

Marrakesh

A Ravenous Romance™ Panamour™ Original Publication

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Prologue

The Nazis, of course, aimed at nothing less than world domination and, at least in the early stages, their plan was simple: They planned to surround the Mediterranean, turning it into a “German lake.”

On the European continent, they were off to a good beginning. They controlled Spain through their ally Franco, and Mussolini gave them Italy. They turned their eyes toward Greece and from there to the Middle East.

Across the sea, they faced a much bigger problem. Rommel’s Afrika Korps had military goals in Egypt and Libya. Yet they persevered even in places they hadn’t actually conquered and, over time, they established a German presence across North Africa, from Cairo in the west all the way to Morocco in the east.

Their resources were limited, and their armies were stretched thin. But the mere threat of a German takeover—military or not—was enough to make the more pliable and ambitious local officials cooperate with them.

In Morocco, the last outpost of independence, untainted by Nazi ambition, was the city of Marrakesh. Poised on the edge of the great Sahara Desert and built largely of local red stone, Marrakesh was distant enough from other population centers to maintain a large degree of autonomy. Marrakesh had uniquely managed to continue air service to Great Britain – two nightly flights left the desert’s edge and arrived in London, one in early evening and one in the dead of night.

Its remoteness made Marrakesh a town without many enforceable standards or morals. Sexual ambiguity was a given there. Substances frowned upon in more “civilized” places were easily available. A lively black market in stolen goods and contraband fed the economy.

And so “questionable” types from across the globe made their way to the city.

Their numbers were swelled by refugees and political outcasts hoping, mostly in vain, to book passage on the London flights. The wealthier and smarter among them managed to do just that. The rest remained in Marrakesh, waiting and hoping, hoping and waiting.

It was only a matter of time before the Germans noticed Marrakesh.

But for me, for a time, it would be a city of unbridled passion and breathtaking romance.

Chapter One

My name is Frank Chandler.

I came to Marrakesh—Dan and I did, that is—after separation from the Army. Neither of us much wanted to return to the States, and with war raging in Europe, our options were fairly limited. We thought about Egypt for a while and even the Far East. But Morocco had a reputation for being a good place for outsiders, which we certainly were, so it seemed a good choice.

Marrakesh was not exactly the remotest part of the country, but it was the farthest point that could reasonably be described as a city, so our choice was obvious. I had had some experience running a nightspot stateside, and there was no real competition in Marrakesh except a place called the Green Iguana, a shabby hole run by a tall, thin Englishman with steel gray hair who called himself Poppa Cherry. There were a few dozen native places even more uninviting than the Iguana, so Marrakesh it was.

Like most of the country, Marrakesh had a fair-sized population of international types – Frenchmen, Danes, Swedes, Chinese, even a few expatriate Germans. Most of them seemed to have come there to hide or to bury their past, which made it easy for us to fit in.

The prefect of police was a guy named Stephane Decae. This was technically “French Morocco,” after all, even though the French government in Paris had fallen to the Germans. But the war was hardly being felt yet in Marrakesh. Local officials, all of them French, carried on with their cheerfully corrupt “administration.” And Stephane was the most cheerful of them all.

He was tall, handsome, urbane, though it was obvious he was a bit past his prime. With bright red hair and piercing green eyes, he must have cut quite a figure when he was younger. But that was definitely in the past.

Stephane liked men and made no secret about it. Morocco is famous—or infamous—for the pleasures it offers men of that persuasion. Stephane gloried in it. Every time a high-profile crime was committed in Marrakesh, which was roughly every other day, he would send out his police to round up a group of plausible suspects, always including a selection of handsome guys for him. If they played ball with him, they were let go. Catching the actual culprits was almost always a secondary concern.

Everyone in Marrakesh knew the game Stephane was playing, and nobody seemed to mind. Certainly the young men themselves didn't object; they benefited from Stephane's favor in all kinds of ways. The police would conveniently overlook their petty crimes, whether picking pockets, trafficking in the black market, or making themselves available to affluent tourists as well as the Prefect. Marrakesh was that kind of place.

Within our first few days there, we found a run-down shambles of a place that would be perfect for an American-style nightclub. Dan thought it was a ruin, but to my eye it looked merely dirty and messy; cleaning it up would take a lot of work, but not a lot of cash.

We set to work, hired a few laborers—cheap in Marrakesh—and within a month the place was looking pretty good. A coat of fresh paint and it would be ready for business. It wasn't too hard to find men with the experience to work there—chefs, waiters, bartenders—and soon enough we were ready to go.

There was no need to advertise. Marrakesh floated on word of mouth—what in other places is called gossip. Soon the whole town was buzzing with the news that an American-style nightclub would be opening soon. We even decided to call it Frank's American Nightclub, just so no one missed the point. Speculation was rife that the owner wouldn't be too choosy about the activities his patrons got up to. This was Marrakesh, after all.

There were people around Marrakesh who whispered that these two Americans were crazy to open a nightclub in such a town. Most of the residents had never even seen a club, much less visited one; they didn't even have a clear idea what such a place was all about.

But I had a surprise up my sleeve, something that was sure to draw people in and keep them coming back, even after the initial novelty had worn off. And that surprise, in a word, was Dan.

Dan was originally from Pittsburgh, and before he was drafted he had earned a living in the jazz clubs in that city's Hill District. He had played with all the greats – Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Bix Beiderbecke and a lot more. The draft and the Army had put an end to that, of course, but I had heard him play a lot, and he was terrific. And when he accompanied himself on vocals, the effect was almost electric.

Marrakesh had never heard American jazz before. Even if the natives found it odd—as some of them were sure to—the city's large international population was certain to love it. If nothing else, there were scores of Frenchmen, and if there was one place in

the Old World where jazz was popular, it was Paris. With Dan playing in the club, we were sure to be a hit.

I had met Dan—Dan Jackson, to give him his full due—in the service. We were both stationed in England, near London. I was a mechanic in the Air Corps. Dan was in a “segregated” unit doing construction. Ordinarily we would never have even met unless we found ourselves in combat together. What the Army called “fraternizing” was strictly forbidden.

But one night I stopped in a little jazz club in London’s West End. There was this terribly handsome black guy playing the piano, improvising and singing “Satin Doll” in the richest, mellowest baritone I had ever heard. I struck up a conversation with him between sets, we learned we were both in the service, and an abiding friendship started to grow.

“Don’t tell the Army I’m playing here, okay?” he said. “They don’t like us mixing with civilians.”

“I won’t tell on you if you don’t tell on me.”

He laughed. “They’re even more down on us black soldiers. They say we give a false impression of America.”

“More false than the military life?”

It wasn’t just his music that captivated me. Dan had the warmest smile and the most wry sense of humor. And, as I said, he was terrifically handsome. Even though it was against regulations, we started keeping company.

I had been with a few women – not as many as a lot of guys my age, but my share. And those relationships had been satisfying in a physical way, but there had

always been...something missing, something that didn't feel quite right. The Army and Dan changed that.

Living in a barracks with a lot of other guys brought something out in me. I had always had sexual thoughts about other men, but I had never really acted on them. I had seen to often how men like that were treated. But barracks life – all those men, most of them naked or in their underwear a lot of the time – that brought something out in me. We used to have jerkoff contests. All the men in the room would take part, sometimes only a half -dozen, sometimes dozens of us. We'd get our cocks out and work them as fast as we could. The idea was to see who could come first.

It was so exciting I couldn't contain myself. All those men, some of them clothed, some naked, some just in their underwear. All working their cocks furiously. Some of them cut, some of them with the most beautiful foreskins. Blond guys, redheads, dark-haired; guys in their early twenties; guys in their thirties and forties. Big cocks and small ones, long ones and short ones, thick ones and thin.

I always positioned myself so I could see them all. And I knew I wanted to do more than just watch. I wanted to get down on my knees and kiss them, lick them, suck them. Swallow the come.

I could never let that happen, never let any of them guess what I wanted. I had seen how guys like that were treated. But Christ, how I wanted it.

Then one day a guy from Iowa suggested a new twist: we would all shoot our come into a glass, and the last guy to come would have to drink it. The guys weren't sure; a lot of them decided not to play. But I, well ... difficult as it was, I delayed my orgasm, so I could be the "loser." And their come, their rich creamy come was the best,

the sweetest, the hottest thing I'd ever tasted. I made sure I didn't lose every time; that would have been too suspicious. But I lost often enough to fire my fantasies. I didn't want to just taste their come. I wanted their cocks in my mouth, singly or two or three at a time, spurting, shooting.

But I could never really do such a thing. It would have to remain a fantasy. Or so I thought.

* * * *

One really hot night, Dan and I were listening to some Glenn Miller records, and he took his shirt off. And he had the body of a god. Perfect, V-shaped chest; small tight nipples. I tried not to stare, but I couldn't help myself.

I had never actually done anything like it before, only fantasized. I had been with a few women—my first time was with a whore—but like I said, I couldn't take my eyes off Dan. I was afraid he'd notice and be offended. But when he saw me staring he smiled. "It's too damn hot," he said, grinning at me like an eager schoolboy. "Why don't we get undressed?"

So it happened. His body felt so good beside mine. He kissed me, and it was better than with any woman I had ever known. When his tongue touched mine, it felt like electricity running through me. His hands on me were so strong and reassuring. When he sucked my nipples, it was ecstasy. Then, smiling like a schoolboy, he slid off my shorts.

Dan sucked my cock, took it in his mouth, caressed it with his lips and tongue. I was harder than I'd ever been. He worked my cock and worked it some more. In my mind I saw all the guys in the barracks, cocks out, shooting huge loads of thick hot come.

Then after a while, I saw only Dan. I looked down at him, and the sight of him with his mouth on my dick made me hotter than I had ever been. I felt it swelling, and finally I came in his mouth. And he swallowed every drop.

When he was finished, I bent down and kissed him. “Now, it’s my turn.” I got down on my knees. Just the sight of his underwear, the white cotton against his black flesh, excited me to the point where I knew I was going to shoot again. But I held back. As I slid his shorts down, his cock sprang up. It was huge, and it was uncut. I pushed the tip of my tongue into his foreskin. He groaned with pleasure.

I wanted this to last. Slowly, very slowly, I licked the tip of his cock. Then took it into my mouth. Dan writhed, and feeling him react to me made me even more excited. I licked his balls. Took them into my mouth one at a time and sucked them. He loved it; I could tell.

The shaft of his cock was long, thick and smooth. It slipped into my mouth effortlessly, and I began the slow, back-and-forth sucking I knew would get him off. As I was working on him, he reached down and pinched my nipples. I stroked my cock. God, I was ready to come again.

I felt his cock swell in my mouth, and he shot. I swallowed a huge mouthful of come and kept working his cock with my lips and tongue—I wanted every drop he had in him. And I came again. I shot more than I had the first time.

Dan kissed me. We had sex four more times, that first night, and each time was hotter than the time before. In between, we slept in each other’s arms. I knew I had found what I had always wanted.

Over the next few weeks, Dan taught me for the first time all the kinds of pleasure my body was capable of. He fucked me, I fucked him. We made love to each other's feet. The first time he put his tongue in my buttock, I exploded with more pleasure than I'd ever thought possible.

We made love to each other every chance we got, and we explored each other's bodies from the tops of our heads to the soles of our feet. When Dan kissed me, it was as if I had never been kissed before, as if the very idea of kissing had been invented then and there. We kissed, fondled, licked. When I felt him inside me, I knew a thrill like nothing I'd ever imagined. When I felt him come in me, it thrilled me as nothing ever had, or could.

When we were finished, I always felt bad about it. Guilty. It was the result of years of being told there was something wrong with men like us. I knew my guilt was a result of prejudice, but I could never quite shake the feeling. I always made myself ignore it. The pleasure, the ecstasy, was so intense.

We started seeing each other a lot more after that first night. We hit London's queer bars together, and of course the jazz clubs. We even took a little flat together for when we were on leave. We tried our best to coordinate our leaves so we could be together.

The Brits were shocked and, I think, a bit scandalized at what they called this "salt and pepper" couple. Even some of the other American GIs who hung out in the queer bars disapproved.

People talked. It was only a matter of time before word got back to our CO.

Not that we didn't try to be discreet. But rumors spread like wildfire. A circle jerk in the barracks was one thing. Boys will be boys, and all that. But two men actually being intimate, actually loving each other – that had to be stopped.

The top sergeant showed up at our little flat with a contingent of MPs one night when we were in bed together. He pounded on the door ferociously. “Open up! Military police.” We rushed to get our clothes on, but they were in the room almost before we knew it.

We were arrested, court martialed, and kicked out of the Army. The one decent thing they did—through the intervention of a secretly queer lieutenant we knew—was give us the opportunity to stay in Europe rather than being shipped home. They kept us in separate cells, but we managed to communicate. Both of us had heard stories about what had happened to guys who were given “blue discharges.” Shunned by friends and family, unable to find work with any employer who checked their records – the military managed to perpetrate the ostracism these men had fought so hard to avoid.

So on the whole, war-torn Europe seemed preferable to us. We bummed around London for a few weeks, where some friends gave us what help they could. Then we moved on to Amsterdam, and from there to Paris. It was in Paris that Dan heard about Morocco, and how it had always been welcoming to men like us as long as they lived discreetly.

Those weeks in Paris ended so unhappily for me. There actually was a woman, Lilli. I thought I was in love, and she treated me as badly as the femme fatale in a Hollywood picture. Dan watched it all with a kind of amused detachment.

It all left me confused and full of doubt. I was depressed and almost suicidal. Dan and I stopped sleeping together, though our friendship remained strong. And he pulled me through. On the eve of the German occupation, he managed to get us out of the city to Marseilles, and from there on a boat across the Mediterranean to, inevitably, Morocco.

“You’ll forget her there, Frank. You’ll remember your true self.”

“My true self. What a laugh.”

“Don’t be that way, Frank.”

“You think I can help it?”

So soon enough, hoping to go where no one knew us, and with Dan taking charge, we found our way to Marrakesh. The opportunities presented by opening a nightspot became clear almost at once. If we were a success, all the important people in town would soon be our customers; and they were contacts we could use. I threw myself into it. Having something to occupy my mind helped me forget Lilli, as Dan had predicted. I was starting to feel alive again.

Dan noticed I was more cynical than I had been before; he seemed to feel obligated to try to cheer me up. But I told him I didn’t want or need cheering. “Cynicism is the only reasonable response to the world and the human race.”

“A lot of people wouldn’t agree, Frank.”

“You know anything about the Greeks?”

“There was a hot sergeant last year...”

“The ancient Greeks. Cynicism was a respected school of philosophy then. One of them wrote, ‘The cynic questions everything in order to learn what is true.’ I’ve learned better than to take anyone or anything at face value.”

“From Greek philosophy.”

“Shut up. You have a band to hire.”

* * * *

The impending opening of Frank’s American Nightclub was the talk of the city. People came to gawk at the renovation in progress and ask prying questions. It was rumored everywhere that Dan and I were lovers; everyone seemed to want to know. But we had been stung once. It became our policy to say nothing, ever, about our past, about our friendship, about anything that might give anyone an advantage over us. This policy had unexpected benefits. The curiosity about us was so great, and generated so much gossip, the success of the club was even more assured.

