be able to afford her? How would he feed everyone?

On the other hand, a plain girl like this could be a great asset. He would make love to her that she would never forget, and she would always be waiting for him no matter what he did or how long he stayed away. Yet there was something strange about her too: her mouth with that sly smile... why? And she seemed too relaxed, too confident for her age. Although he was mightily aroused, the longer he observed her the more deeply suspicious he became. Something about her was really strange. Was his mother involving him in a marriage with one of her young acolytes in *Maji*? He reminded himself to ask his mother how long she had known this girl.

By then, it was almost twelve-thirty. Radouan got up and moved to the edge of the gathering, entered the number of the Mamounia gym and asked for Antonia Howard. Soon Toni was on the other end, panting.

'I just called your number several times, where are you?' she asked.

'Why are you breathing like that, where is Lahcen?'

'Lahcen isn't here to day... his day off, I guess. I just finished my aerobics ... where are you? I hear voices.'

'I'm still with these people... good business deal for me if I can sort out their problems... I'll be along very soon.'

'What people?'

'It's a family... a very rich family arguing about their inheritances. I'm advising them. I'll see you at the flat in a few minutes, I'm not far away.' Fortunately, no one at the gathering understood English. He pocketed his phone and returned to the group.

His mother gazed at him and noticed him looking at his watch. They exchanged glances and she understood it was time to leave. During all the years he'd been supporting them she'd never questioned his comings and goings or his sources of income. But as he was a beautiful boy, now a handsome man, and well endowed intellectually, nothing would have surprised her. What really surprised her was that he had never come afoul of the law.

Indicating that the interview was over, she got up, smoothed out her *jallaba*, and smiled politely at everyone. Then they all shook hands and kissed each other and the whole family accompanied them to their waiting taxi. All except Hafida, who stayed behind in the doorway, her large eyes following Radouan as he walked away, her

fingers tapping impatiently on the door jamb, her soul adrift on uncharted waters.

15

Dropping his family off at Bab Dukala, Radouan hurried to his car and called his old friend, Francesco Monte, who had been leaving messages for him for two days. Although he explained he was already late for lunch with a client, Francesco insisted he stop by at his villa in the Mamounia garden for a drink. On his way Radouan tried unsuccessfully to intercept Toni before she left the gym. At the hotel he handed his keys to the chief Doorman, a childhood friend of his, walked quickly through the garden to where Francesco was staying and rang the bell.

Francesco's black bodyguard, Tawfig, opened the door. Tawfig was a big Tuareg from the Sahara raised in Zagora who trained in the same gym as Radouan. They didn't come any tougher than Tawfig who could drink with you in the evening and roast you for breakfast the next morning. They went through the formalities of an embrace and the usual verbal exchange. Then Tawfig pulled on his nose and gestured disdainfully through the drawing room to a small-enclosed terrace and pool where Francesco was entertaining two young blonde women and several young men who were passing a pipe.

'Radouan baby... *Salaam Alaykoun...Kif al hal.*' Francesco shouted across the pool. Radouan strode out on to the terrace where they embraced warmly kissing each other many times. Francesco introduced him to his friends. The conversation was stilted.

When he was alone with him Francesco would relax like a Moroccan countryman, but when there were other people around he got up tight - No problem. After all, his grandfather had been a commanding general during the Italian occupation of Libya so what could you expect? From time to time Francesco liked to play the Patrone, but understood Arabic so well Radouan always felt more comfortable with him than most of the foreigners he knew.

Francesco shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. 'I called you because I wanted to invite you to a party I'm giving tonight... On such short notice I hope you can come. Juss now there are some very beautiful women in town. I thought you might like to meet some of them... perhaps bring some of your own friends too if they'd like to come.' Then in a lower voice he said, 'I know I could have told you this on the phone, *habibi*, but I wanted to see you in the flesh, it's been three years no? I think of you all the time and miss you very much But you look the same, even better... how are you?'

'The same, yes,' Radouan replied calmly, 'busy running around supportin' my family... you say tonight?'

'Yes'

'I'll come... but now I have to leave, I'm late for an appointment.'

16

On his cell phone walking back to his car, Radouan called Toni: 'I tried to call you but your phone was off, I'm just five minutes away.'

'An hour ago you said you'd be here in five minutes. The maid is sulking.'

Minutes later, Radouan let himself into her flat.

Toni looked up over her newspaper. 'You're perspiring, your shirt is wet, go in and take a shower, and we'll have lunch.'

'Of course I'm perspiring, it's hot... I sweat... what am I supposed to do?'

'Take a shower, darling, you look tired.'

'Not now. I'm hungry I want to eat. What do you have?'

'Cold Ratatouille, salad, cold orange and carrot soup.'

Radouan's jaw dropped. 'Tha's all?'

'That's quite enough... good for our waistlines.'

'It's not enough. You know I don't eat that rubbish Ratatouille - or salad. Don't you have any meat or pasta?'

'She will make it for you darling. What do you want on it?'

Radouan exploded. 'Have you lost your mind? Maybe you have that new disease... Mad Bull.'

Toni smiled; his eyes were flashing exactly like a mad bull's. 'Mad cow, darling' she said, 'it's Mad Cow!'

'Whatever... We've known each other all these years and you still can't remember what I eat. Jus' have her boil some pasta with some milk and serve it with some olive oil and salt, tha's all.'

Toni sighed, 'Will you please stop saying JUS' and THA'S all the time. You know how it irritates me... and why don't you eat sauces... and refuse vegetables. Why?'

'I've told you many times but you never listen. Until I was eighteen sometimes we were so poor I never had meat except on feast days... only legumes and rice or semolina. When I see cooked vegetables I want to vomit. Even thinkin' about them... and mixtures like sauces... we never eat them except from the hands of our mothers.'

'Because of *maji*, I suppose.'

'Exac'ly... how can we trust these women, especially these maids. They get jealous and they decide to poison you. It's like that... simple minded... too stupid to think what will happen to them if they get caught.'

'It happened to Paul Bowles' wife, I believe.'

'Yes. Really, they can give you something now...something you'll never taste or see... and three months later your heart will stop, or your hair will fall out. This maid you have here she's *kharia*! I know exac'ly where she comes from and who her people are... all thieves and fake *majis*. A few months ago she asked me to fuck her...'

'She what?' Toni flushed, 'I don't believe you...'

'Yes, when you were in London... you must know one thing, these maids are very aggressive. I told her if she were the last woman on earth I wouldn't fuck her. So now she must be thinkin' of ways to get rid of me. Please be sure any photos you may have of me are locked up, especially black and white ones. She could give one to somebody who could kill me at a distance. Really, I wish you would get rid of her. To be safe here you have to change maids every year. It's very important!'

'Darling, you're so paranoid today, what's... surely you're exaggerating, think of Minna, she's had the same cook, the same servants, for years...'

Radouan was defiant. 'Listen to me and I will tell you something: in Europe you had your Inquisition which did many

horrible things, but the good thing it did was get rid of witches, male and female, *Majis* and Sorcerers... Why do you think Europe went way ahead of us? And then America burned their witches and went ahead of everyone. Jus' think what it is like to live in a place where everyone is making *maji* against everyone else all the time. It makes for terror. It makes life very difficult, too complicated, and impossible to get things done.'

Toni shrugged, 'Of course, one knows about places like Nigeria and Mali ... but here?'

'The *Maji* here has come up from those places through Tombouctou with slaves which our Sultans have imported; now it's everywhere. Do what you want, you always do, but for your own safety if you want a good cook get a man and bring him from outside, from France or Italy.'

'Please go and take a shower, *habibi*, you're hungry. When you're hungry you get nervous and upset, I know. I will boil your pasta myself. Just go wash away all the bad vibrations... you can have lunch in your bathrobe if you like.'

Over lunch, Radouan caught Toni glancing at her maid as if for the first time, and laughed. Toni looked down at her food, 'I can't remember you talking about this poisoning business are you sure?'

'When you don't want to hear something you don't hear it,' he smiled. 'All these years you've never really lived in Marrakech - three weeks here, two weeks there... a weekend. Now you are coming here to live, there are many things you must know and try to REMEMBER!'

'What is this business deal you're involved in?' she asked, changing the subject.

'Never mind, it could be very important, it could make me a rich man. When it's certain I will tell you, until then it would be unlucky to talk about it.'