And so Dan and I became, by deliberate choice, sphinxes.

I wanted to make him a full partner in the place. But he wouldn’t hear of it. “I’m just a musician, Frank.”

“You’re key to what we’re doing here.”

He shook his head. “No, I think I want to keep a lower profile. This place is called Frank’s. Let’s keep it that way.”

He devoted his time to helping with the renovation work and recruiting some experienced musicians, mostly French, from the international community.

We located a German designer in Tangier and brought him to decorate the place. His name was Schneider, and he insisted there was very little work to be done. “Moslem

architecture is among the most beautiful in the world, and this place is a fine example of it.” He installed some lighting for us, and a few “streamline moderne” decorations, the style that is coming to be called Art Deco. But he was right; very little needed to be done. In fairly short order the place looked like a real nightclub, with atmosphere to spare.

A few days before opening Poppa Cherry showed up, plainly curious about his new competition. “I hear you are counting on Dan and his musicians to attract customers.”

“Dan is the most talented man I know.”

“I’ll tell you what, then. I’ll give you a thousand dollars American for him.”

From the corner of my eye I saw Dan stiffen. I told Cherry firmly, “I don’t buy and sell human beings.”

“You must be the only one in Marrakesh with those scruples, then. Human flesh is the cheapest commodity on the market.”

“Why don’t you go back to your own place? Now. Before you have to crawl back.”

Poppa Cherry laughed at me. “Your kind of American is always so amusing. You think talking tough puts you in charge of any situation. But Marrakesh is a more subtle and complicated city than you seem to know. I wonder if you’ll last here.” He left, still chuckling to himself.

But he left me wondering. Would we last? Could two Americans really make a go of it in a place like Marrakesh?

Chapter Two

There was a movie theater in Marrakesh, a dingy little place called the Bijou. It was run by an excitable Dutchman named Verplanck, a plump, perpetually jolly soul with an avowed crush on Marlene Dietrich. Marrakesh was not exactly a prime market for movies, so the films he played were usually eight or ten years old, sometimes more. We got all the Dietrich films he could book, of course – *Blond Venus*, *The Devil Is a Woman*, *Shanghai Express*. The only one of her famous movies he refused to show was *The Blue Angel*. When I asked him why, he told me in an exaggerated whisper, “It is German.”

“So is she.”

“No, she is an American now. She lives in Hollywood.”

“Oh.”

It wasn’t just Dietrich movies he ran. We got Garbo in *Queen Christina*; we saw the Marx Brothers in *Horse Feathers*; *Grand Hotel*; *Dinner at Eight*; and on and on. Verplanck was an amateur, more fan than entrepreneur. He had a habit of running the reels out of order. We knew how King Kong died before we learned he had gone to New York. Mae West was arrested before she ever got the chance to tell Cary Grant to come up and see her.

But old as they were, and as garbled as he occasionally made them, Verplanck was creating a community of movie buffs in Marrakesh. His films were like nothing most of the residents had ever seen. And so the oddest group of people tended to congregate at the Bijou, usually on the first day new movies ran. I have to admit I was

one of them, if only because I got such a kick out of seeing movies I had loved when I was younger.

And there was something else: the back row. Quite by accident one night, I discovered the back row.

I was sitting, Watching Jean Arthur and Cary Grant, when an older Moroccan man came and sat next to me. It seemed odd; the place was nearly empty. After a few minutes I felt his hand on my leg. At first I was startled, then I realized what was happening.

His hand slid up my thigh. Touched my cock through my pants. Then I felt him reach for the zipper. Before I knew it, he had my dick in his hand and was massaging it slowly, gently. I was nervous; anyone could have seen us. But there didn't seem any way to stop him without making a scene. And part of me wanted it. The knowledge that we might be caught at any time only made it more exciting.

He looked around, then up at me. With a deft movement, he took his dentures out. He dove quickly down for my cock. In a flash he had it in his mouth, sucking, massaging it with his lips. I had to force myself not to groan out loud. When I came, staring at Cary Grant, it was almost as exciting as the first time with Dan.

Among the Bijou's regulars, there was a mad old Russian countess named Prevenskaya who kept telling us that if she could only make her way to Hollywood, she could be a film star too. We listened to her, amused; she must have been eighty. She kept pestering Stephane Decae for a permit to leave on the London plane, but he was too busy being a corrupt official to bother with her. So her film career was, through no fault of her own, on hold.

And there were others—all kinds of international riffraff, people from around the world who, like me, had learned to love movies elsewhere, before they came to Marrakesh. There was a Hindu doctor named Karemi (a self-exile, I think), Italian pickpockets, Swiss forgers; even a few Germans who disagreed with the Nazi regime. The Bijou was its own little League of Nations.

Among the Italians was a particularly repulsive little man called Pinello. I never knew it for certain, but I was fairly sure picking pockets was the least objectionable of his activities.

I went to the Bijou to relax for a while on the afternoon of our opening. A nice blowjob in the back row would be just what I needed.

Dan and his musicians were busy rehearsing. Schneider was overseeing the final details that would give the place atmosphere. There wasn't much for me to do once I'd inspected the staff we'd hired and given them final instructions for the opening that night. Not much instruction was needed. By luck, I had managed to find a crew who mostly had experience working in places like mine. There was Franz, a seasoned headwaiter who had come from the Café de Paris when the Germans invaded. And Jan, a Jewish bartender who'd escaped from Berlin one jump ahead of the Gestapo. Michele had escaped from Rome in much the same way; he was our head chef.

So everything was on track for that night, and I needed to unwind.

The Bijou was showing a double bill of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. The usual Germans, sensing uncomfortable parallels, had stayed away. But a gaggle of Hungarians had come to see Bela Lugosi flap his cape.

Just inside the lobby, where Verplanck's fat wife sold candy bars and popcorn so stale I always suspected it was left over from the Crimean War, Pinello loitered nervously. When he saw me, his face lit up and he crossed directly to me.

"Frank! I was hoping you would come today."

"Why, Pinello? Do you think I have a taste for corny old monsters?"

He shrugged. "Here you are."

"I won't be staying long. We're opening tonight."

"I know. I'll be there. I just wanted to ask you if you would do me a favor."

"I never do favors for customers, Pinello. It's bad business."

"You will be there tonight, of course." He was not about to give up.

"Of course."

"Excellent. We will talk more then."

"That's what you think. Why don't you go find some wealthy tourists to steal from?"

He grinned. "All the best tourists will be at Frank's American Nightclub this evening. But that is not why I will be coming."

"Our dinners are expensive, Pinello. I doubt if you can afford them."

"I might surprise you then, Frank. Besides, I understand you will have gambling in the back room."

I shushed him. "Not so loud. Gambling is illegal. We would never break the law."

"Exactly why I will be coming. I only patronize respectable establishments." His irony was like lead.

“With wealthy patrons.” I tossed him a coin. “Here. Go buy yourself some of Mrs. Verplanck’s popcorn.”

He sulked. “Someday soon you will have more respect for me, Frank. Can I—” he looked around furtively and lowered his voice. “Can I sit beside you in the back row?”

I laughed at him. “No thanks. Go and eat.”

He went. Other regulars stopped to say hello, none of them as annoying as Pinello. Everyone wanted to know about our plans for the opening. I told them they’d have to come and see. Thankfully the lights dimmed and I went into the theater to enjoy Boris Karloff terrorizing Mae Clark, and to get the usual blowjob from a stranger. It wasn’t the best I’d had, but it relieved the tension.

* * * *

After the movies I got a quick dinner in the souk, then went back to the club. We were due to open in little more than an hour. It was clear I had chosen the staff well. Everything was ready; everyone was at their stations, awaiting the first arrivals. The kitchen staff, under Michele’s direction, were preparing the most succulent food; the desserts looked especially appealing. There was every sign the night would be a success.

Mohammed, our doorman, found me in the kitchen, salivating over some pastries. He was one of the few native Moroccans we had hired; the idea was to make the place as “American” as possible. I wanted him to greet people at the door, creating the impression they were leaving Morocco behind them when they came in.

When he found me, he was wearing some weird, jerry-rigged variation of an American Army uniform. “Excuse me, sir, there is someone to see you.”

“Tell them we don’t open for another hour. What the devil do you have on?”

He seemed surprised and puzzled by the question. “I wanted to look American, for our guests.”

“I told you to come to work in your best Moroccan-style clothes.”

“But, Frank. I—”

“Go home and change as fast as you can.” I glanced at my watch. “And I mean fast; we open in less than two hours.”

He was glum. “Yes, Frank.”

“Now about whoever it is outside—I don’t want to see anyone now. Tell him to come back when we open.”

“It is the prefect, sir.”

“Decae? What on earth does he want?”

He shrugged. “He insists on speaking with you, sir.”

“Oh.” I sighed. “Very well. Tell him to wait in the courtyard. I’ll join him there in a moment or two.”

“Yes, sir.”

I spent a few minutes with Jan, making sure our liquor stock was sufficient, then went off to confront the policeman.

It was nearly twilight; the sun goes down so quickly in the Sahara it’s quite startling. Soon enough it would be time to turn on our sign and the spotlights we’d picked up secondhand to make our opening an “event.” The last thing I wanted was to deal with a French bureaucrat.

Our courtyard had tables and chairs for outdoor dining and drinking; it was more French than American, but no one had noticed. And it was planted around with roses—Schneider’s idea—and I found Stephane smelling them and grinning like a schoolgirl.

“Stephane. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so content.”

He turned to face me, still smiling. “A French banker had his wallet stolen this afternoon. The roundup of suspects was unusually rich.”

“You are a Frenchman to the core.”

“I choose to take that as a compliment. Is everything ready for your big night?”

“Right on target, Stephane. I’m touched by your concern.”

“Do not be. I am here on official business, Frankie.”

“What official business? Our permits are all in order. They ought to be. We paid you enough for them.”

He pulled out a chair and sat at one of the tables. “Nevertheless, I am required by duty to check them one last time.”

“You issued them. You ought to know they’re in order.”

He brushed it aside. “There are rumors going around that you are planning to have a small gambling casino in a back room.”

So that was it. “Don’t worry, Decae. I’ve already instructed the staff to let you win.”

“Of course.” He was smug. “But gambling is strictly against the law. You must realize—”

“They’ll let you win every night, if need be. Surely that ought to be sufficient for you. Not that it might ever be called a bribe or anything.”

“No, of course not. The mere idea is shocking. You have been in Marrakesh such a short time. How can you have accustomed yourself our ways so quickly?”

“I’m a fast study. Now, if there’s nothing else you want, I have a nightclub to open.”

Jan came out looking for me. I asked him to bring us drinks and sat down opposite Stephane.

But Stephane seemed lost in thought. “Our ways. You are aware, are you not, Frankie, that I must personally sign exit visas for anyone wanting to leave on the plane for London?”

“What of that?”

“There is a lively black market for counterfeit ones,” he said. “Not that I would suggest you would ever sell one.”

“Never. Did you come here to make a lot of damn fool insinuations? I’ve been in this town for months. I’ve never come close to doing anything illegal, and you know it.”

“Of course not, Frankie. But—”

Jan came back with our drinks. Just then there was a roar overhead; the London plane was leaving. Decae looked up at it. I kept my eyes on him.

“It is easy to suspect,” he said offhandedly, “that you would like to be on that plane.”

“I haven’t said so.”

“If not now, then sometime in the future.”

“And that’s why I’ve done all this work to open the club. If that’s the best police work you’re capable of, Stephane, it’s no wonder this is the most corrupt city in Africa.”

He took a sip of his drink and shifted his weight. "All of this is beside the point. You will have guests tonight. Important ones."

"De Gaulle is bringing a party?"

At the mention of the head of the Free French government, he looked around nervously. "More important still. Colonel Erhardt of the Gestapo will be here."

It caught me off guard. "Erhardt? What does he want? The Germans don't have any authority here."

"You heard about the killing of those two German couriers last week?"

"I never hear any rumors. And the ones I do hear, I never believe."

"The colonel is coming to investigate."

I took a long drink and laughed. "Another vote of confidence in your methods."

He ignored this. "It is whispered that those couriers were carrying blank diplomatic passports issued by the Free French government – signed by General de Gaulle himself and countersigned by Eisenhower – as well as a considerable amount of currency. The passports cannot be rescinded or even questioned by anyone not on German territory. If someone wanted to leave Marrakesh and fly to England, they would be worth their weight in gold."

"To someone who wanted to leave." I said this pointedly and waved my hand at the club. "I have this to keep me here."

"Just so. As you said, you have carefully avoided any illicit activities. You are not suspected. Besides, despite your disdain for my methods, we have reason to believe we know who did the murders. In fact, we expect him to be here tonight. We will arrest him. For the Gestapo's benefit, of course. And it should provide some extra excitement

for your clients.” He smiled and nodded slightly. “My gift to you, to congratulate you on opening the most exciting new place in Marrakesh.”

“Since when do you toady for the Germans, Decae?”

“They are coming here. There is no French government anymore, not to speak of. But the Germans... Well, you know what they say about German efficiency.”

“Yes, I do. You know, Stephane, I can’t help admiring you, in a way. You’re the only man I’ve ever known with no scruples at all.”

He smiled ruefully. “Times being what they are, Frankie, the survival value of scruples is zero.”

I bristled at being called Frankie, but I said nothing.

We fell into an awkward silence. A moment later, some of Dan’s music started playing in the club, *Take the A Train*. Decae cocked his head and listened. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard music quite like this, not even in Paris.”

“That’s what we hope everyone will say.”

“Have you ever been to Paris, Frankie?”

“Once, just before we came here. The memories aren’t good.”

“That bad? No wonder Marrakesh seems desirable to you. But tell me honestly, Frankie, why did you come here?” He added pointedly, “You and Dan.”

“More rumors, Stephane? Is there any gossip you don’t listen to?”

“My position requires it, I’m afraid. People say you were in the American Army before you came to Marrakesh.”

“Do they?”

“I like to think you did something scandalous, which is why you needed to bury yourself in a place like this.” Again he said, “You and Dan.”

“Rein in your salacious instincts, Decae. Dan and I are friends. Good friends. That is all.”

“That is Dan’s loss, then. You are the most appealing man to come here in ages. You must admit that my curiosity, salacious or not, is reasonable. You have been here for months. In a city with plenty of attractive young women and not a few wealthy widows, you have stayed unavailable to them. And yet—”

“I have a nightclub to open. You don’t mind excusing me, do you?”

“About those permits.”

“See me tomorrow.”

Just then, to my relief, Jan came back and asked if we wanted more drinks. “No, thank you, Jan. *Monsieur* le Prefect was just leaving.” I turned to him. “I’ll see you later, Stephane. I’ll tell the croupier to let you win at the roulette table. But not too much.”

Chapter Three

Our opening night was a bigger success than we'd hoped.

We weren't scheduled to open the doors until nine o'clock. But people began lining up early; by eight, the line stretched down the street. Ahmed was completely flustered. "Mr. Frank," he asked me, agitated, "what shall I do?"

"Wait until opening time, then let them in gradually."

"But there are so many."

"If we have to turn people away, it will only add to our mystique as the hot new place."

"But—"

"Trust me, Ahmed, that air of exclusivity will make us."

"If we disappoint them, there will be fights—riots."

"Don't be melodramatic, Ahmed."

"Yes, sir." He pouted.

I took a look out the front window, and the crowd was indeed large and growing. It seemed everyone in town wanted to come to Frank's. Ahmed didn't think I knew what I was talking about, and it showed. But he went sulking back to his station at the front door, brushed off his clothes and prepared to face the crush of humanity he was sure was going to cause mayhem.

I caught Franz's eye. "Go out to the kitchen and tell Michele to start cooking. From the look of things, he'll be preparing a lot of meals tonight."

"Yes, Frank."

“Then keep an eye on Ahmed, and give him a hand sorting out the crowd. There will be some important people here tonight, and we don’t want any of them shut out. I’m going upstairs now to change into my dinner jacket.”

Dan and I had separate apartments above the club. As I headed upstairs I noticed he and his sidemen were already in their monkey suits and were warming up, tuning their instruments and riffing on some chords Dan played. They were sounding like a real American jazz combo; Dan had trained them well. There was a temptation to remind them how much was riding on their performance that night, but I decided that might only make them nervous.

The crowd outside was getting noisy, and against my better judgment, I found myself worrying about riots. Then, seemingly from nowhere, a half-dozen of Decae’s police appeared, brandishing nightsticks, and the crowd quieted. I watched from my window as I changed clothes, and I couldn’t help noticing Decae himself, in full dress uniform, near the front of the line.

It was dark by now. Downstairs again, I switched on the neon sign we had imported from a Belgian craftsman. FRANK’S AMERICAN NIGHTCLUB blazed in bright red letters. Strings of electric Christmas tree lights stretched across the courtyard. I assumed it could be seen halfway across town. The effect was not exactly cutting edge, but Marrakesh could not boast a gaudier display.

It was almost time to open the doors. I checked with all our key personnel to make sure they had everything ready. I was particularly concerned that Ahmed might miss a few local VIPs; we couldn’t handle much ill will, not even with Decae as a protector. Good smells were coming from the kitchen. I told Jan to put more champagne

on ice. Dan and the band went into a soft, swinging version of *Honeysuckle Rose*. We were ready.

Then the doors opened. Franz and Ahmed worked efficiently, admitting people and seating them. The best tables were saved for important visitors, of course—civic officials, Decae among them, and other local bigwigs. The place filled up fast. Dan and his men played a medley of Gershwin tunes. The very American music, contrasted with the Moroccan architecture, created just exactly the atmosphere I wanted. Franz dimmed the lights a bit. Waiters bustled through the crowd, taking orders and delivering food. People lined up at the bar and ran Jan and his assistants ragged. We were in business.

When Dan and the guys finished their set, everyone applauded enthusiastically. Then the floor show began. I had left the business of hiring our other entertainers to Dan. He knew more about that kind of thing than I did; my expertise was on the business end. I had decided I wanted only musical acts, no comedians; the mix of nationalities and languages made that advisable. Other than that, it was Dan's show.

First up were Vincent and Vanessa, a British dance team. They were a bit past their prime, which is why they were playing Morocco rather than London, and their costumes were more shopworn than I'd have liked for our opening act. I made a note to myself: if they worked out and we decided to keep them on, get them new costumes. Where we would find them was anybody's guess. It might actually be a matter of ordering them from Paris.

Dan's men played a rather torrid tango. Much to my surprise, Vincent and Vanessa performed wonderfully, despite the fact they were obviously a bit past it. You

could feel the passion in their movements. The place quieted down and nearly everyone watched them. Dan had chosen well.

Next was a Spanish singer named Movita. She had fled to North Africa during the Spanish civil war. She wore one of those frilly, ruffly flamenco dresses and accompanied herself on the guitar as she warbled folk songs from her country. The crowd was not as focused on her as they had been on the dancers, but she did a fine job.

By now the place was filled to capacity. A glance out the front door showed people still waiting to get in. If we could repeat this every night, we would be made. Someone tugged at my sleeve. I looked and saw Pinello. He smiled an ingratiating smile. “Congratulations, Frank.”

“Thank you, Pinello.”

“Would you join me in a drink?”

“I don’t drink with customers. It’s bad business.”

“But Frank, we are friends from the Bijou. Surely—”

“I don’t drink with customers.”

He sulked. “I won’t get too familiar, Frank. I promise.”

“I promise you won’t, either, Pinello. Now, go away. I have more important customers than you.”

Decae came at us through the crowd. Pinello saw him, looked anxious and hurried away.

“I thought you said you’d be bringing your German pals, Decae.”

“They will be here shortly. I am planning some, er, entertainment for their benefit.”

“If you think I’m going to pay you...”

“Not that kind of entertainment.”

“Oh.”

“Franz tells me your backroom—the gambling parlor—is not open yet.”

“Patience, Stephane. It will open in a few minutes. We’re planning to open it every night an hour after the main club. After people have had a chance to get a drink or two. Don’t worry. I know you want the enjoyment of gambling and the suspense of not knowing whether you’ll win or lose.”

“Don’t be impertinent, Frankie. Officially, gambling is illegal in Marrakesh. You will remain open by my good grace.”

“Your good grace will cost us a tidy sum. Just keep your pants on.”

He laughed. “That is not what I’m used to hearing from men as attractive as you.”

“And would it be too much to ask you to keep your cops out of here? They make people nervous.”

“There is one patron who has good reason to be nervous. After tonight, there will be no reason to keep my officers here.”

“Good.”

“Loosen up, Frankie. Your club is a hit. Will you have a drink with me?”

I scowled. “I don’t drink with customers. It’s bad business.”

“Good heavens, I never suspected what a prig you are.”

“Tell Jan to give you a drink on the house.”

But before he could do that, and amid considerable fuss, several men in German uniforms appeared at the front door. The club was already full. I could see Ahmed didn't want to let them in, I assumed because of the crowding and not for any political reason. But they were being insistent.

"Come on, Stephane, let's greet your Nazi buddies."

Colonel Erhardt was not looking happy. I put on my most professional smile and crossed quickly over to him. Ahmed was noisily telling him there was no room for him and his two aides, that he didn't have a table. I got between them.

"Colonel Erhardt? My friend here, Prefect Decae, was just telling me you would be visiting us tonight." I turned to Ahmed. "It's all right, Ahmed. Colonel Erhardt is a distinguished visitor. We must do our best to make him and his party comfortable."

"But Frank—"

"It's all right, Ahmed." I said firmly. "I'm sure we can find a table for the colonel." I smiled at the Nazi. "You are always welcome here, colonel. Whenever you're in Marrakesh. Please, just give us a moment to arrange things for you."

Erhardt was an archetypal Nazi, tall, stiff, military in his bearing, aristocratic in his manner. He clicked his heels together and bowed slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Chandler. Your hospitality is most appreciated." He clicked his heels again.

"Believe me, colonel, it is our pleasure."

I left Stephane to deal with him, shot Ahmed a stern look and went off to find a table for them.

Two minutes later they were seated at a table near the floor show. I ordered a bottle of champagne for them. "Compliments of the house."

Erhardt sipped his as if it might be poisoned. "So, you are the proprietor of this place."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Decae here tells me this club is the talk of Marrakesh. He says everyone who is anyone is likely to be here tonight."

"Stephane has a gift for judicious exaggeration. This is just a saloon like any other."

"But so crowded on your first night."

"America does that to people. It's something to do with freedom."

Erhardt stiffened. "You are suggesting Germany does not represent freedom?"

"I am suggesting nothing. America is a marketing device to me, nothing more. I am as apolitical as anyone you'll meet in Marrakesh."

He was the serene patrician. "I hope so, Mr. Chandler. For your sake."

I made myself smile. "I've been looking out for my own sake for quite some time now, colonel. I have no political convictions, I belong to no party, and I never take sides when it might interfere with business."

"A wise policy, Mr. Chandler."

"I thought you'd agree. Now, if you'll excuse me, M. Decae here is anxious for me to open the casino." I smiled and made a slight bow. "I'll tell Franz to get you anything you want. Gentlemen." I bowed again and left their table.

I headed to the back room, to get the gambling operations started. Franz was already there, fussily making sure everything was ready. A moment later we opened the

door and the first of our more adventurous customers came in and began checking the place out. Not surprisingly, Decae was among them.

“This is quite a layout, Frankie. Roulette, a craps table, blackjack, poker, baccarat...” There was a twinkle in his eye. I wondered if it was for the gambling or for me.

“We’ll never give Monte Carlo a run for its money. But I’m glad you like the place.”

“I should have known that a man like you would not do this halfheartedly.”

“A man like me? Just what do you mean by that?”

“Let us just say you are a skilled entrepreneur.”

He headed for the roulette wheel. I made my way to a little table at the back of the room, where I could keep an eye on everything. The main room was running nicely. I could give my full attention to the gamblers.

A few minutes later Poppa Cherry came waltzing in. He looked around, took everything in, then crossed directly to me.

“Congratulations, Frank. Your place is a success.”

“Thank you, Cherry.”

“Of course, how long it will remain successful remains to be seen.”

“Why not let me worry about that?”

He chuckled. “Will you let a business rival buy you a drink?”

“Sorry, Cherry. I don’t drink with customers,” I said again that night.

“Really? What an absurd policy. There is no better way to get to know them intimately. There are a great many unattached women in Marrakesh. Or attractive men, if that is your taste.”

I refused to take the bait. “This is a nightclub, not a bordello.”

“How interesting that you see a difference. Most people do not. There are already a number of call girls plying their trade at your bar.”

“What of it?” I brushed some imaginary dirt off my jacket. “As long as no money changes hands in here, it’s none of my business.”

He laughed again. “If you’ll excuse me, I want to try my luck at the blackjack table.”

“By all means, Cherry. I wouldn’t want to stop you spending the profits from your place.”

“You are the character, Frank.” He looked around, plainly hoping for an excuse to get away from me. “If you will excuse me, I see my good friend Countess Prevenskaya at the baccarat table.” He sashayed away, across the room to the blackjack, eyeing several of my waiters as he went.

Franz came rushing up to me. “We have a slight problem, Frank. Or rather, Jan does.”

“Another one?”

“There is a pickpocket working the bar.”

“Only one?” I sighed, got up and followed him. There was indeed a pickpocket at work. I was surprised none of his victims had noticed. I had seen him around town a few times, a nervous little man with slicked-down hair like Rudolph Valentino. I had

heard he was a Syrian, but no one seemed to know for certain. Jan saw me watching the man.

I put a hand on the thief's shoulder. "I appreciate your help."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Helping us to locate all those missing items. You were just about to give them all to the bartender, weren't you?"

He stammered. "I—I—"

"Or were you going to find one of Prefect Decae's policemen and give them to him?"

His face fell. "No, no, the bartender is right here. Why bother the police with a trivial matter like this?" He began emptying his pockets, handing wallet after wallet to Jan. Then he started to walk away.

I caught him by the shoulder. "That is all of them, isn't it?"

"Oh!" He pretended surprise as he took a small ladies' bag from his pocket.

"How careless of me. Here you are." He handed it to Jan with a flourish.

I took him by the arm. "I'm sorry you have to leave us now. Er, you were going, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes. It is getting late, and so—" He shrugged to indicate he had no choice.

I hustled him toward the exit. "Good. Don't let me catch you in here again, or I will give you to Decae. You know what he does to petty criminals, don't you?"

His eyes widened. "No, no, no, please don't give it another thought. I will not be back." Without another word, he ran out the door.

I went back to my table in the casino and told one of the waiters to bring me a large gin. Sipping it, I sat and watched the crowd. It felt good to be in business again. Out in the main room, the band started a Gershwin medley I had heard them rehearsing.

Another pest—Pinello was working his way through the crowd and toward me. I took a long gulp of gin. He smiled what he obviously thought was an ingratiating smile. “You have time to talk to me now, Frank.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Why should I? We have plenty of other cockroaches running around here.”

He pouted. “You don’t think very much of me, do you, Frank?”

“Let’s just say you don’t have a significant record of achievement. All right?”

His pout deepened. “That’s what I thought. You have no respect for me at all.”

“That isn’t true, Pinello.”

“Really?” He brightened.

“No. I have a very little respect for you.” I made myself smile so he’d know I meant it.

The pout was back. “Really, Frank. You Americans are so...” He made a vague gesture but left the thought unfinished.

“We Americans have a pretty good track record.”

“Yes, but you are not the only ones. My family are nobles in our hometown of Lucca. There is a family mansion I could go and claim any time.”

I chuckled. “With ten million lire in back taxes on it. If you could live like a lord there, why are you in Marrakesh? I imagine Decae would be happy to sign an exit permit for you.”

“I may do just that. And I won’t need Decae’s approval to go.” He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Frank, I need to ask you a favor. You’re the only one in Marrakesh I really trust.”

“I wish I could say the same for you.”

“You should think more highly of me, Frank. Maybe you will now.”

I leaned back in my chair. “What do you want?”

“I need you to keep something for me.” He reached for his pocket. “Please, Frank.”

Out in the front room, Dan’s men switched to Rodgers and Hart. I watched Pinello. He took several things out and arranged them on the table in front of me. “Here, Frank. Maybe your estimate of me will grow.”

My interest was up, but I maintained a carefully aloof manner as I inspected them. There in front of me were two diplomatic passports, signed by General de Gaulle and countersigned by Eisenhower. Beside them was a stack of crisp new pound notes.

I registered surprise.

“You see, Frank? Even you can not maintain your cool façade in the face of these.”

I picked up one of the passports to examine it more closely. It was genuine, no doubt about it. “How much cash is there?”

Eagerly he told me, “Ten thousand pounds sterling.” He looked like the proverbial canary-eating cat.

But it was so improbable he should have these things. I narrowed my eyes and peered at him. “Those German couriers who were killed out in the desert... No wonder Erhardt is here. The Third Reich can’t be happy about losing these.”

Pinello smiled again. I’d never seen him look more smug. “Please don’t ask how they came into my possession, Frank.”

“I won’t. You know Erhardt’s reputation. He’s one of the most vicious officers in the Gestapo. “Why would you take such a risk? I’ve always thought you were a sniveling little creep, Pinello, but I never thought you were a fool.”

“I’m going to sell the passports soon, Frank. The other one, plus the money I get, plus these pounds will get me back to Italy with no trouble. But I need you to keep these for me for a while. I will give you one of these thousand pound notes.”

I stared at the passports and the pound notes. “I don’t want them here long. Not even overnight.”

“No, no, Frank. My...customer...buyer...will be here tonight.”

I took the stack of pound notes and rifled them. “Did you kill the German couriers?”

“Frank! What an indiscreet question.”

I laughed. “All right, Pinello. I’ll keep them for you. But only for a couple of hours. No more.”

A look of relief crossed his face. “Thank you, Frank. You won’t regret it.”

“Every time anyone’s ever said that to me,” I said, “I’ve wound up with regrets.”