Toni frowned and pouted, 'Why must you be rich when I am rich, *habibi*? You know very well I'm rich enough for both of us... what's mine is yours... when we're married it will be legally yours as well.'

'If you think I want to live with you like that, you're crazy. I want my own money. I've always made my own money. I like it... to make money. Rich women like to be hustled because it gives them power... don't try to make me into some TOYBOY!'

'Wherever did you pick that one up?' Toni giggled 'I hope this business deal of yours doesn't involve drugs... I do worry you'll get involved in something really bad... you have no idea how much time I spend worrying about you...'

You know how much I dislike drugs... I don't do them and I don't deal them. My weakness is for wine. I enjoy gettin' drunk from time to time... really drunk, in vino veritas... YES!

'That's what you think, but it's not true.'

'Not with me. When I drink I can really see ...without the garbage of my life passing before my eyes. These people here in Marrakech, mostly they use *kif* and hashish. It puts their brains to sleep.'

Toni rolled her eyes, 'I smoke hashish. I've always smoked it... in fact I can't remember when I started.' She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. 'I know you don't like drugs, *habibi*, but that wouldn't prevent you from financing a big deal... would it?'

Radouan pointed at her and wagged his finger. 'Attention! Attention! Right now you're doin' the worst drug of all... You must stop... absolutely... NOW... put it out or I'll...'

'You have this vision of yourself as a Mafia stud doing deals...'

'Yes what do you think...? Al Pacino I love him. Let's go to New York and I'll prove it... Brooklyn I'll join a gang... buy a gun... be a gangster. I would like that... and believe me I would be very successful because I look like one. Godfather One, Two and Three... I've watched ten times at least... but I know more tricks than them.' Radouan fired into the air with his forefinger. 'All I need is a gun.'

Toni grimaced. 'You're so fascinated by all this criminality yet you sit there telling me I should get rid of my maid because she comes from a family of thieves.'

Radouan grinned. 'It's my *FANTASIA*, *'bibti*, you don't understand the danger, the power, the challenge of New York, Miami, Las Vegas. But don't worry, believe me, I may go away from time to time but my life is here in Marrakech with you.' He stubbed out her cigarette.

'So you're not going to tell me about this business deal of yours,' she said evenly.

'Not 'til it happens... it's like poetry, you can't talk about it while you're writing it... really, you don't have to know everything, *habibti*... we have a saying you know... Curiosity killed the Goat.'

'And we say Curiosity killed the Cat.'

‘*Bibti* écoutez moi... to be too curious here can get you in big trouble; you don't have to be a cat or a goat... curiosity doesn't get you anywhere... because what you call Truth is impossible to know... sometimes we see Truth in visions but...’ he shrugged.

‘You sound like one of those preachers on television, I hate them! God helps those who help themselves!’

‘You mean God helps the greedy...’

‘Not at all; it means one takes action based on curiosity... then God helps you.’

‘Or rejects your application ... There is no way to discover that, believe me, no philosopher has ever discovered what is the correct action to take. And every action has consequences we might not have counted on. You may think curiosity is the mother of invention, but that is *Shaitan* the deceiver talking. If you want to see curiosity at work just watch your maid. She knows every centimeter of this place. She knows when you're going to be here and when you're going out... like tonight she could easily stage something, invent something ...like that a thief has come and taken everything. Because you will find her gagged, tied and beaten you will not suspect her, but that's the price she'll pay for sharing the take with her friend the thief who is probably her cousin, her brother in law, or even her uncle. Believe me. I hope you have your jewelry well hidden.’

Toni's mouth twisted despairingly and she shrugged her shoulders. ‘Shall we move to Spain then...?’

j

Late that afternoon Radouan left the flat and drove to the Medina where he spent an hour sitting with his mother listening to her plans for his coming marriage and ignoring her remarks designed to trick him into committing himself to a specific date. After that he walked to the *Riad* where he found Fouzia cursing Nick who had become stuck in the branches of one of the two ancient Cyprus trees that towered over the garden.

‘I came up here to start trimming this tree as you suggested,’ Nick shouted breathlessly from above. ‘Then SHE came out, your

dear sister, insisted I was doing it all wrong and while arguing with her I cut off the branch I was standing on! Now look... can you imagine... so here I am one foot dangling in the air, can't reach the bloody ladder; and she's refusing to move it! All she has to do is push it forward a meter but she refuses... wants to torment me... and she's saying we've run out of booze which I know is a god damn lie!

Suppressing an impulse to laugh, Radouan addressed his sister sternly. 'Why must you always be provokin' him? Go home and I will sit with him for awhile ... but you must be back here by nine.' He pushed the ladder up against the trunk of the tree and Nick climbed down. 'You're right,' he panted, 'exercise is what I need.'

'Don't do too much at first... you made a good start though.'

'After exercise one requires a refreshing beverage don't you think?'

'Of course but only one,' Radouan replied, 'we're not young any more... our hard drinkin' days are over.' Retrieving a bottle of whisky from its hiding place he poured out two glasses.

'What have you been up to?' Nick asked.

'I've seen the girl my mother has picked out, Hafida. She's cute, maybe a little wild underneath ... something mysterious about her. But now a huge problem has developed: yesterday I met a *gazelle* from France and she likes me; met her by chance, *Inch Allah*, so it must be important.'

'And you've been to bed with her, of course.'

'Not yet! We can't do anything until she finishes her shoot... she's a Vogue model - incredible...'

'What's her name?'

'Delphine. I just told you, her name is Delphine.'

'You didn't tell me, you haven't mentioned her name... I can see you've been very busy...'

Radouan heaved a sigh, 'Yes, too busy! You know I never expected Toni would move to Marrakech. We've been friends for many years, but now she's divorced her husband, she's planning to move here permanently and build a place outside of town - having dinner with the architect tonight! And on top of that, now she expects me to marry her!'

'You're a good Musulman, aren't you?'

'Yes. Of course I try to be!'

'It's very simple then... you can have four wives, no problem.'

‘But I can only have more wives if I can support them... where’s the money for that? You know how I have to scramble...’

‘If you marry the English one first you will have plenty of money. Isn’t she rich?’

‘Yes, but I can’t take her money.’

‘Of course you can... you have for years.’

Radouan shoved his hands in his pockets and paced back and forth. ‘Now you’re bein’ sarcastic,’ he said finally, ‘what I know absolutely is I must have this girl Delphine. Something happened to me when we met, I shook and trembled all over, couldn’t stop. That’s never happened to me before, believe me, it was like bein’ born again...’

‘A born again lover...’ Nick hummed idly, ‘praise be to The Almighty...’

‘And she wants me too,’ Radouan continued obstinately... ‘I can tell.’

‘Does that surprise you?’

‘Yeah... she wants me for some purpose, but I don’t know what... I spent the whole day thinking about her...’

‘In love at last...’

‘Maybe.’

‘Really, you’re so crazy, *habibi... hemq.... anta majnoun!*

‘Why? - Because I might marry three or four women?’ Radouan grinned, ‘It’s your fault because you have put this idea into my head, but don’t worry, I could keep them happy...My father’s father had four wives and over fifty concubines. One of them was my grand mother’

They consumed their whisky and Radouan prepared a *tajine* of chicken with potatoes, lemon slices and *ras hanut*.

After they had eaten he held Nick’s hand and stroked his forehead until he fell asleep. Gazing down at him, Radouan wondered who could possibly understand how he felt about this man. No other person in the world except his father had influenced him so much. With his father it was always excitement or discipline, but with Nick it was different, a relationship which gave him courage and tools that had unlocked many doors. Looking back, he knew he’d made a huge mistake doing the physical thing with him, but what to do? *Mach ‘Allah ...* They were young and lusty then. What had always surprised him was that their relationship should have gone on so long and affected them both so deeply.

18

By eight thirty Fouzia had returned and Radouan headed for the *Hamam*. After bathing, he would go home, change, and have something to eat before going on to Francesco's party. Maybe Delphine would be there; he had absolutely to see her. Maybe she was one of the beautiful women Francesco had been speaking about or maybe she wouldn't be there at all. If she were not there he would go looking for her.

A few hours later, however, as he was getting out of his car at the Mamounia and giving the keys to the Parker, suddenly a taxi pulled up and followed by a young man carrying several cameras, Delphine got out.

'God the Provider', he whispered to himself barely able to believe his eyes.