“Not this time, Frank. I promise.”

Dan and his sidemen took a break. I heard Movita strumming her guitar and warbling a Catalan folk tune. It gave me an idea.

“Now, why don’t you go away, Pinello? It wouldn’t be good for either of us if the Germans saw us talking and put two and two together.”

“Don’t worry about that, Frank. No one suspects me.”

I made my face a blank. “Even so. Why don’t you go drum up your ‘customer’? The sooner you get these things out of here, the happier I’ll be.”

“Yes, Frank.”

He slithered away and engaged Poppa Cherry in conversation. I wondered if Cherry was his customer for the other passport. It flattered me to think that now that he had real competition for the Green Iguana, he was clearing out of Marrakesh. But I decided the less I knew or thought I knew about Pinello’s business dealings, the better off I’d be.

With Movita entertaining in the main room, I passed among the crowd there largely unnoticed. A few people recognized me and said hello, but by and large, she held their attention. Dan had chosen his entertainers very well.

Erhardt and his men seemed as mesmerized as everyone else. I made my way quietly to the bandstand and found a place to hide the passports and the money.

Then as I headed back through the crowd, I felt someone tug at my arm. It was Verplanck. “Frank, my friend. You deserve congratulations. This place is marvelous.”

“Thank you, Verplanck.”

“But you must come to the Bijou tomorrow. We have a new film. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Shall We Dance*. It is only five years old.” He beamed with pride.

“How did you get hold of a movie as recent as that? Usually I feel lucky you’re running talkies.”

He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It was supposed to be *Flying Down to Rio*. 1933. Someone loaded the wrong film in the cans.”

“Lucky you. Lucky Marrakesh.”

“Of course, I would prefer Marlene Dietrich, but...” He spread his hands in a gesture of futility, as if to ask, *what can I do?*

“Have you watched it yet?”

He shook his head.

“Well, let’s hope it’s not too modern. Most of your customers wouldn’t know what to make of it.”

From the corner of my eye I saw Pinello at the bar, talking to Poppa Cherry. Was he really the “customer” for that other passport, then? They were both drinking fairly liberally. I made a note to tell Jan not to serve anyone who had had too much. Decae’s cops were filtering through the crowd, toward the bar. I sincerely hoped the evening would not become too interesting.

Just as I was finishing with Verplanck, a young woman came over to me. “Mr. Chandler? I’m Emmy Lou.” She had a strong Southern accent, like someone from the backwoods of Alabama or someplace. I had seen her earlier. She seemed to have been watching me all evening. I smiled and said hello.

“Emmy Lou Lee.” She took my hand and shook it vigorously. She had a grip like a Marine. “I’m an American.”

“I gathered.”

“I wanted to say hi and welcome y’all to Morocco.”

“We’ve been here for several months.”

“Your club hasn’t. And believe me, Marrakesh has needed someplace like this. The fact that it’s being run by such a handsome man makes it even better.”

Oh. So that was what she had on her mind. My heart sank. A proposition was the last thing I wanted to deal with. I smiled a tight smile. “Thank you.”

“I’ve been here for nearly two years. And sometimes I get so homesick.”

“What brought you here?” I pretended to be interested.

“Oh...business.” She grinned conspiratorially. It was only too clear what business she was in.

“What would the folks back in Alabama say?”

“Tennessee,” she corrected. “What they don’t know won’t hurt them. Daddy and Momma think I’m in university here.”

“Good for them. Listen, I’d like to stay here and chat with you, but I’m afraid I have a business to run. If you’ll excuse me...”

She giggled. “I’ll catch up with y’all later, then.”

I pulled free of her and moved quickly through the crowd. We were well into the evening, and things were settling down. Most of Franz’s duties for the night were done. As I approached him, I could see disappointment in his face, as if he wanted to ask, *what*

now? Instead he said, “It looks like we are a success. Everyone likes the place. I haven’t heard one negative comment.”

“That’s great, Franz. Listen, you see that girl over by the bar? The one in the green dress? Her name’s Emmy Lou something or other. She’s a goodtime girl. Working the crowd. She tried to hustle me, so I guess we should leave her alone. Keep an eye on her, will you? With so many cops in the place... Well, we don’t need that kind of trouble.”

“Yes, Frank. Do you have any idea why Decae brought so many of his men? I’ve been watching them all night and wondering.”

“I think it’s something about those dead German couriers.”

“There can’t be too many dead Germans.”

“Quiet.” I glanced anxiously at Erhardt’s table. “On the record, the Germans are our honored guests.”

“There’s no way we can keep them out?”

“Not without stirring up more trouble than we need.” I whispered, “Decae’s in bed with them.”

He made a sour face. “From what I hear, he’s in bed with half the men in town. I don’t think discriminating taste is one of his hallmarks.”

“Just keep an eye on the girl, will you? You’re doing a fine job tonight.”

“Thank you, Frank.”

At the bar with a large drink was a young Moroccan guy who had sucked me off at the Bijou once or twice. In better light, he was fairly attractive. He was dressed in the Western manner, in a dinner jacket. I crossed to him. “Good evening. It’s Ali, isn’t it?”

His eyes widened. “You!”

“Yes, me. Are you surprised to see me here?”

“Yes, I—”

“This is my place. I thought everybody knew.”

He looked around and seemed relieved that no one was paying attention to us.

“You are Mr. Frank?”

I chuckled in a way I hoped he would find reassuring. “Just Frank will do.”

“Please.” His voice was hushed. “We must be discreet. My wife is here. She knows nothing about my...proclivities. And the Koran is most explicit on the subject of men who do with men.”

I was about to point out that the Koran also forbids alcohol, but I held my tongue. I glanced around the room and saw that everything was under control. No one would miss me for a few minutes. “Come upstairs with me.”

“But—”

“Just for a few minutes, Ali. No one will notice.”

“Well...”

There was desire in his eyes. It was easy to see. I moved toward the staircase, and he followed me.

There was a dim light burning in my room. I took hold of him and kissed him. He resisted, or tried to, then melted in my arms. I reached down and stroked his crotch through his pants. He was already stiff. He groped me, too.

This had to be quick. I got my cock out and let him play with it. His hands were warm. Then I took him by the back of his neck and bent him down to suck it. “Do it, Ali. Swallow my dick.”

He sucked like the hungriest man in the world. I almost came, but I stopped him. “Now let me.”

His cock was small but in the light from the lamp I could see it was beautifully shaped. I kissed it, then licked the length of the shaft. Ali moaned with pleasure. Then I undid his trousers and slid them down.

His ass was gorgeous. Firm and tanned. I kissed it. I tongued the hole, and I could feel him opening up. So I stood up and pushed my cock into him. For the briefest moment he stiffened, as if he found it unpleasant, but that passed quickly. Our bodies moved together in rhythm, and I thrust deeper and harder. “Oh, please, Frank,” he whispered. I reached around and began jerking him off as I fucked him.

When I shot my load inside him, he let out a deep groan. A moment later, he came too. I wiped my hand on his dinner jacket. Then I kissed him again. “Now, Ali, it’s time to go downstairs to your wife.”

He smiled. “And to think—I was getting ready to leave.”

He followed me down to the bar, then disappeared quickly into the crowd. From the corner of my eye I saw Pinello and Poppa Cherry, still chatting at the bar. And I saw that Decae’s cops were slowly tightening a ring around them, drawing closer and closer. Just at that moment, Pinello must have seen them too. A look of mild alarm crossed his face. He peeled himself away from Poppa Cherry and headed toward me. I glanced over at Erhardt’s table. He and his stooges were watching what was happening with rapt

attention. Decae and one of his men stationed themselves right beside the front door, apparently determined to give Pinello no chance of exiting the club.

Pinello reached me and took hold of my arm in a grip tight as a boa constrictor's.

"What do you want, Pinello? Take your hands off me."

"Frank, you've got to help me."

"Help you what? I've done all the favors I'm going to do for you tonight."

"Please, Frank." The cops were getting closer to us. A note of desperation crept into his voice. "Please!"

"I told you to get your hands off me. Do it now, or you may not have an arm to move."

"Frank!"

I pulled violently free of him, sending him reeling backwards into a table. Glasses and dishes tumbled to the floor. The four patrons sitting there jumped to their feet and scrambled away.

I left Pinello on the floor and told them, "Sorry, folks. Just a bit of trouble with a drunk." I waved a signal to Franz. "Franz, get another table for these people, fast. See they get anything they want. Bring a bottle of our best champagne. And make sure it's all on the house."

Mollified but eyeing Pinello warily, they brushed off their clothes and waited for the new table and chairs.

Dan and his combo took their seats again and began tuning their instruments.

"What on earth is going on?" Franz whispered to me.

"Decae's idea of entertainment for our guests. At least the German ones."

Decae signaled his men and they drew their pistols. The one closest to Pinello announced, “Giuseppe Salvatore Pinello, you are under arrest for the murder of two German emissaries in the desert south of here.”

“No!” It was a hysterical shriek. He looked around like a trapped, frightened animal—which is what he was—then suddenly bolted for the entrance to the back room.

One of the cops aimed his pistol and fired. The bullet hit the door itself, not Pinello. He hesitated for an instant, then kept moving. Another policeman fired at him. And this time he was not so lucky. He cried out another shriek, then fell to the floor, coughing up blood.

I signaled to Dan, and the musicians fell silent. But everyone in the place seemed to be talking about what had just happened, either with alarm or fascination.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I announced loudly. “Please excuse the commotion. A wanted criminal was here tonight, hoping the police wouldn’t notice him in the crowd. Unfortunately they had to take measures to prevent him from escaping. But it’s all over now. Please, go back to your meals and drinks. Enjoy the music and the cabaret. There will be a free round of drinks for everyone here. I promise you there won’t be any more commotion.”

Dan ran his fingers up the keyboard and launched into *Isn’t It Romantic?* as if nothing out of the way had happened. Gradually the room quieted down. The excitement was over.

I looked to the spot where Pinello was still lying on the floor. From the look of things, he had lost gallons of blood. His clothes and the floor were soaked in it. He was still bleeding, which meant he wasn’t dead.

I had to make sure he wouldn't say anything awkward to the authorities about what he had done with the passports. When I reached his side, Decae was there, trying to interrogate him. I stood beside the prefect, watching. If it looked as if Pinello would say anything...embarrassing, I was prepared to make a little diversion.

Then he let out a loud gasp, almost a sob, and stopped moving. He was quite dead.

Decae nudged his body with the toe of his shoe. "What a pity. Colonel Erhardt would be so much more impressed if I'd managed to get a full confession out of him."

"We all have to live with disappointments, Stephane."

He made a glum face and ordered his men to carry the body away. Then he made a beeline for Erhardt's table. The Germans were all smiling in approval, and Erhardt himself was positively beaming. Hands were shaken. The general air there was of hearty congratulations. The killer of the two emissaries had been disposed of.

Dan struck up a lively dance number, and couples took to the floor. I found Franz at my elbow. "Well, Frank, so much for our successful opening. What business should we try next?"

"What do you mean, Franz? Just take a look around."

"A man was killed here tonight. When word gets out, nobody will want to come here. Is dining and dancing with a police presence your idea of fun?"

"The police will be gone after tonight. I have Decae's word on it."

He pretended to spit. "A cop's word. Do I need to explain to you what that is worth?"

“Now, now, Franz. Decae is all taken care of. He’ll be here every night, or at least every night when he needs money. Having his men keep too close an eye on, er, shady activities wouldn’t be good for his pocketbook .”

“But—”

“Besides, everyone seemed to enjoy what happened. Or at least to be intrigued by it. It’s not the kind of entertainment you can see at the Green Iguana. And for what it’s worth, we seem to have earned the good graces of the Third Reich.”

This time he actually spit.

“Relax, Franz. Frank’s American Nightclub is a big success. We’re made.”

He wasn’t pacified, but said, “Yes, Frank.”

“Now, go see to your patrons. Make sure everybody keeps having a good time.”

“Yes, Frank.”

Chapter Four

Franz could not have been more wrong. As word of the shooting of Pinello spread through Marrakesh, people grew more and more excited about the nightclub where it happened. As I strolled the market, one person after another approached me and asked for the latest news. Would we be opening earlier, to accommodate the crowds? Were we thinking of expanding? I asked Dan to keep an eye out for more performers.

I ran into Decae in the market—the souk, as the natives call it—the day after our opening. “Hello, Stephane. And thank you for the ‘entertainment’ you provided last night. We’re an even bigger success because of it.”

He pretended to be interested in the melons on offer. “You surprise me, Frank. I was under the impression Pinello was a friend of yours.”

“Friendship isn’t in my business plan.”

“Surely you consider me a friend now.” He began to stroke a squash in a particularly suggestive way.

“When will you get the message, Decae? I’m a businessman, not Don Juan. I came to Marrakesh for the opportunities it offers. Period.”

“Every man deserves a bit of pleasure now and then, Frankie.”

I looked him up and down. He was a handsome man, tall. I’d even have said rather appealing. I knew I could have him.

There was a time when the thought of casual sex would have horrified me. Marrakesh was changing me.

But no. He was a cop. And he was the cop whose good graces I was relying on. Complicating our relationship with anything physical would be a mistake.

I put on a no-nonsense manner. "From what I hear, you have access to half the men in town."

He made a sour face. "The criminal element. No one with your class, Frankie."

"Do I have enough class for you to stop calling me that?"

Decae chuckled. "Think of it as an expression of fondness."

"That squash will spoil if you don't get it home and refrigerate it soon."

Again he laughed. "All right. Consider me vanquished. Oh, by the way—"

"What now?"

"I thought you ought to know. Colonel Erhardt was in my office this morning."

"Helping you come up with an official story about what happened to Pinello?" I asked.

"Among other things, yes. He mentioned that he is quite enamored of Marrakesh. He is planning to stay as the resident representative of his government."

"And he's so devoted to the Reich he wants to stay as far away from it as possible?"

"Really, Frankie. It is not necessary to say what you're thinking all the time."

"It's a bad habit, I know, but I can't seem to break it."

"At any rate, the colonel will keep a permanent staff of six men here with him. You can expect them to frequent your establishment. He said, 'Unless I miss my guess, everyone in Marrakesh will go to Frank's sooner or later.'"

"Would he be willing to appear in an ad for the place?"

He started to laugh still again, then seemed to catch himself. “Really, Frankie, I am telling you this for your own good.”

“Leave my own good to me, Decae.”

“Colonel Erhardt is most concerned,” he said. “You see, even though we trapped the killer of those emissaries, we did not find on him either the diplomatic passports or the pound notes they were carrying—I gather quite a lot of them. It reflects badly on the police department and on me personally, I’m afraid. I am obligated to find them. If by chance you should have them...” He let the sentence trail off, the obvious threat unspoken.

“Why should I have them? I barely knew Pinello except as a pest. He would never have given them to me.”

“No, of course not.” He peered at me. I had the feeling he could see right through me. “I am only saying if.”

We sparred for a few more minutes. I had the impression he wanted to make certain I was taking his “friendly warning” seriously. Then I finally managed to pull free of him.