She was wearing silver slippers with stiletto heels and a floor length gown that clung to her body and shimmered and sparkled so that she seemed surrounded by a halo of rosy light. For a moment, he was spellbound, humbled by her brilliance. Then their eyes met and she stepped out of her aura and extended her hand. He kissed it, bowed slightly acknowledging her stellar presence, and while her photographer friend was taking pictures, slowly drew her aside, encouraged her to sit inside his car, retrieved his keys from the Parker and drove off.

'What do you think you're doing?' she said angrily as he paused at the bottom of the drive, 'Where are we going? I'm due at a party. It's very important for my career that I be seen there... just turn around and go back.'

'I'll take you back soon,' Radouan replied, trying to deal with an attack of extreme anxiety, 'you were arriving much too early to make a good entrance and I wanted to apologize for the scene I made the other morning at your hotel. I was trying to think of a way to see you again and now ... *Mach'Allah*, God's Will a second time.'

'I suppose that means we're fated to meet,' she said and stared hard at him. 'Give me a break... What were you doing there?'

'Where?'

'There just now at the Mamounia...'

'Going to the same party as you, I think. Are you a friend of Francesco Monte's?'

'No, but that's the party I'm suppose to be going too. Do you know him? I'm supposed to meet him.'

'I've known him for years... a long story.' He watched her out of the corner of his eye as her expression changed. Opportunist, he thought, all the better to catch her. 'If you want to meet Francesco, you should not go to this party,' he declared.

'Why not?' she pouted.

'Because every bimbo in town will be there. Come with me now and I will introduce you to him properly tomorrow when he's alone. Believe me, we are very old friends. If I don't show up now, he'll wonder why... it will arouse his curiosity. When we appear together he will be more fascinated. Trust me. I know him well. With Francesco you have to play games... who was that guy you were with just now, your boyfriend?'

Delphine smiled dismissively. 'Of course not. He's one of the photographers on the shoot... wanted to take pictures of me for some English magazine.'

'Do you mind not going?' Radouan asked politely.

Delphine gazed down at her costume 'It took me a long time to get ready for this event,' she sighed, 'but if you promise to introduce me to him tomorrow or the next day I suppose...'

'Are you hungry?'

'Actually I'm starving!' she laughed.

'It's just as well you don't eat there,' Radouan said earnestly, 'at these big soirees you can get sick... let's go to your hotel. I'll have them make us some chicken sandwiches.'

'Remember I have to work tomorrow.'

'What time?'

'Late afternoon,' she sighed, 'it's the last shoot.'

'Good,' Radouan said, relieved that she had smiled, and then laughed! They were progressing, 'So it's early, we'll have a few hours before you have to go to bed.'

Letting her out in front of her hotel, he parked his car and by the time he reached her suite she was standing there with a bottle of champagne. He took the bottle, popped the cork and poured out two glasses. She sat down on the bed and he sat in a chair facing her, their knees almost touching. She sipped her champagne and smiled

knowingly at him. He felt awkward and wanted to kiss her, but restrained himself from making the first move.

‘How’s the shoot going?’ he asked finally, looking at his knees.

She didn’t answer but relaxed back on one elbow in a seductive pose. He wondered if this was a signal for him to proceed or not. Instead, he slipped off his chair, knelt down, took off one of her high heeled slippers and began to suck her toes one by one. She sat up and slapped his face. He stared worshipfully up at her, took off her other slipper, brushed it against his cheek and kissed it. She commanded him to stop; she had to take her gown off or it would be ruined. He dropped her foot, put his hands behind his back as if shackled and bowed before her.

His behavior, so different from what she’d expected, began to arouse her. Slowly she stood up before him and took off her gown then grabbed his hair and lifted his head. He stared up at her, up between her sheer silver stockings and her garter belt, parted his lips and licked them with his tongue. He was hugely excited, but determined not to touch her until she commanded him.

Lifting his chin up with her free hand she poured champagne into his open mouth and wondered how far she could go with him. Slowly relaxing back on the bed against some pillows, she sipped her champagne and thought about how much she enjoyed taking off her clothes in front of a fully dressed man

What next he wondered? Shouldn’t he be willing to go along with whatever style of flirtation she chose? Swallowing more champagne he began licking her legs upward exploring her inner thighs with his tongue. In his whole life, in his long career as one of the city’s most desirable young men he had never crossed this threshold which was considered unmanly and dangerously foreign.

Suddenly she took his head in both hands between her legs, held it there and pressed it against her *tina*. ‘Suck it,’ she whispered and he sucked her clitoris, penetrated her with his tongue and did many things he never thought possible.

Finally, she reached down, slapped his face hard, one cheek then the other, snapped her fingers and ordered him to get up and take down his pants.

Rising from the floor, he unbuckled his belt undid his zipper and let his pants drop. ‘And the shorts too,’ she commanded.

He obeyed

Observing him like a connoisseur, she lay back on the edge of the bed and stroked her breasts. Then slowly she rolled over on her stomach, arched her back and showed him her *zouk*.

‘There,’ she said, ‘now get to work.’

Crawling on to the bed, he licked her *zouk* and caressed her clitoris with his hand. He was on the edge of a huge ejaculation and would do anything she commanded. ‘I need to come,’ he groaned.

‘Not before me,’ she said sternly, ‘make me come first and then we’ll see about you.’

‘Don’t worry I can come many times,’ he whispered.

She turned and gazed up at him for a long time without speaking, her eyes boring into him, then she said, ‘If you dare come first I will never see you again.’

He resumed his labors.

She berated him, for not working hard enough, not extending his tongue far enough inside her, commanded that he suck the juices inside her *tina* and swallow them, called him a big donkey in Arabic and many other horrible names in French. Finally, as he sat there on his knees panting, he stuck his finger deeply inside her and she had a prolonged orgasm.

‘Now crawl into the bathroom on your hands and knees and jerk off,’ she ordered, throwing him a towel, ‘I don’t want to watch.’

Her tongue was like a whip. If he wanted to rape her on the spot she would not be able to resist him. ‘I want to put this inside you,’ he muttered urgently, showing it to her.

But by then she had poured herself more champagne and was flipping through a magazine. ‘After you introduce me to your friend Francesco Monte maybe I’ll let you do it,’ she said seductively, ‘now go into the bathroom and do what I said... and take a shower, you smell bad.’

Radouan crawled to the bathroom and took a shower, but the moment had passed and he did not jerk off. Then he came back, struggled into his clothes and stood there wondering whether he should kiss her good bye or punch her. If she were a Moroccan woman he would have beaten her. Instead he grabbed her toe, gently wiggled it and promised he would make an appointment with Francesco for the following afternoon. ‘Keep your phone on,’ he said, ‘I’ll call to confirm the time.’

With a mighty sigh of relief, which he did not quite understand, he hurried to his car and drove the short distance to Toni's apartment. It was past one in the morning, and he had expected to find her there waiting up for him, but no, her flat was dark, and assuming she'd gone to bed, he made himself a drink and went out on the terrace to cool off. His clothes were damp from the heat. He stripped down and sprayed himself with the garden hose. Then he dried himself and went inside and opened Toni's bedroom door, but she was not there. Where was she? Ah yes, YES, with the architect of course, the young architect she was having dinner with... but so late? He stretched out on a thick Berber carpet. He'd been worried about getting back to Toni and now, well, there were certainly many other places he'd rather be; even sleeping on the roof with his father, or down in *Riad Zitoun* with his orphan. He never got enough sleep - for years now grabbing it when he could.

'Darling, it's me... Radi? *Habibi?* Wake up, I'm home. Sorry, darling...'

It was Toni's voice calling to him in a dream in which he'd been making love with someone - not her. He opened his eyes, blinked, smiled, and pulled her down on top of him. 'What time is it?' he asked.

'Nearly three-thirty. I'm afraid...I'm sorry but I had no control over what happened.'

'The architect raped you! I can tell by your eyes!' He sat up and held her tightly. 'Now I'm going to have to knock you. I've told you many times...'

'Stop ... you're half-asleep, you're hurting me. STOP! We had dinner at Trattoria. One of the King's sisters was there... brought her own musicians...the most wonderful music. But no one could leave until she left and she was having such a good time she stayed and stayed and I was trapped.'

'You could have called me.'