There were a few other people in the market that afternoon – Verplanck, Countess Prevenskaya and others. They congratulated me on our opening, schmoozed me for what perks they thought they could get—no cover charge and so on—and I finally managed to get away from all public attention and get home.

My rooms above the club were small but comfortable. Architects in hot climates knew how to build for the breeze, so the least little puffs of wind helped kept the place

cool. Ceiling fans did the rest of the job. I stripped, crawled into bed and napped for hours.

* * * *

That night we were even busier than we'd been the night before. People were lined up for hours. Jan and Michele had to lay in extra provisions. Franz, as usual, was flustered.

I had a quick word with Dan and asked him not to play *Isn't It Romantic?* He knew perfectly well that when I had been involved with Lilli in Paris, it had been "our song." It carried nothing but painful memories for me. He understood and promised he wouldn't play it again.

The night was uneventful. People who hadn't been there the previous night asked all about the police, Pinello and the shooting. A surprising number of them asked to see the precise spot where it happened. I had the impression they were hoping to see dried blood or something. Halfway through the night I told Franz to have his people showing them the spot, no matter how insistent people were.

Other than that, the night was uneventful. Decae won at blackjack. Erhardt and his men sat at the same table, looking disdainful and superior. The crowd seemed to love Dan's playing, as well as Movita's Spanish songs. Even Vincent and Vanessa went over well, with an audience that mostly had never seen a dance team before and had no idea what to expect from one.

But the night left me tired. After we closed, cleaned the place and killed the lights, I headed to bed again. Sleep would be so fine.

But there was someone in my bedroom. In my bed. I turned the light on low, hoping I could surprise whoever it was. My first guess was that it might be Decae, even more forward than usual. Or one of Poppa Cherry's rent boys.

But as I took a few steps toward the bed, I saw long hair and realized it was a woman. Long auburn hair cascaded over the covers. The woman woke with a start and looked up at me.

For an instant I was certain she was no one I had seen before. But then I recognized her. It was Emmy Lou Lee.

When she was over her surprise at being wakened, she blinked a few times and smiled at me. "Frank."

"What are you doing here?"

She blinked again, or tried to bat her eyelashes seductively – I wasn't sure which.

"Come now, Frank. What is a woman usually doing in a man's bed?"

"Usually the woman has been invited. Remind me—when did I ask you?"

She adopted a "you silly man" tone of voice. "You made it clear enough last night that you want me."

"I knew I shouldn't have let you drink so much. I'll have to tell Jan you have a two-drink limit."

"Why don't you get in next to me, and we can discuss it."

I took a step toward her. The sheet slipped down a little. Her shoulders were bare. She uncovered herself completely and began to masturbate, obviously thinking it would excite me.

My heart sank. This was the last thing I wanted to be dealing with. “Why don’t you get out of there and get your clothes on?”

I heard Dan outside in the hall, climbing the stairs and going into his room. I half hoped he’d come in, for whatever reason, and put an end to this.

“You want me, Frank.” She made her voice low and sultry. She extended her hands toward me, which made the sheet slip down even further. A nipple showed. “You know you want me. How long has it been?”

I stared. The situation left me speechless.

Slowly she kicked the sheet off the bed. The outline of her body shone in the dim light. “Come on, Frank. Make love to me.” She cupped her breasts in her hands and massaged them. One hand slid down to her crotch. “Please, Frank.”

“This isn’t right. Women don’t take the initiative. That’s not part of the game.”

“I do.” She spread her legs slightly and pushed her fingers in more deeply. Seeing her there like that, I was almost tempted. She was young—she couldn’t be older than twenty-five—and her body was soft and curvy.

I crossed to the bed, bent down and kissed her, a long, deep kiss. But with my eyes closed, I imagined I was with Dan. His kisses were better than any I’d had with a woman. I touched her breast, fondled her nipple.

“Kiss it, Frank.”

I started to. But it was not Dan’s chest, not firm and hard and athletic. Suddenly I wanted to be anywhere in the world except there with her. I pulled away from her and straightened up. I felt cold; and I didn’t try to hide it.

“What’s wrong, darling?” she cooed.

When I spoke, my voice was hard. “How many men have you called that?”

“What do you mean, Frank?”

“I mean I’m not going to be taken in like this.”

“I don’t—”

“You’re a goodtime girl. You think that by sleeping with me, you can get me to let you work the club.”

“No. I—”

“Don’t lie to me. You’re a whore and we both know it. Who knows how many men you’ve played this game with?”

“No! I’m just a good American girl who’s down on her luck and needs a little love, that’s all.”

“Put your clothes on and get out of here.”

“But Frank,” she almost whispered. “I love you.”

“Stop it. Do you think I’m dumb enough to fall for a whore’s patter? I told you to get dressed.”

Without another word she sat up, reached for her clothes, which were on the floor on the far side of the bed, and began putting them on. She started crying, very convincingly. “This is no way to treat a woman who loves you,” she sniffled. “Treat her right and she’ll do anything for you.”

“That hasn’t been my experience.”

“Here, Frank. Help me with my brassiere.”

“Do it yourself. I want you out of my place. The sooner the better.”

I stood against the wall, expressionless, and watched her get dressed. She didn't try to get me to talk any more. When she was finally ready to leave, she crossed the room till she was right in front of me and tried to kiss me. I turned away.

"Frank!"

"Get out. Now. And don't let me catch you trying to hustle my customers or I'll give you to Decae."

She pouted. "From what I hear, he wouldn't want me any more than you do."

"Maybe not. But his men would. Ask anyone in town what they do to the whores they pick up."

She shrieked at me, "I am not a—" She raised a hand to slap me.

But I slapped her first. Not hard, just hard enough to let her know I meant it.

Finally she left. I stood alone, looking down at the bed. I kept thinking about Dan, about how good sex with him had been, more satisfying than anything I'd ever known. Why had our affair ended? Why did I always feel so unfulfilled after I made love to him?

And in between those thoughts, I kept thinking of Lilli.

Lilli. Beautiful woman. Seductive woman. I had let myself believe I loved her, and maybe I did. It was Lilli who had come between me and Dan. Thank God I'd never see her again.

But Emmy Lou had touched something in me. I needed relief. I started to jerk off, but it wasn't satisfying, wasn't what I needed.

There were rumors of cafes in the city where men went to find other men. Not exactly gay bars—not like the ones I had known in London. Quiet places, discreet places, places where no one was too concerned about what the Koran said.

One of them was at the edge of a little park near the Koutouba Mosque. Through darkened, empty streets, I went there.

It was dimly lit; only a few oil lamps burned. A man in the corner, Greek from the look of him, played a mournful tune on what I thought must be a bouzouki. There was no actual bar, only a counter where a thin young man leaned, bored. I approached him and asked for coffee.

“No one has coffee this late at night. It keeps them awake.”

“What do they drink, then?”

“Tea. Mint tea. We have kif too, if you would like.”

“No thanks.” I ordered a cup of the mint tea. He said he’d bring it to my table.

I sat and listened to the music and studied the patrons.

An odd group, a diverse group. About half of them were obviously Moroccans. The rest were various international types: a Scandinavian blond, a dark Spaniard, a hairy Middle Eastern man. Most of them returned my curious gaze.

Finally one of them, the one I took for a Spaniard, came to my table. “It is late at night,” he told me.

“I know it.”

“Yet you are out.”

“Yes. So are you.”

“I am Paolo.”

raised my eyebrows. “Portuguese? I thought you might be Iberian.”

“Yes. And you—you are American?”

I nodded. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around town before.”

“I am a writer. I seldom go out.” He sat down. “May I buy you more tea?”

“No thanks. But tell me about yourself. Why do you live in Marrakesh? How long have you been here?”

He told me he liked being an outsider. And he asked me about myself.

“My name’s Tom. I’m a salesman.” I felt an inch tall, telling the lie. But I wanted Paolo. He was not tall, but he had a good body. His arms were muscular and hairy, which excited me. His eyes were jet black. They seemed to be hiding some mystery, and I wanted to explore them more deeply.

We chatted for a few minutes. Then the moment came. “Would you like to visit my flat and see how a writer lives?”

“Yes, very much.”

He reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Good.”

His place was only a few streets away. It was unremarkable, a Moroccan residence like a dozen others I had seen. But the décor hardly mattered. Almost in the moment we entered the door, Paolo put his arms around me. We kissed. The feel of his tongue on mine erased the last trace of Emmy Lou Lee from my mind.

We were naked in an instant. His body was exciting to me. His uncut cock was only average in size, but it was beautifully shaped. I went down and started sucking it at once.

I licked his balls, sucked his dick, put my tongue up his asshole. Then it was his turn, and he did the same to me. Just when I thought I was going to come, he pulled away from me. “Wait here.”

A moment later he returned with what the residents called a *mouche*, a flyswatter made from a bamboo handle and a sheaf of palm leaves. “Bend over,” he whispered. He lashed my butt with it. It stung just enough to be erotic, not enough to actually hurt. More and more, harder and harder he lashed me. My cock pulsed with pleasure. I wanted him inside me. The mouche stroked my thighs, my back. I wanted Paolo to fuck me. I wanted all of him.

I jumped down to the floor and started making love to his feet, as he kept lashing me. I licked them and sucked his toes, and he moaned softly with pleasure. Then softly he said, “Now.”

He fucked me. I felt his cock slide in. It wasn’t big, I knew, but it felt enormous. And he began his rhythmic thrusting in and out, his dick massaged my prostate. It felt like I was being masturbated from the inside. Paolo was not as good as Dan, but he thrilled me nonetheless. I began playing with my cock, and he went deeper and harder. “Tom,” he whispered, “you are mine.”

When I felt him come inside me, there was an explosion of pleasure. I shot my load, and it splattered onto his foot. I greedily licked it clean.

We promised to see each other again. Neither of us meant it, that was clear. But I left more than satisfied.

We never saw each other again. Once I thought I saw him in the club, but it was only someone who looked like him.

There are encounters like that in every city.

Chapter Five

In a very short time, the club became a part of the city's fabric. And so did we. In fact, we became local celebrities, Dan for his music and me for owning the hottest nightspot in Marrakesh.

This happened without us much wanting it to. The idea of celebrity, for two men who had come to the city hoping for low profiles, was annoying at best. We had no desire to be in the public eye.

We hung out together as little as possible, especially in public. But of course, that didn't stop the gossip or the prying questions. Neither of us took up with any of the local women, so naturally everyone in town "knew" we were lovers. Denying the gossip, ignoring the questions or brushing them aside with a sneer did no good.

We actually thought about leaving town for somewhere else, but it would be no different no matter where we went, and we knew it. At least Marrakesh was sufficiently remote from the rest of the world—even from the rest of Morocco—that our reputation wasn't likely to spread beyond the city. We discussed the possibility that one of us might move somewhere else; but living at the club was too convenient, and we weren't that annoyed.

It was all especially irritating to me because I liked getting out of the club and my apartment and seeing the rest of the city. The marketplace, called the Djemaa-al-Fna, was fascinating, always full of people and energy.

I enjoyed buying our food, liquor and other necessities myself. It didn't take me long to become good at the haggling over price that was a way of life here. At first, all

the bickering over a few francs annoyed me, but I soon learned it was a lively kind of social interaction. If I refused to bargain with this merchant or that one, he was sure to take it as a deliberate slight.

“Mister Frank,” I would hear one of them call. “I have some fresh muskmelons.” Or rugs or candles or clothes or whatever. “You may have them for a mere—” And he would name his price.

I would inspect the goods on offer, then tell him I wouldn’t pay more than a tenth what he was asking, and so it would begin. A half-hour later I would leave with my purchase, bought for a fraction of the original asking price, and I was up to date on all the latest news and gossip.

Schneider was long gone, so the task of keeping the club’s design fresh and interesting fell to me. The décor was all very American, of course, so I decided using native Moroccan things as accents would add interest. In the market I found some colorful rugs and some brass lamps that definitely made the club’s tone more provocative.

Franz didn’t like them one bit. “Frank, you are making the place look like a Moroccan cathouse.”

I smiled at him. “I’ve never been to a Moroccan cathouse. What are they like?”

“Never mind.”

But the new décor seemed to please most of the paying customers, which was all that really mattered to me. Franz worried over everything anyway, and he never seemed to approve of much. I could have brought in Frank Lloyd Wright to design the interior of the club, and Franz would have found something wrong with it.

As for Dan, after a time he started to go native. He took up with a brother and sister who lived near the Koutouba Mosque, just off the marketplace. Their names were Ahriman and Cherifa, and they were both attractive. I wondered which of them he was sleeping with.

But it was not something I was sure I wanted to know. The idea that he had found a woman who satisfied him more than I had was not a pleasant one. I decided to pretend he was having affairs with both of them. The images that conjured up for me fired my sexual passion. But I was way too discreet to be seen patronizing any of the local establishments, male or female. There was enough gossip already. Besides, I didn't think it would last.

But I was wrong. Months went by, and the siblings showed a palpable influence on him. He began dressing Moroccan style, in djellabas, the long, flowing robes that local men wore. He took up kif, the mixture of hashish and tobacco that seemed to be available in every café in town.

Once he asked me what I thought of the way he was dressing. I honestly thought it made him look sexier than ever. But I pretended indifference. "As long as you keep wearing a tux at the club every night," I said, "it's none of my business."

"But you have an opinion. I know you, Frank. What do you think?"

"I think I wish I was back in the States. Just for a short time, mind you. I have a craving for a chocolate milkshake."

"Have you tried kif?"

"I have not. I know better than to mess with drugs."

"Smoke some kif, and you'll know a lot more than that."

“No, thanks.”

Erhardt and his men, though there were not many, seemed to be everywhere in Marrakesh. At the club, at the Bijou, in the market, everywhere. Some of them seemed to be at the Bijou almost every afternoon. They disliked Verplanck’s choice of movies and complained constantly.

One afternoon Verplanck came up to me in the market, clearly agitated. “Frank, you’ve got to help me.”

“Me? I’m just a poor saloon keeper.” I pretended to inspect some pottery.

“You have friends around Marrakesh. You have influence. Decae likes you.”

“That’s just because I wear pants. What is this all about?”

He hesitated and made a sad face. “The Germans.”

“They want you to reserve the best seats for them? Very German of them.”

“No. Frank, it’s...they’re threatening me.”

I put down the pot I had been fingering. “Threatening you? Over what?”

“They don’t like the movies I show.” He lowered his voice and looked around as if he was sure they were listening. “Dietrich.”

This sounded so improbable to me. “They prefer Garbo?”

“They say she is a turncoat. That she defected from her fatherland. They’re demanding I stop showing her films.”

“Oh.” I took up another vase. “Talk to Decae.”

“I tried. He won’t see me. That is why I want you to talk to him for me.”

“Verplanck, it wouldn’t do any good. He seems to be listening to Erhardt. He outranks me. Besides that, the price Decae would demand of me is more than I’m willing to give him. Why not just show other movies? Carole Lombard, Claudette Colbert...”

“Dietrich is our biggest draw. The Moroccan men find her exotic and mysterious. When we ran *Blond Venus*, we couldn’t fill the seats fast enough. And you know I like her myself. It would be so sad for me not to see her again.”

I laughed. “Maybe you could spend more time with your wife.”

“Frank, this is serious. The Nazis have been making threats. Veiled threats, but...” He looked away from me; I had the impression he was embarrassed. “I’m afraid. When I think what they could do to me and my wife...”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do. Don’t expect much from me, though. Like I said, I’m only a glorified bartender.”

So the Germans were making themselves felt, even though we were officially in Free French territory.

But they did provide us with some unintentional amusement. A few months after Erhardt set up shop in Marrakesh, an Italian captain named Blasetti showed up, under orders to serve as his attaché. The Germans treated him with more or less open contempt, but Blasetti remained blissfully unaware of their attitude. He told people around town how important his posting was to the German “legation.” He called it that even though there was no actual legate.

His first night in Marrakesh, he came to the club and introduced himself to me, plainly expecting me to be impressed. The German sergeant, Wilm Flaudenturm, who was squiring him around, stayed discreetly in the background, prepared to enjoy himself.

“I am the representative of the Italian government,” Blasetti announced to me with an overdone grin. “Il Duce sends his felicitations.”

I did not try to hide my puzzlement. “Felicitations? What are they?”

He paused. This was unexpected. “Il Duce, Benito Mussolini.”

“I know who he is. What I don’t know is what you’re talking about.”

He pressed on. Patiently he explained, “Il Duce’s government sends greetings and hopes you are well.”

“Why?”

“Well...well...” He groped for a response. “Do you not understand what diplomacy is, Signor Chandler?”

“I thought I did. It’s for diplomats. For governments. I’m only a saloon keeper.”

“Yes, but—”

“Chef has prepared some delicious lamb tonight. Shall I order some for you?”

“Yes, but—”

“Sergeant Flausenthurm will show you to your table. It’s the best in the place.” I leaned close and told him in a stage whisper, “They’re Germans. They’d take it anyway.”

My little joke was lost on him. “Yes, but—”

“I’ll tell Franz to take good care of you.”

“Yes, but—”

The sergeant took him by the sleeve and led him away like a trained ape. I walked over to the bar and got a shot of gin. So now we had Italy to deal with as well as the Third Reich. Blasetti seemed to take himself every bit as seriously as the Germans.

Fortunately, he was a lot more ineffectual. When Erhardt and the rest of them arrived, they kept him busy running to the bar to get them drinks.

* * * *

Late one afternoon I got back to the club after several hours of browsing and haggling in the market. Franz was already there, going over some liquor accounts.

“Franz, I ran into Countess Prevenskaya in the market. She’ll be coming here in a while. She says she wants to talk to me.”

“Why didn’t she talk to you there? That’s what the marketplace is for.”

I shrugged.

He lowered his voice. “She is filthy rich, Frank. She managed to get her jewels out of Russia during the revolution.” He shook his head sadly. “So many of the Russians are reduced to working to earn a living.”

“Like you and me? Yeah, Franz, that’s really too bad.”

“She’s one of the wealthiest women in Marrakesh. If she offers to marry you, do it.”

“Why don’t you tend to your own love life, Franz, and leave mine to me? Do we have enough booze in stock?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Good.”

A few moments later, the countess showed up. She was dressed simply, but a huge emerald ring decorated one finger. Her manner was hushed, even breathless. “Can we talk somewhere private?”

“Let’s go back to the casino,” I said. “There’s nobody back there.”

“No croupiers? No cleaning people?”

I laughed. “No, countess, no one. We can talk freely there.”

She seemed doubtful. “I d not want any prying ears around.”

“Why? Are you going to tell me your sins?”

“This is not a joking matter, Mr. Chandler.”

“No, of course not.” I told Franz to make sure we weren’t disturbed and led her to the back room.

There was one upholstered chair in the casino, for my personal use. She took it without asking and sat down imperiously. “Mr. Chandler, I wish to discuss the death of the unfortunate Signor Pinello.”

“Why, for heaven’s sake? That was months ago. I’m surprised anyone even remembers him. Except the Germans, of course.”

“Nevertheless. I am told that Pinello was seen talking with you that sad night.”

“I talk with a lot of people. A good host has to.”

She began to fidget nervously. She looked around to make sure there were no stenographers within earshot. “What did you talk about?”

I laughed. “You expect me to remember that? After all these months?”

“Pinello murdered those German couriers. They were carrying diplomatic passports and, I believe, a large amount of cash. You know this.”

“I know Decae says he did it. I’ve never seen any proof.”

“Those passports have never been found.” Almost as an afterthought she added, “Neither has the money.”

“What of that?” I had let her beat around the bush long enough. It was time to find out what she wanted. “What is this, countess? You’re not hard up for cash. That ring you have on could feed half the native quarter for a year.”

“I am not acquainted with persons from the Kasbah.”

“You should make the effort. There are a lot of good people.”

“Mr. Chandler, permit me to be direct. I believe Signor Pinello gave you those passports before he died. I wish to purchase one of them. He would have sold it to me himself that night, if the police had not...had not...”

“Had not done to him what your glorious czar did to so many of his subjects?”

She made a sour face. “Precisely, if you wish to be colorful about it.” She paused and took a deep breath. “Mr. Chandler, I want that passport. I will do anything to get it.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. I had the impression she thought she was being provocative. “Anything.” She stroked her breast suggestively. She slowly undid the top button of her blouse. She raised the hem of her skirt.

She was at least sixty years old, probably more. She was as plump as any dowager anywhere. I couldn’t contain myself, and I broke into a long, hearty laugh. “With all respect, Countess Prevenskaya, you’re a bit ripe to be competing with the goodtime girls who come here and proposition me night after night.”

The countess stiffened. “I do not understand what you are suggesting.”

“Come off it, your ladyship.” I looked around hoping I could find someone to bring me a drink, but there was no one. “Everybody knows how rich you are. If you really want to get out of Marrakesh, it shouldn’t be too hard to buy your way out. It isn’t

exactly a secret that Decae has his price. You must have a few rings or necklaces or bustiers lying around that you're not using."

"M. Decae has refused to do business with me. He says he would need approval from Colonel Erhardt before he could let me leave the city. And we Russians are fighting the Germans much too fiercely. Besides," she smiled. "I have tried being seductive with him as well. I got no farther than I did with you."

"There are other venues you might try. Poppa Cherry at the Green Iguana will provide any service you want, if the price is right. Or so I hear."

"That odious man." She wrinkled her nose. "I was considered a great beauty at the imperial court. To be reduced to trafficking with that cockroach..."

I thought I saw a tear form at the corner of her eye. She wiped it away quickly.

"Cheer up, countess. Anyone who can afford to lose as much as you do at roulette can't be hurting at all. Try Poppa Cherry."

She stood to go. "You have those passports, Mr. Chandler. I am more certain than ever. I only want one of them, for my own use. The second one, you may keep for your own use. It is so out of character for you to save the other one for your...what exactly is the English word for a man like your pianist?"

"I think you ought to go now, countess."

"Mr. Chandler, I was the intended buyer for that passport. I have a right to it. I demand you let me have it."

I made my face a blank. "I don't have the remotest idea what you're talking about, countess. Goodbye. It was nice of you to stop by."

“Yes, of course.” She was obviously not used to being refused by a mere commoner, much less being rebuffed by one. Trying to maintain her dignity, she walked grandly out of the casino, as if she were still young and beautiful and still at court.

I shouted, “Franz! Make sure the countess remembers where the door is. And bring me a glass of gin.”

* * * *

As time passed, my natural urge became stronger and stronger. Several nights a week, I would visit the queer cafes. Most nights I got the partner I wanted. I tended to stick to the places with large Moroccan clienteles. No sense giving the international community too much to gossip about. Besides, the Moroccans men were lean, with rich brown bodies. We explored so much together: the lash, the whip, buttplugs, piss...

Yet I never felt quite at home in Marrakesh. As wild and fulfilling as the sex was, it always left me wanting more. I desired something lasting, something permanent, and I had no idea how to find it. I would have wanted that anywhere, in any city. At least in Marrakesh, sexual pleasure was easy to come by.

* * * *

Erhardt and his Germans made their presence felt in the city more and more. And Stephane Decae was acting more and more like their lap dog.

Rumors kept circulating that Marrakesh harbored numerous sympathizers with the anti-Nazi underground in Europe. I made it a point to avoid politics. Taking sides meant making enemies. My life had been...eventful enough. The whole reason I had come to a remote place like Marrakesh was the hope that events in the larger world would not touch

me there, that I could live a life undisturbed by humanity's seeming determination to make sure no one, anywhere, could ever lead a quiet life.

But that kind of humanity, as represented by the Third Reich, established a greater and greater presence.

Erhardt himself approached me one night in the club. His customary arrogance was even more in evidence than usual. "Mr. Chandler, a word with you, please."

I made myself smile. "I'm always happy to chat with my customers. You and your men are among the best."

"I am glad you think so. But I must ask you—what exactly are your politics?"

"So it's going to be that kind of conversation. Let's find an empty table then, colonel."

We took a table at the farthest corner of the club. I told a waiter to bring Erhardt a drink.

"Wine, if you please." He smiled stiffly. "Rhine wine." Then he turned to me. "We know there is a great deal of anti-German activity in Marrakesh, Mr. Chandler. A great deal."

"What of that?" I played dumb.

"This nightclub of yours—this American nightclub—is at the center of a lot of it."

"What do you expect? The government in Berlin is making life difficult, even here."

"That is nonsense, Mr. Chandler. Germany is at the forefront of a glorious new age for humanity."

"Some of humanity, anyway."

The waiter came back to my table, looked nervously at Erhardt and whispered in my ear. I whispered back, and he headed off to the bar.

“May I ask what that was about?” Erhardt was imperious.

“Simple. I told the waiter to bring you a glass of French wine. It seems we don’t have any of the German kind. The supply lines have been cut by the Allied army. The glorious German government has not been able to reopen them.”

He kept his face a blank. “Where do your sympathies lie in this war, Mr. Chandler?”

“My sympathies are with whoever can keep me supplied with gin.”

“Germany, then.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

The waiter brought Erhardt his wine, a glass of *Beaujolais*. He sipped it and made a sour face. “As I said, we know there is a great deal of pro-underground activity in this nightclub. These wasps spread their venom everywhere.”

“I can’t tell my customers what to talk about. Most of the whores in Marrakesh are pro-German.”

“We know that you personally are not involved in any of it. Prefect Decae says you are the most apolitical man he’s ever known. He is a shrewd observer of the scene here.”

“He could win a prize for being apolitical himself. He could teach reeds how to bend in the wind.” I smiled at Erhardt.

“Decae is useful and efficient. We choose to overlook his...peculiarities.”

I chuckled. “Sodomy is a peculiarity? You sound mighty apolitical yourself, colonel.”

“I want to give you a friendly word of warning. Stay out of all this subversive activity, Mr. Chandler. You and your colleague Mr. Jackson will, shall we say, remain in business much longer if you do.”

He drained his wine glass, stood, bowed and clicked his heels together. Then he pushed his way through the crowd and went back to his fellow Germans. Blasetti was there too. As Erhardt rejoined them, he looked crestfallen.

But I had been warned. Warned unofficially, but warned.

* * * *

A few days later the first shoe dropped. One of the Germans, Corporal Herman Ludwig Schwimpf, was ambushed in a dark alley and beaten severely. He was hospitalized with bruises and cuts, several of which required stitches.

His fellow soldiers lived up to the name storm troopers. They went on a rampage in the native quarter, raping women and stealing everything they could carry. Decae had his police round up twice the usual number of suspects, all of them men, of course.

That night, Erhardt and Decae were at the club. I smiled affably and welcomed them. What I really wanted to do was spit. To Decae I said, “Hello, Monsieur Prefect. How is your sex life?”

He was unfazed by this; nothing ever seemed to ruffle his feathers. “If you are really interested in my sex life, Frankie, you should drop by late some night.”

I ignored this and turned to Erhardt. “I hear you’re having trouble maintaining discipline, colonel.”

“The German army is the most disciplined fighting force in the world, Mr. Chandler. I can not imagine what you mean.”

Other patrons gave the two of them a wide berth but did not attempt to disguise their hostility. Once Dan sat down at the keyboard and started to play, the tension in the club eased noticeably.

But later, Decae headed back to the casino for his usual roulette take. I stayed away from him. It would not do to have our other customers think we were actually friends. But he sought me out. “Really, Frankie, it wouldn’t do for you to get in the habit of needling Colonel Erhardt. He already thought you know who was behind the assault on poor Corporal Schwimpf. Now he is certain of it. He will be watching you very closely.”

“He can watch as closely as he likes. I don’t know a thing.”

“You are a celebrity. In the international community, at least. People come here and tell you things.”

“Gossip. Small talk. You and your pals can’t arrest me for that.”

“You would be amazed what the Germans are arresting people for.”

“Yes, Stephane, but that is in Europe. Surely you are the official here.”

He smiled at the compliment. “The underground sympathizers are certainly part of that international community.” He lowered his voice. “Most of the suspects my men picked up are native Moroccans.”

This was the first thing he said that caught my attention. “Does Erhardt know this?”

“He does not.”

“Decae, you may qualify as a human being yet.”

“Keep it to yourself, will you? I wouldn’t want my German colleagues to know.”

* * * *

Not long after that, Mrs. Verplanck was found murdered.

Verplanck had been operating the cinema alone that night. His wife had been home, not feeling well. When he got home, he found her on the living room floor. Her throat was slit.

Marrakesh was shocked. Mrs. Verplanck had been a jolly, plump woman, warm, open and generous, and everyone who knew her liked her. She even indulged her husband’s obsession with Marlene Dietrich with a gentle smile. When the Nazis had made him stop showing Dietrich films, she personally tried to find another screen goddess for him to fixate on. Myself, I hadn’t known her more than noddingly; she had sold me snacks at the theater.

Verplanck was shattered. His wife’s murder left him alone in the world. Even his love of movies seemed to be muted now.

He came by the club one day not long after the funeral. “Frank, why did they do it?”

“They?”

“You know who I mean. I was going to stop running Dietrich movies. I had ordered no more of them. They did not have to...to do this horrible thing.”

“Maybe it wasn’t the Germans.”

“It was. You know it was. Why did they do this?”

There wasn’t much I could say, except to voice my sympathy to him again.

“Why, Frank? I need to know.”

“Perhaps you were taking too long phasing them out. You know the German fetish for efficiency.”

I meant it as a joke. But he didn't laugh, only shook his head and left. I felt terrible for him. But what was I to do?

* * * *

Just south of the city, on the very edge of the Sahara, at a place called Tifniss, there were some Roman ruins. Locals said they had marked the extreme southern limit of the Roman empire. I never knew whether to believe that. It might just have been the Moroccan penchant for exaggeration.

But the ruins were lonely enough, and far enough out of town, that they gave me the solitude I needed now and then. They were distant. They were lonely. There was no sign any one human had been there for centuries. Not even Marrakesh's children went there to play, though it seemed to me they'd make an ideal playground.

Mostly the ruins were just scattered stones in the sand. But there was part of what seemed to have been an amphitheater. The seats were crumbling. The stage was cracked. There had been no play there since the beginning of time, it seemed.