'I kept thinking she'd leave... the architect's cell phone was dead and I didn't have mine. At one point the owner came by and

said he'd find me a phone but he disappeared. I'm sorry, darling, can you forgive me?'

'Tell me another story.'

'Call him... call him right now if you don't believe me... the owner... I forget his name.'

'Je suis fatigue...' Radouan sighed, 'hard negotiating session over this business deal I'm in. Made me nervous and now I must go to the mosque in a few hours to pray because day after tomorrow is the Feast of the Sacrifice, *Aid Kabir*, in case you forgot, and today I'll be busy buyin' sheep. Go to bed. I'll wake you up around nine when I get back from praying, now I mus' sleep.' He turned away from her and assumed the foetal position.

'Can't you just come into the bedroom; she said petulantly, 'it's only a few steps?'

Radouan was almost asleep again. 'Take your clothes off and lie down here beside me, look...' he guided her hand down between his legs. She took off her clothes and lay down with him.

'You're hot,' he said, 'you aren't usually this way. Admit it; you've been shaggin' that architect.'

'You're imagining things...'

'I'm not imagining things... I don't smoke so my sense of smell is...'

They rolled around on the floor.

'Darling, you're hurting me, STOP. And you're drunk too, I can smell THAT.'

'I was drunk before but now I'm MAD! I want to cum but I won't put it in there with your architect's sperm.'

With great difficulty she extricated herself from his arms. 'I think you're awful. Really! If I'm excited, it's from thinking of you... wanting to get back here and not being able. Come to bed and I'll set the alarm. COME! You... you keep me waiting all the time but if you have to wait for one moment you go crazy! YOU MUST LEARN TO BE PATIENT!'

'WAITIN' AROUND TO TAKE ORDERS FROM YOU,' he yelled, 'I've never had time to be patient! You know that.'

'I do know... I know very well. But now you're going to have plenty of time. As soon as we're married you'll have all the time in the world.'

'When we're married you will try to STEAL MY TIME... I know it.'

'But you won't have to do all these other things to make money so you'll have plenty of time....'

'For what?' he said stubbornly.

'For whatever: your friends, polo, reading, travel, thinking, SLEEP! Really darling, I can see you're exhausted, please come to bed, we don't have to do anything but sleep... I'll wake you at five.'

'Why won't I need money?'

'WHAT?'

'Money. You said I wouldn't need to make money if we're married'

'I've told you this before.' she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. 'As soon as we are married I will make over a large sum of money in your name.'

'Why can't you do it right now? What does marriage have to do with it?'

'A married man must have money of his own.'

'That's not the reason. You're thinkin' if you give me money before we're married I might run off and leave you.' His eyes widened, 'After all these years you still don't trust me... that you have to bribe me to marry you, or buy me... something like THAT! He laughed menacingly. This is why I must make my own money, *habibti...*' he yawned. 'Now get you to bed and I'll wake you up around nine...'

Toni was now wide-awake: 'At great expense, of both time and money, I have divorced Rupert and now you say you are not interested in getting married!' she said angrily.

'But I don't see the reason for it. What is the reason? I know you want some stupid legal ceremony somewhere, but what does it mean? It means nothin... real love doesn't need marriage.'

'Don't be so exhausting' she murmured, 'I feel drained. I want us to be married under British Law... at the Consulate in Rabat or in England itself. It's for your own sake, my darling, you'll be a British resident and soon after that a British subject.'

Radouan stared at her in disbelief. 'Why should I want to be a British subject when I'm already a subject of King Hassan II... his devoted subject, believe me. For me, really, such a marriage is not one I can accept. For us to be really married you must marry me according to Islamic law... Sharia... that's the only way I will really feel married to you.'

'Can you imagine what they'd say if I did something like that! They've said enough already. They'd say I've gone mad.'

'Who's THEY?'

'MY FAMILY. And the press of course... paparazzi... the media ... whatever!'

'I think tha's your problem, darlin'. Everything you do, you're always thinkin' of what people will say about you...can't you jus' forget being someone people talk about?'

. 'Look,' she said furiously, 'I'm breaking all the rules having this relationship with you and it hasn't been easy for me, I can tell you... dangerous financially too...'

'Move into the modern age, *habibti*. Plenty of women break rules all the time and don't worry about it. You think I'm not breakin' the rules of my people by having a relationship with you? I'm not exactly a nobody here in Marrakech and I come from a tribe that really hates foreigners... exterminated quite a few of them in the past too!'

'No. I really don't think you are breaking any rules. I know your people consider me a trophy - just a trophy that's all. Having sex with a *Kafir* like me is *Jihad*... a form of *Jihad*... Religious conquest... I know that...'

'Watch it...'

'Let me finish, damn it! I know these things and really I don't mind... I don't... being a trophy that is, believe me I understand it. But I also want to be married according to the laws of MY people...'

'If I married you in Britain you would agree to be married here according to our laws and customs?'

'I believe as a Moslem man you are allowed to marry an unconverted non Moslem woman with no problem...'

'Tha's right. But it's me who would like you to convert... not any law... ME, your lover - The one who loves you and always will.'

Dressing quickly Radouan left her flat, slamming the door behind him. At Bab Dukala he parked his car and walked to his father's house where he found the old man on the roof, lying on a mattress and still awake.

'You've come,' his father rasped weakly, 'I've been waiting for you. I was afraid you wouldn't... it is not often we are alone together and I must speak to you of certain things.' Leaning up on one elbow he pointed toward the sky. 'Tonight I saw a certain star out there rising in my birth sign which means I will soon be leaving for another world...'

'Oh my father, do not speak of such things, speakin' of them makes them come to pass.'

'But you are my first born, dearest of all to me and there are things I must now tell you. Come closer and listen.'

An owl hooted on a nearby roof top as though listening to them.

'But I don't want...'

'Shut you up and listen, I'm going to tell you something important. Hidden in our portion of this old house are certain metal boxes. When I got sick and we had to move here, you were twelve or fourteen; at that time, I sent everyone away and hid them myself. There are two steel boxes beneath the tiles under my bed. They are filled with more than enough gold to pay the bride prices for you and your brothers and to maintain your mother when I am gone.

Radouan gazed at his father. Suddenly the sadness of the past came rushing in on him; tribal madness, the interminable centuries of blood feuds, religion and fighting, the useless craziness that had shaped his life and now plagued him. 'My father. MY DAD,' he stammered, 'I cannot speak of such things... look the tears comin' from my eyes. Why have you never told me this before, we could have used that money...I could have had a life! I could have paid the *Reshwa* to get a teaching position...'

'Why should people pay bribes for positions that will benefit others? No. When one is young it is important to struggle... it has toughened you and made you strong and clever. When one is old life is not easy, and to struggle is impossible.' The old man's eyes glinted and he spoke softly. 'Do not worry about me, my son, DO NOT FEEL SAD. I have had a full life and I am not afraid... we all

come to this. I am only sorry I may not live to see you happily married to a good woman.'

'You will. You will. You are strong, you will live to see it! I am goin' to marry this girl Hafida!'

'*Inch Allah!* my son, *Inch Allah!* But there is something else I have not told you. A few days ago there was a sudden rainstorm...I haven't told you this because I haven't seen you...it was in the late afternoon of the day you went to see Hafida...'

Radwan nodded.

'Well, I was up here on the roof and there it was, a *kaous kozah* arching over the big square... from the west it came down in the area of the Prefecture on *Riad Zitoun Jdid*, just near that house where you are keeping that orphan.

Radouan was astounded. 'How do you know about the house in *Zitoun Jdid*?' he muttered, not daring to meet his father's eyes.

'How did I get you off the hook years ago when you put those policemen in the hospital?' his father chuckled. 'You think I have lived my whole life here in the Medina and don't know everything that goes on ... I am happy you bought that house! It is an omen of things to come. You could never have known that Chaiir el Hamra lived and died in that very house.'

'I did know, my father... that is why I bought it. And the boy was starvin'... a country boy lost in the city. I found him on the street passed out. He's an orphan. His name is Mokhtar.'

'Ah, The Chosen One,' his father smiled, 'it is good to help orphans...' The old man's eyes twinkled. 'But let me return to the arc en ciel...it was not the usual *kaous kosah*...never seen the likes of it before...looped and coiled in the sky like a serpent with many colored scales ending in a shower of gold right over Chaiir Hamara's house. Before I could call your brother it had vanished. So I spoke to your mother about it and she spoke to an old woman she knows who said it was a very rare sign, auspicious, and means that soon you are going to be very rich. Perhaps God is favoring you for saving that orphan perhaps the chosen one is going to bring you luck. Promise me you will always keep that place and never tell anyone about it. Many tender moments I have spent there under the lemon tree making music and listening to Chaiir Hamra read his poetry. Someday you might need it to get away from your life... maybe you'll give up this world and become a recluse... I feel it.'

Radouan whispered hoarsely his voice filled with emotion:
 'Look my father, in the East the sky is brightening, see the morning star riding high. Soon it will be dawn and I must go. Let me carry you downstairs. Day after tomorrow is the big feast... today you must rest up and I must go buy sheep... but first I will go to *hamam*, and then pray.'

21

At the *hamam* J.W. had been working all night and was about to leave when Radouan stumbled in. '*Salaam alikoum*,' said J.W., 'you look terrible, what's the matter?'

'I've been sittin' with my father.'

'How is he? I keep thinking to stop by and see him.'

'Not good. His breathin' is difficult. Tonight he slept on the roof and saw a sign in the sky... he thinks it means he will die soon... and the other day he saw an *arc en ciel* with a loop in it which he thinks means I will soon be very rich', Radouan laughed cynically, 'I think he's going *majnoun*, if he would only take the proper medicines and diet he would live much longer but he won't... he's suspicious of doctors.'

'Those twisted rainbows are considered very lucky; can't you take him to Rabat?'

'Where is the money for that? Anyway, I doubt he would go now, he's too weak... He was a good father who taught me many things... saved my ass many times so it's very sad seein' him like this...very triste. And now in a few hours I have to go buy sheep for the Sacrifice and this evening make love to this new girl I've met, Delphine. You must see her. You will be overwhelmed. I will arrange for you to meet her as if by chance in some cafe. I love her a lot but right now because of my father my mood is dark... my mind is fucked up!'

'Come,' J. W. smiled, 'I'm quitting work. We will bathe together... the hot vapors will revive you.'

They entered the hottest of the rooms of the *Hamam* and J.W. scrubbed Radouan's back. 'What of the girl your mother has picked out?' he asked.

'It is done... we have just to choose the date for the *L'adoul*. I'm delayin' as much as possible but it will happen.'

'So you have seen her, what's she like?'

'We sat on the floor of her parent's house and she had to bend over to pour tea and serve... her *zouk* is *zween*. I can tell you when she finished it was difficult for me to stand up. For fifteen she is very forward... pretends to be shy but underneath I can see she's hot, tres chaud. When I stood up, she looked at the bulge in my pants... I swear, and now she's excited because she knows that I will be able to satisfy her. She blushed and as we left she stood in the doorway smiling a kind of crooked smile. Her name is Hafida!'

'The Keeper!'

'Yes I know but what does it really mean?'

'Keeper?' J.W. laughed, 'Keeper of Secrets, then Keeper of rules... of traditions... money, keys, and her virginity... and your *zahp*! Whatever she can catch hold of she'll hang on to.'

'I'm a little scared of her because I think she might know *maji*. She's one of us.'

'Our R'hamna women are famous for knowing *maji*...your own mother...'

'Of course... that's what worries me... she may be one of my mother's protégés.'

'So where does your Lady Antonia fit in to all this?'

'I will marry her also... *Inch Allah*. After all these years we still make great sex together and she is very tender and kind... but first she must accept Islam, and she will. No Islam, no *Zahp*! Believe me she will.'

'She doesn't have to convert for you to marry her... why do you have to go around trying to convert people? It isn't cool man, it's boring. Nobody talks like that any more! Marry her in her own way and let her convert if she wants to. She's not a concubine after all... *Khliha taamed ala nafssha*, let her rely on herself.'

'She's not a virgin either.'

'You've known that from the beginning.'

'You're right, but now there is another problem... Delphine... the one I will see in a few hours. I've never... no other woman has ever

effected me like her... from Arles in France. Maybe she's part Arab: I don't know... maybe she has the *maji* too.'

'What does she do to you...?'

'When we make sex I start tremblin'and shakin'. When I come it's like a volcano explodin' even after comin' many times... I never had that sensation before...'

'Don't you think you might be exaggerating a little?' J.W. ventured, knowing Radouan was fabricating again. 'I think it sounds like maybe she's hypnotized you.'

'Yeah, tha's what I say to myself... which is upsettin' me because some day soon she's gonna be very famous and I could lose her!'

22

Knowing Francesco always woke up early, the following morning Radouan called him at nine, apologized for not showing up at his party and said he would like to bring around an interesting girl to meet him.

'Where were you lass night? Francesco growled softly'

'Busy with her... with this girl.'

'Who is she?'

'She's twenty four so I guess she's a woman, she's fantastic.'

'Mi amico, you have introduced me to so many fantastic women... you are too kind.'

'This one is different...'

'I'm sure she is, they always are.'

'No... believe me, in my life for the first time I'm really in love. She's a top model on a shoot here for Vogue. But she's different. I want you to see her... maybe she will inspire you as she has inspired me... you will want to create a film around her I'm sure.'

'Oh that... well, it would depend on what's in it for me personally.'

'A new star.'

‘Thass not what I mean.’

‘If you mean you will make it with her, forget it,” Radouan laughed, ‘this one I won’t share. I forbid you to try anything with her. Swear now or I won’t let you see her.’

‘Calma ragazzo, I swear! I haven’t even seen her yet... but yes I’d like to. I know your taste...’

‘Why not have lunch with us then, we’ll meet you at the hotel bar.’

‘Nonsense,’ Francesco drawled, ‘you must come to me.’

A few hours later after a pleasant stroll through the scented garden behind the Mamounia Hotel, Radouan and Delphine found the great Francesco Monte alone at his villa having a smoke with his bodyguard Tawfig. Tawfig eyed Delphine solemnly and excused himself.

Radouan introduced Delphine to Francesco who said he hoped he wasn’t interrupting her day and she made it clear to him she had to be ready for her last shoot an hour before sunset - whenever that was.

Soon two men in livery brought food and wine. The scent of jasmine and tuberose mingled with that of hashish as Francesco lit a pipe and passed it to Delphine. ‘Radouan, he likes to drink,’ Francesco grinned, ‘he won’t smoke hashish or kif.’

‘I prefer hashish myself,’ Delphine replied, ‘People who drink all the time are difficult to live with, Radouan should learn to smoke.’

‘Are you crazy? I don’t even smoke cigarettes. You should learn to take *Majoun*.’

‘What is *Majoun*?’

‘A pate made with honey, almonds, kif, hashish and other herbs and spices... only to be made by a woman you trust.’

‘But there is a problem,’ Francesco explained. ‘Because *Majoun* it works so slowly you think iss not working at all and iss so delicious you eat more and more, and suddenly it takes you... carries you away... or you feel like a stone... or you want to dance madly... dance and dance... I don’t like. It lasts too long and you never know whass in it... what these women put in it.’

Radouan grumbled: ‘Hashish inhibits the production of sperm, lessens desire.’

'Now it's you who are crazy.' Delphine said. 'Hashish heightens desire and sensuality... but it mustn't be overdone.'

Francesco handed her the pipe again: 'Oh, of course... we wouldn't want you to over do anything, my dear, even if you wanted to. I'm sure you find time to think about it though... I mean about over doing things?'

'But of course, doesn't every one?' She stared at him indifferently.

'Sei molto onesto.' Francesco lapsed into his native tongue.

'Most of the time I am,' Delphine replied, 'but often it is better to protect people from the truth, especially when it is too complicated to think about.'

Francesco's dark eyebrows shot up, 'Ah! Not only are you very beautiful,' he smiled, 'you are wise.'

Delphine glanced at Radouan, 'If I were wise I would leave Marrakech soon; my shoot is over today.'

Radouan panicked. 'What are you sayin'? You can't leave. You're a Marrakchi now!'

Delphine wagged her finger at him. 'And you're a very dangerous man.'

'She means you might not be good for her career, she might fall helplessly in love with you.' Francesco grinned.

'I hope so.'

'But what would that mean for her career? You'd be a very jealous lover, I'm sure, and wouldn't let her travel... wouldn't let her see other people.'

'I'm already jealous but I would always respect her, believe me she's the boss.'

'Oh really,' Francesco smiled coyly.