The only other recognizable structure had been a temple. Part of its columned façade was still standing, and there was a large stone table at the rear that must have been an altar once. There was a large doorway with a stone lintel. Over it was carved the name VENUS. Goddess of love. In a wilderness, in an empty desert. It seemed appropriate to me.

I loved the ruins. I would go there and sit and think, or wander among the stones, for hours on end. We kept the club closed on Fridays, out of respect for the Moslem holy day. So on Friday afternoons I would go to be alone in the ruins.

They seemed to be at the end of the world, so remote that no one from my former life could ever find me there. Not the Army. Not Lilli.

I used to think of Lilli when I was there. The Temple of Venus brought up the association. I had loved her, or thought I did. And she said she loved me. And she had...

A desert, dry, arid, full of long-dead buildings, was the right place to remember her.

* * * *

With the Germans becoming more and more aggressive, I imagined that Marrakesh couldn't get any more dangerous for me. But events soon proved me wrong.

It was a Saturday night. The club was busier and more crowded than usual. There had been rumors that a famous underground fighter, Paul Thierry, was coming to Marrakesh, or was already there, hiding from the Reich's men and hoping to find a way to America.

All the German soldiers in town were there that night, two tables full of them. I was not happy about it. They usually expected to eat and drink on the house. I told Franz to pass word to the staff that they should take their time waiting on the Germans. The less they were able to order, the less we would have to give them.

Erhardt approached me. "Herr Chandler, will you join us in some of your best champagne?"

“No thanks, colonel. I make it a policy never to drink with my customers.”

“Then if I might have a word with you...?”

“Of course. What’s on your mind?”

“We have received word that Paul Thierry is coming to Marrakesh, that he is making his way to your homeland.” He looked around conspiratorially, as if this might be a secret or a surprise; it had been the talk of the town for days.

“What of that?”

“Will Thierry be welcome here in your establishment?”

I shrugged. “I don’t see why not, as long as his money’s green. I have no grievance with him.”

“The Third Reich would be most unhappy if you made him too welcome. We would prefer him back in Europe.”

“In Germany, I suppose, or in one of the countries you’re occupying. In one of your ‘detainment’ camps.”

“A great deal of illegal activity goes on in Frank’s American Nightclub, Herr Chandler. Most of it happens overtly. If we were to suspect that you yourself were involved in any of it...”

“I’m not, and you know it.”

“Of course, Mr. Chandler. But—”

“If you’re trying to make veiled threats to scare me into playing ball with you, you’re wasting your time. Morocco is free territory. Decae is the law here, not you. And you may not have him in your pocket quite as firmly as you think. Now why don’t

you go back to your friends, drink some of my champagne and stop trying to scare people?”

He bowed stiffly and clicked his heels together. “As you wish.”

I headed back to the casino, where people would leave me alone. But Franz followed me. “Is everything all right, Frank?”

“Why shouldn’t everything be all right? Get me a glass of gin, will you? Tell Jan it’s for me, so he won’t water it down.”

I sat at my usual spot in the back corner. A waiter brought my gin, and I watched the crowd and drank. In only a few minutes, I felt a very pleasant buzz.

There were the usual whores, both female and male, and pickpockets working the crowd. When I spotted them, I signaled the waiters to throw them out.

Then...

Something was not right. It took me a moment to realize what. Then it dawned on me. From out in the main room I could hear Dan playing a solo on the piano. And the tune he was playing was *Isn’t It Romantic?*

I was just slightly drunk. I pushed my way through the crowd until I was beside the piano. “Dan, you know I hate that song. Why the devil are you playing it?”

He kept playing. From the corner of his eye he indicated a table near the piano. She was sitting there, idly tapping her fingers in time with the music. Her dress was red, and her blond hair was covered with a veil of navy blue lace. It was Lilli.

Chapter Six

When I saw her—when I realized it was really her—I went numb. So many memories, so much pain, all of which I had tried to bury. Alive again, there in front of me, in my club, my domain.

Suddenly I was not the confident nightclub owner, facing the Nazis with cool aplomb. I was a boy, a teenager, struck dumb with emotion. Lilli.

She smiled at me timidly, as if she knew what I was feeling and was afraid of how I'd react. She started to wave but backed off from the gesture. Her hand hung in midair, as useless as what I was feeling.

Confronting her was too much. There was no way I could face her. Instead I turned to my other lover, Dan. "I asked you never to play that."

"She asked me for it, Frank. I didn't know how to say no."

"You know what that song meant to us. Back when there was an us. Please stop it."

"Sure, Frank."

He let the music trail off, then picked up again with *Mountain Greenery*.

I glared at him. He seemed surprised at my reaction. "How much farther from *Isn't It Romantic?* can I get?"

"No Rodgers and Hart. Please, Dan. That ironic take on love is too...too... Please, don't."

"What should I play, then?"

“Anything else, as long as it isn’t about love. Play Fats Waller. Play Duke Ellington. Anything.”

“Sure, Frank.”

He went into *Lullaby of Broadway*. But the music seemed to fade away for me. All this time I had avoided looking at Lilli. But I could feel her eyes on me, watching me, trying to guess what I was feeling. If she had been a decent human being, she’d have known. I turned to face her.

“Frank. Hello, Frank.” She smiled shyly, a smile I remembered only too well.

For a moment I forced myself not to react. But what would have been the point?

“Lilli.”

“How are you, Frank?” As if she cared.

“Just fine. And you?”

“Well and happy.” The words cut me like a knife. What right did she have to be happy when I ached every time I thought of her? “It’s such a surprise, finding you here in Marrakesh.”

“I could say the same about you. What are you doing here?”

She ignored this and spoke to Dan. “Dan, it’s so good to see you again.”

“Yes, Lilli.” It was clear how awkward he found the situation. “You always did look good in red.”

I stiffened. She had always worn red for me in the old days, in Paris.

“Thank you, Dan. I’m glad at least one of you is happy to see me.”

I forced myself to watch her. Honey blond hair worn naturally, hanging around her shoulders. Slim figure, small breasts I used to find irresistible. Delicate hands,

graceful movements. Every inch of her had tasted so sweet once. No wonder I had been in love with her.

“These are dangerous times for a woman to be traveling alone, Lilli.” I made my voice neutral, or as neutral as I could manage. “And Morocco isn’t exactly friendly turf for a Western woman on her own.”

She smiled and laughed. I remembered her laugh only too well. I used to say and do anything I could to get her to laugh that way. “It’s sweet of you to be concerned, Frank. But—”

“I’d be concerned about anyone. Don’t take it personally.”

“But, as I started to say, I’m not alone.”

As if on cue, a man pushed his way through the crowd from the direction of the bar. He was carrying a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Middle height, graying hair, the kind of man you’d easily overlook in a crowd. He handed one of the glasses to Lilli, then sat down and sipped the other.

Lilli said, still smiling, “Paul, I’d like you to meet two old friends of mine, Dan Jackson and Frank Chandler. Frank, Dan, this is Paul Thierry.”

For an instant I was off guard. So this was the famous freedom fighter. He had caused enough trouble for the Nazis that they had chased him across Europe. I’d never have guessed it, to look at him.

But I was genuinely impressed. “Monsieur Thierry.” I stepped to the table and shook his hand. “It’s a privilege.”

“You have heard of me? I am most flattered.” The accent was Slavic, not French.

“Surely everyone has heard of Paul Thierry, the biggest thorn in the side of the Third Reich.”

He chuckled. “I am hardly as important as that.”

“That’s what you think. It’s not every customer here who provokes such attention from our German friends.” I nodded in the direction of Erhardt’s table.

Lilli looked concerned and put a hand on his arm. “Darling, we have to get out of here.”

He put his own hand on top of hers. “Relax, Lilli. This is Free French territory. The Germans can do nothing to me here.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that. The local police prefect is in their pocket. If they tell him to arrest you...” I gestured toward their table again. Decae was sitting there with them, watching us, stone-faced.

“I see.” Thierry was mildly unsettled, and it showed.

“I wouldn’t be too concerned, M. Thierry. My friend Prefect Decae likes to preserve the illusion he is independent. As long as you keep your nose clean, he’ll probably leave you alone.”

The idiom puzzled him. “My nose?”

“I mean, as long as you don’t give him any cause to detain you.”

“Oh, I see.”

Lilli had not let go of his arm. She lowered her voice and told him, “Paul, please be careful.”

“You know I always am.”

“Even more so than usual,” she insisted.

“Yes, darling.”

Smiling, she turned to Dan. “Will you play *Isn’t It Romantic?* one more time, Dan? All the way through, this time.”

Dan glanced at me. “I don’t think I remember it all, Lilli.”

“Shall I hum it for you?”

“No, Lilli, but...but I have a lot of other requests to play first.”

“Oh. I see.” Disappointment showed. I whispered thanks to Dan and excused myself from their table. “I have a saloon to run.”

“Won’t you have a drink with us first? Both of you.” Thierry said and held out a glass to me. “It is not every day I meet old friends of Lilli’s.”

“Frank never drinks with customers.” Dan got up from his piano. “It’s a hard and fast rule with him. But I don’t mind if I do.”

“No, I’ll be glad to join you.” My curiosity got the best of me, but word quickly spread through the club that I was having a drink with customers. People looked surprised and even shocked. The unsocial Frank Chandler, socializing. I could hardly have made more of a stir if I’d sprouted wings.

Thierry filled glasses for Dan and me. We toasted ostentatiously, knowing the Germans were watching us, the Allied cause.

Thierry smiled at me. “I hear you have quite a war record, Mr. Chandler. Lilli says you were quite a hero.”

What did he know? I couldn’t tell if he was being ironic. I kept my face neutral. Lilli had never known the reason Dan and I left the Army. “There is no such thing as a hero, M. Thierry. Only men lucky enough to survive when their comrades didn’t.”

“But—”

“Now, you, on the other hand. Most of the world knows the damage you’ve done to the Nazis. If there is such a thing as a heroic freedom fighter, you are it.”

He blushed. “I love my homeland, Mr. Chandler. What I have done, I have done for that reason and no other.”

Dan interjected, “Then the world needs more men who love their homelands like you do.”

Thierry looked away shyly. “You are too generous, Mr. Jackson.”

“Not at all.” I sipped my champagne. “Personally, I have no interest in the war. It isn’t by accident I’m here in Marrakesh, not back in the States. But it’s hard not to admire the kind of courage you’ve shown.”

“You are both too kind.”

Lilli took his arm, smiling. “I have long since given up trying to convince Paul what a hero he is. It isn’t in his nature to believe it.”

I had been avoiding looking at her. Now I watched her. The smile was the smile I remembered, the smile that could break a man’s heart without trying. She seemed happy. How could she be—how dare she be—when I had suffered so much since she left me?

We made more small talk, and Dan and I each had another glass of wine. Then I made my excuses and left their table. I tried to sound light about it. I hardly wanted her to know how difficult it was for me. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a saloon full of customers to keep happy. It’s harder than it sounds.”

Thierry laughed and shook my hand. “It has been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Chandler. And experiencing this wonderful nightclub. You will see more of us. We expect to be in Marrakesh for some time.”

I was hardly away from their table when I found Colonel Erhardt at my elbow. He was smiling. When a Nazi smiles, it is never a good sign. Stiffly he said, “You have dangerous friends, Herr Chandler.”

“Friends? They’re customers. If you haven’t noticed, I’m in the business of hospitality.”

“What did they say to you, Thierry and the woman?”

It would have been easy enough to invent something incriminating, to have my revenge on Lilli. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I made my face a blank. “They like champagne.”

“And what else?”

“Champagne is all they ordered.”

“What else did they say?” He asked it in very emphatic tones.

“They plan to be in Marrakesh for a while. They didn’t say how long.”

“Good. We want them here. They will not leave.”

“It seems to me Paul Thierry has made a pretty good career out of not doing what you Germans want him to.”

“A career that is at an end, or will be shortly. Mr. Chandler, let me be blunt with you.”

“When are you anything else?”

“Those diplomatic passports that disappeared months back—we believe you might have them. Berlin would be most displeased should you give them to Thierry.”

“Even if I had them, what makes you think I’d do a thing like that?”

“We do not ‘think you’d do that.’ I am merely giving you a word of advice, that is all.”

“When I need your advice, colonel, I’ll be certain to ask for it.”

“Just so, Herr Chandler, just so.” He turned his back and returned to his table.

It was nearly closing time. I told Franz to close up. Seeing Lilli again had upset me more than I’d wanted to admit to myself. I needed to be alone for a while.

* * * *

Desert nights can be chilly. I got a light jacket and headed out to Tifniss, to the ruins I had become so fond of.

There was a full moon, and a million stars pocked the sky. Until I had seen it for myself, I could never have imagined how big the desert sky can be. There was a large rock not far from the Temple of Venus. I sat there and watched the stars and the moon.

“You look lost, Frankie.”

I It was Decae. He had obviously followed me.

“What do you want here, Stephane? Can’t I even find a bit of solitude in the Sahara Desert?”

He squatted on the ground not far from me. “I’m sorry you’re not fonder of me, Frankie. I was watching you at the club tonight.”

“For your German pals?”

He chuckled. "For myself. And, I think, for you. You look like a man who needs a friend. Colonel Erhardt doesn't have me under his thumb quite as firmly as you might think."

"Go away. I have enough friends."

"You mean Dan?"

"I mean I have enough friends. Will you get out of here?"

"You know that woman. The one who came with Thierry." It was an accusation.

"What if I do?"

"I saw the way you looked at her. And the way she looked at you. There is something between you."

"Mind your own business, will you?"

But he kept on. "What is it, Frankie? Failed love affair? Or an unrequited one? The romantic in me wants to think she is your wife, or used to be."

I picked up a pebble and pitched it at him. He ducked aside.

"Get out of here, Decae. I need to be alone."

He lapsed into silence but didn't move. I ignored him and looked up at the sky again. A falling star streaked across the zenith, then burned itself out.

Softly, Decae said, "I was serious before. You looked quite lost tonight. I don't understand it. All the time you've been in Marrakesh, you've never been interested in any woman."

"I'm still not."

Softly he laughed. "All right, Frankie. I'll leave you alone. But..."

"But what?"

He stepped toward me. Before I knew what was happening, he put his arms around me. Then in another instant, I felt his lips touch mine.

It was not entirely unexpected. He had been flirting with me long enough. Still, it left me off balance. I tried pulling away from him, but he had his arms around me. “Stephane, stop.”

But he didn’t stop. He held me even tighter and pressed our mouths together aggressively. I felt his tongue touch mine. And I surrendered to him.

I remember thinking, it has been so long... It had been months since Dan and I made love. And other than Dan, there had been only anonymous pickups. Some of the hustlers in the Djemma-el-Fna had been tempting. Some of them were so handsome. Moroccan men have such large, beautiful eyes... But I had been as circumspect as I could manage.

Part of it was that I knew they were looking for sex, not love. I wanted more than that, if such a thing was possible. And there was the fact that Marrakesh lived on gossip. If I had let any of them seduce me, the whole town would have known within days, if not hours.