Radouan snorted. 'If I had thought to restrict her I would never have introduced her to you... *El Kors*.'

'*El Kors*...?'

'Arabi for Shark,' Radouan nodded, 'by *El Kors* we usually mean The Thief.'

'As they say in Hollywood that's show biz,' Francesco snickered, 'but seriously, we directors we are more Octopus than Shark... we like to sit in dark places and wait... like here in Marrakech!'

'Marrakech is not dark!' Radouan said defiantly.

'Francesco laughed: 'The sun is always shining but inside it is very dark and you know it... which is why I love it.'

'Really, we don't like this show biz thing,' Radouan pontificated. 'We are suspicious of images... we believe they are powerful *maji*.'

'Why are you always checking yourself out in mirrors then?' Delphine quipped, 'you do it all the time.'

'It's a habit from the past. In my father's house there were no mirrors except one very small one for shaving... images, even reflections, were considered blasphemous and dangerous. For many years I wasn't sure what I looked like... had to check myself out in other people's mirrors... believe me even now I'm not so sure.'

'If you are so suspicious of images,' Delphine said, 'why do I see these satellite dishes everywhere?'

'We watch the sports, news and the sex channels. You must remember we have another side that you don't see ... *moujnun*.'

'First *majoun*, now *moujnun*. What are we talking about?'

'Demented my dear... louche!' Francesco smirked.

'You mean the men watch porn after the women and children are safely in bed.' Delphine said.

'No, *make* porn,' Francesco laughed.

Radouan gazed incredulously at the two of them. 'Of course, what do you think? We wouldn't want them to see it. Women and children must be kept pure. In their hearts men are still beasts; some are lions, some are horses, others camels, donkeys, dogs and pigs. Women must be protected from our animal instincts... They have the real power, the power to reproduce and multiply. This real power must be protected.' Why do armies always rape the women of their defeated enemies' women? Power, *Kaid N'ssa*, *TINA* POWER. Female power is strong but it is raw and undisciplined. Unless she is supervised and protected she will bring on *F'tna*, Chaos! The desire of women perpetuates our race... Men, they think they are controlling things but they cannot.'

'Oh give me a break,' Delphine said scornfully. 'If women have any real power here why aren't they more educated? Why can't they inherit as much as their brothers or their sons? Why can a husband take his wife's property - what about all the prostitutes? If women had any real power they wouldn't be prostitutes.'

'Ha!' Radouan purred. 'Female power doesn't have anything to do with education, some of the most powerful women in Marrakech are prostitutes... many were poor country girls when they started out.'

We blame their families, we don't blame them. Even so, normally here in Morocco, the girls, *les k'hab*, are not generally mistreated except by freaks like Francesco.'

'He iss lying, do not listen to him,' Francesco chuckled.

Radouan guffawed, 'We must protect them from persons like him, and give them work.... yes, much work! Without our hot blooded nature, what would become of them? Destitution! Today in Morocco there are three women for every man. It is our duty as men to keep them satisfied; otherwise they will become angry and turn the world upside down. What do you think?'

Francesco stared at him: 'She thinks you are a male chauvinist pig...'

Delphine smiled menacingly.

'Don't put words in her mouth!' Radouan complained, and thought either Delphine was a better actress than he'd imagined or she was falling for Francesco's line; found himself suppressing the urge to grab Delphine's long golden hair, and drag her out of Francesco's villa, through the hotel lobby and right out the front door. Scandal! He knew he could carry it off, but he would lose her and Toni would find out. He had to swallow his pride and sit there listening to the great director's talk, his endless jokes which he had heard too many times.

'We women can determine our own destinies and we can be very disciplined.' Delphine observed. 'In France we've been doing it since the Revolution. We don't need men to tell us... here, it seems to me, women are just objects like pots and pans to be bought and sold by husbands and fathers. It's very depressing.'

'You don't understand Morocco or Islam or you wouldn't say that,' Radouan complained. 'You haven't been here long enough. If you had you wouldn't say these foolish things. You will see. You think women are prisoners here, but really it is us men who are the prisoners.'

'You aren't locked up in rooms and houses,' she scolded him.

'No. We're out on the fucking streets! It's us who have to deal with the world outside. Women have the PRIVACY - of the house, the roofs... and they have their *maji*. Really, we are all prisoners, both men and women...God's prisoners... Life is God's joke.'

Delphine stared at him sullenly 'That's why I'm an atheist,' she replied, 'I don't want to be anyone's prisoner.'

Despite his hypocrisy she found herself increasingly charmed by Radouan; by his street smarts, his faux earnestness and his classic profile with its slightly up-turned nose suggesting something saturnine - the flared nostrils when he got excited.

'If I stay, will you promise to look after me and not try to boss me around?' she said with a sly smile.

'Of course, absolutely, you can count on it. I will be your lover and your bodyguard ...I will wait on you hand and foot... drink champagne from your slippers.'

Francesco was amused and shook his finger. 'Don't believe him, my dear, non ascoltarlo... don't believe a word he ever says... he's a wolf in sheep's clothing.'

'No, no,' Radouan protested, 'a sheep in wolf's clothing!'

They all laughed.

'But really, my dear,' Francesco wagged his finger at Delphine, 'you must not leave Marrakech too soon... iss like good wine, the longer you stay the better it gets ...everything interesting is deeply hidden, takes time to discover.' He waved his hand in the air. 'Marrakech is a feast for connoisseurs and you will be an adornment to that feast... I guarantee it. I would like to see what you look like on film or tape. Cameras do such strange things: ugly persons become unforgettable, beautiful ones often fade away... but you are certainly not ugly, nor are you a clone of a clone - these days that iss very rare. Radouan thinks you could be a star, but first we have to see what the cameras will tell us. Over in Ouarzazate we could do some tests. I understand they have production facilities there now... maybe you and Radouan could do a love scene... first a fight, then love.'

Delphine glanced at Radouan, then at Francesco: 'I don't do love scenes,' she said pointedly. 'I think I should go back to Paris... I have many things to attend to.'

'Believe me,' Radouan said earnestly, 'I could never make love to you in front of a camera. I couldn't. I hate them!'

Francesco grinned: 'Now you're lying again, amico mio

'It's not me who is lying and you know it!' Radouan replied earnestly and turned to Delphine. 'I have to tell you Francesco here, he is a professional voyeur... that's why he's a great director, but he's dangerous. It doesn't have to be a love scene.'

Francesco ruminated.

'Where is this place you're talking about?' Delphine asked, 'Wahssa... whatever?'

'Ouarzazate.' Radouan grinned. 'It's across the Atlas Mountains towards the Sahara... a dull place... but it's become a film making center because of the light and also the desert locations. If you need a desert or mountains for your film, they have them. You can also fly direct to Paris from there... flights every day.'

'How would we get there?'

'We could take a car but it's a long drive over the mountains... I'm sure Francesco will fly us there.'

'He will?' Francesco gazed dourly at Radouan.

'Yes, why not?'

'Because for some reason you have to fly to Casablanca to get the plane to Ouarzazate... It would be easier to drive and it's a fantastic trip.'

'You can hire a helicopter here... I'm sure the hotel would know...'

Francesco narrowed his eyes and pouted irritably, 'You want me to spend money.'

'Yes, of course, what do you think?' Radouan laughed. 'You have to spend money... You have a beautiful intelligent young woman here who is going to have seven pages in all the Vogue magazines in the world and you want her to drive on that dangerous road in some car that will probably break down? You're crazy! Seeing all that space she'll get sick. Sometimes I get sick.'

Francesco rolled his eyes, 'Flying helicopters in those mountains is more dangerous... one gets sick in helicopters too.'

'Well, it's up to you,' Radouan said dismissively, getting up to leave. 'Jus' let us know when you want to go. But it will have to be at the end of the week. Day after tomorrow is the feast of *Aid Kabir*. Things will not function for the next five days. Nobody will work, just eat, pray, and enjoy.'

On the drive to her shoot at the Marjorelle Gardens, Delphine turned to him and frowned: 'Do you really think he liked me?' She looked doubtful.

'Why not? You're a very beautiful woman and smart too. Jus' relax... he's gonna give you everything, wait and see... Wait! Francesco, he hates waiting for anything... always in a hurry, always looking at his watch... for him waiting is like death. Now we've tempted him he must wait like a dog until we throw him another bone. The longer he waits the more anxious he will become. He has the power to make you a huge star... I don't have that power...' He grinned at her, 'I'm just a guy called Radouan.'

At the Marjorelle Garden he stayed in the car, put on a CD and dozed in the back seat. A few hours later there was a tap on the window and it was her standing there in the dark, one of the gatekeepers holding a lantern. She looked ethereal. He got out, opened the front door for her, pulled himself together and they drove off to La Maison d'Arabe where she bathed and finally came out wearing a scandalous ensemble of black lace and elastic.

'Gautier I suppose,' Radouan observed. He was sitting on a puff watching Manchester United play Arsenal.

'How did you know?' she asked.

'Because he made some underwear for me once too... special!'

She stretched out on the bed and began leafing through a copy of Elle. 'You really know him...'

Radouan turned off the game and sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Of course, I know him; he's a great designer... I know everybody here and everybody knows me.'

She gazed at him from behind her magazine with arched eyebrows.

'I think I'm jealous of you,' he grumbled. 'When Francesco was staring at you it made me crazy. In my life before, believe me I've never been so jealous.'

'Haven't I heard somewhere Francesco Monte is gay... or maybe I read it?'

'That's crazy... since I was twenty years old I've known him. Believe me; he's not a gay whatever you might have heard.'

'Something about liking young North Africans...'

'He has many enemies who like to smear him... If you're one of the greatest film directors in the world you have many enemies. I suppose you're tryin' to say I'm a gay... Waha, I've enjoyed sex with

guys from time to time but does that mean I'm a gay? We hate that word... to us it's meaningless except that these foreigners who come here talking like women... they call themselves gay.'

'Why aren't you on the floor?' she said threateningly, 'you know that's your place.'

'Because I'm here beside you,' Radouan grinned.

She laughed, 'you like it... you know you do... get down!

'It's interesting with you, yes... I can get into it, but it's new for me.'

She put down her magazine and stared at him. 'But you've thought a lot about it I can tell... like discipline turns you on... look at your erection.'

'With you anything would turn me on.' He smiled tenderly, 'Please, will you take off those rubbish things so I can make love to you properly.' He removed his shoes and socks, then stood up and took off his clothes.

'Look,' she pointed, 'you're already wearing a condom... Really!

'You promised that if I introduced you to Francesco you'd let me do it... remember? So here I am ready to obey your promise. My *zahp* is big and strong. I have to protect it. The condom is mint flavored. You will like it.'

She stared at him defiantly.

'This doesn't have to change our relationship,' he said, 'I mean, you will enjoy it... you will order me to do it frequently and I will obey... I promise.'

She smiled indulgently and slowly removed her lingerie. He embraced her and nibbled at her breasts. Before she had been hard and verbally abusive, now her body was compliant and began to yield.

Idly, he wondered what The Keeper, Hafida, would be like in bed; would she be clean and sweet smelling like this one, or would she be...?

He tried to kiss her but she turned aside. He slid slowly down her body nibbling at her groin and licking her inner thighs. She began groaning urgently and pulled at his hair. He gazed at her *tina*, kissed it, then entered it with his tongue, closed his eyes and imagined he was kissing her mouth. She went crazy. Her cries were an aphrodisiac.

She pulled his hair again until he came up and then she kissed him, one long kiss that went on and on until he penetrated her.

They were like two serpents entwined, she thought, his body sliding over hers, until they climaxed together, not once but four times. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before.

An hour later they were in her bath and Radouan was massaging her shoulders and serving her sweet mint tea. '*Oridouka*,' he whispered, '*Oheepouka, Ahta Jouka*.'

'What does that mean?' she whispered, 'you were saying that before when we were...'

'I like you... I want you... I need you. Maybe some day you would like to learn Arabi. It's very poetic.' He was still very excited. Never before had he encountered an accomplished woman who could lose herself so completely until she was almost talking to you with her body. Compared to her, all other women had been mannequins. He rubbed her back with a loofa and finally asked:

'Who was that old man you were with at the Mamounia?'

'A French businessman... he's very sweet.'

'He's your patron, yes? And gives you plenty of money, I'll bet?'

'Yes he's very generous.' She submerged herself until only her breasts were above the water. 'And how much does that English woman, Antonia Howard... how much does she give you?'

'How do you know her name?'

'Everyone knows her, she's famous... always in the journals, the magazines,' she laughed. 'That's why I looked your way because of her, not you. But you seemed to know her pretty well... don't you know she's a big celebrity?'

'I've known her for many years, since I was eighteen. I play polo with her husband, but I never think of them as being famous.'

Radouan got out of the bath and stretched. 'Now I mus' go,' he yawned. 'Tomorrow I have a very busy day. Can I call you in the morning around eleven so we can plan tomorrow evening?'

'Of course,' Delphine whispered, 'but I don't want you to go, I want you to stay.' Her face and hair floating in the water were like a sunflower.

'Just because I opened to you, you mustn't turn off on me now.' She whispered., I know that trick too... really, it's a very *bazaar* way

to behave, bazaari sex... just turn off and leave people feeling dark and empty... like you just turned off a light or something, it's not cool. I also know that you are a little bit crazy... don't forget I've studied psychology. I know you suspect your own madness and it scares you...'

Radouan knelt down and took her hand. 'You're tired.' She got out of the bath and he dried her off. 'You must sleep now... the days ahead are going to be the most important of your life and you must look happy and relaxed.'

'And what will you do?'

'I will just sit here beside you and hold your hand until you go to sleep.'

'And then?'

'I have many obligations.'

She looked distraught and turned away. 'I can see you have another life which has nothing to do with me... maybe you have several.'

'As you do too, I'm sure, but you wouldn't want to be part of them, believe me... I would be happy to give them up forever but that's in God's hands not mine.'

'You don't believe we have much control over our lives?'

'If we do, then tell me how we met? Explain that to me...'

'We met by accident...'

'Exactly!'

After Radouan left, Francesco, mightily aroused by Delphine's haunting beauty, her wit, and earthy frankness had paced the floor of his villa debating whether or not to send Tawfig out to get a couple of girls. But Tawfig had been equally unnerved by her and was too drunk to function. So out of boredom Francesco had gone to bed, only to be awakened later by Radouan calling to say he was coming over

By the time he arrived, Francesco had pulled himself together and was mixing two stiff drinks. 'I've been thinking of your Delphine,' he said, 'I agree with you there is something there. I mean... there was a star back in the 50's, fabulous woman... great fun... probabilmente non hai mai sentito parlare di lei... Rita Hayworth... she married Ali Khan. Also in Egypt the famous Houda Sultane whom you may have seen. This Delphine, she reminded me of them; that body... the same abbandono... la sua innata quasi sensualita... makes you want to get in there and ride eh?.. From Arles, right?'

'So you want to go ahead with the screen test in Ouarzazate... you weren't bull shittin'?' Radouan stared hard at him.

Francesco lit a cigar. 'No no... I am very serious and compliment you on your good taste. I'll make arrangements tomorrow and we'll plan to leave as soon as possible after *Aid Kabir* ... but I have to know what's in it for me if I do this... you see I am getting very lazy, I must have something to motivate me.'

'I told you... you can't fuck her, she's mine. But you will make a fortune with her.'

Francesco laughed. 'I already have a fortune, mia amico, I don't need any more.'

'Everyone always needs more, tha's life... You will see... she will win the Palm d'Or for you, I know it. Your fame will spread!'

'I have won the Palm d'Or twice and I'm famous enough already.'

Radouan was exasperated, 'Then what do you want? Partouze, I suppose.'

'Not really...' Francesco filled their two glasses again.

'You have some trick up your sleeve I can feel it.'

'Voglio te, habibi...'

Radouan was taken aback, 'what you say?!...'

'You, my friend - I want YOU. You can't believe how tired and bored I am of these women, I can have them anytime, I want you. We have shared many together. Now I want something different... I want you alone!'

Radouan laughed uproariously. 'I can't believe you... *mahboul*, crazy old man!'

'I'm not an old man; I'm only fifty six...'

'Tha's old... I can't believe... after all these years... I can't believe you're propositioning' me!'

Francesco sighed and rolled his eyes, 'Not propositioning you, *Habibi*... I am NEGOTIATING. If you agree, I'll do everything to make her a big star, a huge cash cow ... otherwise forget the whole thing... iss a lot of work.'

'FUCK OFF!' Radouan paced back and forth, 'after so many years of friendship now... You're drunk... you must be very drunk to speak like this. I am shocked... Give me another drink. Jus' this morning when I mentioned your name to Delphine she said she heard you were a gay. I said absolutely not... now you say...'

Francesco poured out more whisky 'You're absolutely right... I'm not a gay, whatever that is... I just happen to want to make sex with you. Now if...'

'Tha's your price for helping Delphine?'

'My lass price, amico...' Francesco waved his hand lazily, 'when I call, you muss come... wherever I am... drop everything and come - in Roma, in London, Paris, wherever I am, if you don't come immediately I will stop thinking of Delphine.'

'*Kharia!* Fuck you off you're jokin' me... you mus'...'

'Never was I more serious, believe me, never. And don't tell me you haven't fucked around with guys because I happen to know you have.'

'No, no, *Habibi*, believe me you are imagining these things, fantasizing.'

'Have another drink... Monsieur Paradise'

'Maybe it would be better if you forgot about helping Delphine.'

Radouan said narrowing his eyes, 'If you make her a star, I know I will lose her...I know it!'

'Now you're walking away from my shop, my friend... that means you are interested.'

'Interested in what?' Radouan's chin jerked up

'This deal... you're walking away from it juss like in the Souks. I know this game. I know how to play it!'

Radouan grinned. 'It's my nature.'

'I am very well aware of your nature, Grandissimo Difetto, believe me. But I won't bargain; not on this one.'

'So it's me for her.'

'Yes, whenever I call. Of course I'll pay all your expenses.'

Radouan looked at him suspiciously. 'For how long?' I'm very expensive.'

'I know that...For FOREVER of course!'

‘That means after death as well, I suppose...’ Radouan snickered

Francesco’s eyebrows arched. ‘Your name means Paradise... I would hope so...’

‘Be serious, *habibi*.’

Francesco shrugged his shoulders, ‘For as long as it takes to make Delphine a real star then.’

‘What’s a real star?’ Radouan felt like roughing him up. ‘How much will she have to be makin’ before she’s a real star?’

‘Twenty-five million dollars a picture, I suppose.’

‘Tha’s way too much. Ten is enough. When she reaches ten million, you will release me from this bond.’

‘Don’t worry, by that time either I’ll be bored with you, or dead.’

‘*HABIBI!*’ Radouan roared, ‘Don’ speak like that... we are old friends. You know how much I like you *habibi* Francesco... *oridouka!* If in three years Delphine hasn’t won at Cannes you have to agree that our deal will be over.’

‘Make it twenty then, it takes time to make a star these days.’

‘Fifteen...’

‘Okay...Okay!’

‘Give me another drink, please.’ Radouan narrowed his eyes, ‘I mus’ think about this thing. Really I like you too much... you know it... but we know each other so well... it’s embarrassing... tha’s why I wish you would reconsider your request...it embarrasses me’

Francesco filled Radouan’s glass. ‘Perche mai?’

‘Because you could become obsessed with me. It has happened to others ... they start callin’ me the Devil or *Shaitan* or that I have a *Djinn*... in side me. This plan of yours could be dangerous for you.’

Francesco made a face. ‘I am already obsessed with you. And long ago I decided either you were not really human, or you were inhabited by some *djinn*. It’s the *djinn* who fascinates me... the one inside you ... if only I could capture that one on film I wouldn’t want to have sex with you, but that’s impossible... when you stand in front of a camera you freeze because the *djinn* hates cameras. If you could juss relax you could be the greatest romantic comic since Fernandel.’

‘COMIC...are you crazy...I’m a very serious guy...SERIEUX!’

‘It’s the *djinn* who is serious, *habibi*, and very determined to get what it wants. You have this inner battle going on with it which is very charming, unselfconscious and very funny.’

‘YOU’RE TRYIN’ TO PUT ME DOWN SO I’LL STOP NEGOTIATING,’ Radouan growled menacingly...

‘But I’m not, au contraire, I’m putting you up; way up on a pedestal beyond my reach. I’m saying I am totally charmed. Your *djinn* is so sensual, so fascinated with evil. Would you consider doing this screen test with Delphine?’

‘Why not?’ Radouan said grudgingly.

‘And you will stick by our agreement: you for Delphine until she is making fifteen million a film or wins at Cannes whichever comes first?’

Radouan, now drunk, scrutinized Francesco: ‘It wouldn’t be that hard, I guess. I’ll have to think of all those girls we’ve had together. You’re still pretty fit. What do you want?’

Francesco laughed and toasted Radouan with his glass, ‘Vorrei essere una di loro!’

‘You mean to dress up?’

‘We could think about that, I suppose... but not for the moment.’

‘What then? How can I know what you want unless you SAY IT?’

‘Si... I want to become a woman with you. I want to have the experience!’

‘I wanna, I wanna,’ Radouan slurred drunkenly. ‘Your new name is gonna be IWANNA. I’m going to start callin’ you that’. He collared Francesco roughly ‘Come here I wanna, did you know you’re crazy, *habibi*. You think you have to make excuses to have sex with me? You’re a guy. You can never feel like a woman feels... forget it. Believe me, when a man gets fucked it’s different.’

‘You’re an expert then...’

‘NEVER, believe me on the head of my mother, I never...’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Francesco snickered.

‘Listen, I will tell you something important. As a boy I was very *zween*. My father knew I would have to defend my ass so he took me to a gym where they taught me to fight. By the time I was fourteen I was a fighter...’

‘But you lost one and somebody raped you.’

‘NO, *HABIBI*, be sure I never lost a fight. Once I put four policemen in hospital...’

‘Someday you’ll tell me how you know so much about getting fucked then...’

'I will tell you right now. My father, he was the life long friend of our last great Marrakchi poet, Chaiir El Hamra... his lover for many years. The poet was an authority on love making between men.'

Francesco now quite drunk hugged him enthusiastically. 'I wanna spend the tonight with you... Tawfig's passed out. We can begin our agreement right now.'

'Not tonight, I wanna. I left my father sleepin' on the roof... it will cool off soon and he will need a blanket. No one else will remember to bring it to him... I will sleep there on the roof with him.'

'Non ti credo'

'Believe me or not, as you like. Moreover, *habibi*, our agreement cannot begin until after the screen test. How can we know anything before that?'

'I think you're embarrassed by your own sensuality.'

'You're right, it's not Islamic... gets me in a lot of trouble.'

'Your problem has always been that you are too *zween*... when they see you, men are attracted ... and repulsed because they are attracted... and because they know you can steal their women'

'You're right.'

'Women are powerfully attracted too, but frightened by the savagery of that heartless *djinn* lurking inside you... that some day you will go away and leave them because the *djinn* is voluptuous and wants to wander... not be trapped inside your body. You must have been beaten a lot too...'

'All the time...'

'So was I. And now you are sadique, because the *djinn* has suffered so it wants to inflict pain on you and those around you.'

'I am also masochist.' Radwan smirked

Francesco looked surprised, 'In what way?'

'Lettin' you touch me, *habibi*... havin' to make sex with you. Beauty like mine doesn't come cheap, *habibi*, you will have to make lots of money for Delphine and me...'

'Now it's you who's being sadique...'

'If I'm gonna sin, if I'm gonna be roasted in the fires of *Jahannam* for satisfyin' your whims, then I must receive adequate compensation. Believe me I'm not bein' sadique with you, jus' tellin' you the truth. You're still good lookin' but look... the wrinkles... your skin... all those blotches! Its YOUR MONEY THAT'S ATTRACTIVE, *habibi* and tha's part of you, I'm not puttin' it down... Believe me, money is *ZWEEN*. Without it there's nothin, jus' work fuck and eat!

MONEY IS SACRED. In India, those cannibals, they worship a Goddess of Money, called Lakshmi; I get a hard on jus' thinkin' about her.'

Francesco collared Radouan: 'Hypocrite..! Really, you know some day I think I'm going to kill you... surprise you some night with a knife... slice off that *zahp* of yours and watch you bleed to death... slowly.'

Like a bored lion, Radouan gently shook off Francesco's hold. 'If you cut off my *zahp*,' he purred, 'I swear, *habibi*, it would sprout wings and fly away to the nearest *tina*! Now I mus' go! In Ouarzazate we'll seal our agreement after the screen test. Okay?