With Decae, it was different. He was not prone to spread gossip. And he was a handsome man. And he wore his uniform so well; part of me felt like I was getting my own back on the Army.

It was impossible to believe that he wanted what I did, a permanent love affair. He used the men of Marrakesh too gleefully for me to believe that.

But I needed someone that night, someone, anyone who was not Lilli. And the touch, the kiss of another man felt so good...

Without even thinking about it, I bent down and kissed the front of his uniform. I kissed the polished brass buttons. Then I kissed him again. He put his hand in my short and pinched my nipple, and my body exploded with pleasure.

There was so much in his kiss. I could taste Dan in it. I felt once again the passion I had felt in Dan's arms, in Dan's lips. I could taste a bit of every man I had ever found attractive – soldiers, sergeants, officers, they were all there in Decae's lips and on the tip of his tongue. I even found Lilli in that kiss, and remembering what it was like to be with her was not pleasant. And yet...

I closed my eyes and surrendered, let him kiss me again and again, more and more deeply. It felt so good, so right. He reached down and stroked my cock through my pants. Impulsively I grabbed his cock too.

In an instant he was on his knees in front of me, sucking me off. He had his own cock out, and it was huge, much larger than I'd ever imagined. As he sucked me he played with himself, manipulated his foreskin.

On another level, it did not feel right at all. This Frenchman, this cop, this fellow traveler with the Germans...

After a moment I pushed him away. "Stop it."

He seemed confused by this. "Why, what's wrong?"

"This." I said it as forcefully as I could. "What you're doing."

And suddenly he was his usual self, cool and detached. "What I am doing? I had the distinct impression that we were doing it."

"I guess we were. But we both know it's wrong."

“Because I am Prefect of Police? With responsibility for overseeing your business?”

“Among other reasons, yes.”

He leaned back against a rock, looked me up and down, then laughed softly.

“You are such an American.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.”

“We French know how to yield to our natural impulses. You wanted that kiss as badly as I did. I suspect you want even more.”

“Suspect all you like. See what good it does you.”

“But what I see as perfectly natural, you use as an excuse to fill yourself with guilt and shame.”

“No.”

“Shame and timidity are not virtues, Frank.”

“They are if you’re doing something shameful.”

“Stop it. I want to make love to you,” he said. “You know it. And there is no reason why I should not, is there?”

“Love, Stephane? The way you ‘love’ all the men you have your cops round up?”

Again, he chuckled. “I never knew you were quite so romantic, Frankie. It’s rather endearing. I might almost say I respect you for it.”

I had had enough of this. “I came out here to be alone. Why won’t you respect that?”

“All right, all right.” He had not stopped laughing. “I’ll leave you alone with your thoughts.”

“I’d appreciate it.” I made my voice ironic.

“Good night, then, Frankie.” Quickly he leaned close and kissed me on the cheek.

“Pleasant dreams.”

With that, he walked off into the desert night, heading back toward town.

The night was dark despite the moon. A million stars twinkled overhead. From someplace nearby came a rustling, slithering sound—a snake or a lizard. I ignored it. Stephane Decae, police prefect and gleeful *roué*. His kiss, his arms around me were so good. How was it possible?

Lilli. I wanted her. Wanted her again. To hold, kiss, make love to, as Stephane would have done to me if I’d let him.

Of all the nightclubs in the world, what were the chances she’d find her way to mine?

I wandered into the ruins of the Temple of Venus. Dan had given me a bag of kif. I rolled a cigarette and smoked. As long as I had been in Morocco, and as widely used and readily available as the stuff was there, I had never tried it. It seemed...not right, somehow.

But now I did. Lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. I have never been a smoker, and the first thing the kif did was make me cough. But after a few puffs, I got used to it.

The stars grew brighter; the moon seemed to blaze. The temple’s columns, what was left of them, seemed to blaze in the moonlight. Another meteor flared across the sky, and it seemed bright enough and fiery enough to set the whole world on fire.

But then the kif helped me withdraw slowly, blissfully within myself. In one corner of the temple was an ancient stone bench. I curled up on it and watched the sky some more. In time, I fell asleep.

I dreamed of Lilli, naked in my arms. But she kept turning into Stephane Decae. There were kisses, hot, wet, passionate, and they excited me, but I was never certain who I was kissing. I saw Lilli kiss each of them in turn, and their excitement was there for me to see.

Hands fondled my body. I fondled back. The body I was touching was soft like Lilli's, hard like Dan's, unyielding like Decae's. Then all of us were there together, touching, kissing, licking. Penetrating. I was on top, I was on the bottom. I felt myself inside another human being, another body, and I felt someone inside me.

It was wild; it was passionate. It seemed every part of my body, every pore, every hair, was sensitive and excited. Feet, hands, earlobes, every inch of me was on fire with passion. My body burned as brightly as that meteor had.

My passion grew and grew till I reached climax, and my body writhed with the most intense pleasure I had ever felt.

* * * *

In the middle of the night, I woke. The moon was high in the sky now, and the Milky Way arched high overhead. I had always been a city dweller. Waking to find myself under a desert sky was sobering.

For a moment I thought I could hear someone there in the shadows, watching me. But it was only some nocturnal creature, some snake or bat or owl.

I laughed softly to myself and said to the empty air, “Venus? Is that you? Don’t waste your time on me, don’t waste your magic. I thought I loved Lilli once, but it ended. As for Dan, I need him more as a friend. And Decae? Don’t make me laugh.”

Of course there was no answer, just more rustling in the shadows. I thought I heard wings, as if some night bird was taking flight.

The effects of the kif were wearing off, to my great relief. I could sleep again, and this time there would be no dreams, there would be no Lilli. She had hurt me more deeply than anyone I had ever known.

No more. She would never do it again. I swore that to myself. But even as I had the thought, I knew it was foolish.

She was back in my life. No drug, no imaginary goddess could change that.

The emptiness, the stillness of the desert were what I needed. I walked. Out into the Sahara, out into the night I walked.

Chapter Seven

When I awoke it was dawn. The sun rested precisely on the horizon, orange and enormous. But it was cold. People who have never been to the Sahara have no idea how very cold it gets there after dark. I was stiff from the chill and from sleeping on the stone bench. The Temple of Venus, which had seemed so welcoming by moonlight, now seemed just a heap of stones.

I made my way back to the city. It was normally a walk of twenty minutes or so, but now it took me a lot longer. Vendors were setting up their kiosks in the marketplace. Children ran and played in the streets. Early shoppers browsed for goods. A few cafes were open, and early risers had tea, coffee, eggs. I had seen this all a hundred times or more, but now it seemed strange to me, unspeakably alien. Moonlight in the temple, bodies intertwining, sweat, passion, those were the real things. I needed to shake them off, to return to the pleasant routine of daily life. Daily life without sex.

Just as I got back to the club and was climbing the stairs to my room, I encountered Dan, just out of a shower. A white towel was wrapped around him, and his body glistened with moisture. I wanted him, wanted to touch him, kiss him, but...“Dan.” I made my voice as cheerily neutral as I could manage.

“Frank.” He smiled and nodded. “How is she?”

For a moment I thought he meant Emmy Lou Lee or one of our other more questionable customers. Then I realized. Playing dumb seemed the smartest thing. “She?”

“You know who I mean. I know what she did, and I know how you feel about her. But I saw the way you looked at her last night.”

“I looked at her like I look at all our other customers.”

“Right.”

“Don’t needle me, Dan. I’ve had a rough night.”

“You’re looking pretty stiff. It must have been quite a session.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re still in your thirties. You’re too young to be moving like an old man.”

“If you don’t stop picking at me...”

Dan laughed. “Relax, Frank. We’re American males. If we can’t joke about sex, whatever will we talk about?”

His elbow bumped the bathroom door and it swung open slightly. Inside I could see his twins. They were naked, toweling each other off. “So you had a long night, too.”

“They say they love me. Both of them.”

“Moroccans. They’re probably trying to hustle you.” I couldn’t take my eyes off them. Their bodies were lean, the color of café au lait. The brother was excited by what his sister was doing—or by what Dan had done.

“They’re doing a good job of it, Frank.”

“It looks like they’re ready for more. Why don’t you take care of them and leave me alone?”

“Why don’t you come and join us, Frank?”

I watched them. And they knew I was watching. But... “No, thanks. Should they even be doing that? I mean, they are brother and sister.”

“No, they’re not.”

“They’re twins, Dan.”

“Yes. Twins. The idea of their twinhood excites both of them more than I can tell you.”

“Then...?”

“They are not actually brother and sister. They are not even related. But thinking of themselves as twins makes their lovemaking more passionate. They’ve even suggested I should start thinking of myself as their big brother.”

I couldn’t stop watching them. “I never knew you had this side to you. You’re a kinkmeister.”

“As kinks go, this is a fairly harmless one. You sure you don’t want to join us? You’ll never taste anything as sweet. The brother in particular is—”

“No, thanks.”

“Think about it, Frank. You can be on the top and the bottom at the same time. Every organ in use, every orifice occupied.”

“Stop it, will you?”

He laughed again. “Wow, I didn’t realize she was still under your skin, after all this time.”

“I was not with Lilli.”

“If that’s your story, Frank, It’s all right with me.”

I had had enough. I went into my room, stripped and got into bed.

There were more dreams. Dan, the twins, Decae, Lilli, Thierry, even Erhardt. I would sleep for a few minutes, wake and try to shake off the dreams, then sleep for a few

minutes more. When I finally got out of bed and got dressed, just before noon, I was still tired.

* * * *

The sun was blazing. I spent a moment remembering how cold the desert had gotten the night before. It didn't seem possible.

Dan and his not-really-twins were still at it in his bedroom. I could hear them clearly. For a moment I was tempted to take him up on his offer and join them. But no. That wouldn't really have satisfied me at all. Instead I showered and let the hot water take the chill out of my bones, finally.

* * * *

Later, downstairs in the club, I stopped in the kitchen to make sure our food supplies were all right. Jan came in, upset and dithering; he was having a minor crisis. "We're out of bourbon, Frank. I don't know what to do."

"Serve Scotch 'til we get new stock."

Then Michele came at me across the kitchen, plainly agitated. "We're running low on flour. If we don't get more, we may not have enough fresh bread to get us through the week."

"Go into the market and get what you need. Tell them to send me the bill."

It was a typical day. Things never went smoothly but they always went better than everyone expected. If I hadn't known he was still upstairs making love, I would have expected Dan to complain that the piano needed tuning or there was a hole in the snare drum or whatever. It felt good to be in my usual routine, to shake off all the conflicting emotions of the previous night.

Out in the casino, I noticed the baize was coming loose on one of the blackjack tables. I got some glue and fixed it.

Franz found me. Another little problem to be solved, I thought. “What is it, Franz?”

“There is someone to see you, Frank.”

“Who?”

“An old friend of yours, I think.” The way he said “friend” put quotation marks around it.

“Friend? Who?”

“You’ll want to see her, boss. She’s what Americans call a knockout.”

Dan was at his piano in the main room, practicing some Fats Waller numbers. Jan was washing some glasses at the bar. Otherwise there was no one, not even the cleaning crew.

Except, of course, for her. She stood by the front door, looking nervous, maybe even scared. She was afraid what I’d say to her after all this time, and after what she’d done to me. She was wearing a white dress, tight, Clinging. It showed the curves of her body perfectly, her small firm breasts, her thighs, her backside. She wore white gloves and a large white picture hat. Over the hat and covering her face was that same navy blue veil.

To be honest, I didn’t know what I’d say myself. There were too many emotions, most of them conflicting. Bitterness, even a bit of hatred. Tenderness, even protectiveness. Lust—I want her body as strongly as I ever had, but I knew if I screwed her again now, it would be violent. It would be done out of revenge.

But I wanted to touch her, to taste her. Part of me, I realized at once when I saw her, was still in love with her. It would be so easy for her to hurt me again, and I could not let her realize it.

I crossed the room to where she was waiting. “Lilli.”

Shyly she smiled. “Frank. Hello, Frank.”

“All in white. Is that supposed to make you look pure?”

The question threw her off guard. “I don’t know, Frank. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“You look like a nurse.”

She laughed tentatively. “But you want to make me take my medicine, don’t you?”

I smiled as if I thought this was funny. “Come in. Sit down. Can I get you a drink?”

She looked away from me. “It’s too early.”

“Nonsense. For a woman like you? It was always Scotch and water, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. “But not too strong, please. I don’t want to—”

“And I’m a bourbon man. That should have told me right there that we weren’t cut out for each other.” I tried to make it sound like a joke.

“Please don’t, Frank. I came here today because I wanted to see you.”

Dan looked up from his keyboard and realized what was going on. He called across the room, “Is everything all right, Frank?”

“Just fine, Dan. How could it be otherwise?”

He looked doubtful. “If you need me...”

“I won’t.”

He frowned and looked doubtful. Without a word he got up and left.

Groping for conversation, Lilli said, “Dan looks good.”

“He always does.”

“When we came in here last night, I knew it was him playing the piano before I ever saw him.”

“He’d be flattered to hear you say so. You should tell him. But let me get us those drinks.”

I went to the bar and got some clean glasses. Jan was just drying them. “You want something, boss?”

“I’m just getting a couple of drinks, that’s all.”

“Let me get them for you.”

“No, that’s all right, Jan. I’ll get them. Why don’t you take a break for a few minutes?”

“It’s no problem. I can—”

“Go!”

“Sure, boss.” Puzzled and a bit sullen, he left.

Lilli followed me to the bar. She watched him go. “Just a short one, all right, Frank? It’s not even lunch time.”

I ignored this and filled a large glass for each of us. But I didn’t want her to be there. I was beginning to feel the strain of working to keep my reactions neutral. There had to be some way to make her go away. As I handed her the drink I said, “I have to go to the market. We need provisions. Would you like to come?”

Most strangers find the Djemaa-el-Fna intimidating. All those Moroccans, talking a strange language and going about their business as if nothing Western mattered. I was hoping that would be Lilli's reaction, that it would throw her off balance.

But she surprised me. "I'd like that, Frank. I saw a bit of the market yesterday, and I'd love to see more. Marrakesh seems a bit magical to me."

"You always were a romantic."

"So were you."

I put on a mordant smile. "The only magic in Marrakesh happens when the police spirit someone away."

"It's like the rest of the world, then. You shouldn't disillusion me."

"Is it me that's disillusioning you, or the world?"

Unexpectedly, she laughed at this. "Tell me, Frank. There's something I need to know. I'm wondering... It would be so helpful if I could know..."

"Drink up and stop beating around the bush."

"Sorry." She sipped her drink. "What...how much authority do the Germans have here?"

"Technically, none." So that was what was on her mind. I felt a bit relieved. "The only real force they have comes from intimidating. As your friend Thierry could tell you, they're good at that."

"So if they decided to make trouble for Paul and me...?"

"They can lean on Decae, that's all."

"Would they do that? Would he let them?"

I drained my glass. “They’ve done it already. And Decae...well, he’s like a wild reed, bending whichever way the wind blows.”

“I see.” For the first time her smile disappeared. She lowered her voice and looked around. “We have to get to London. The Germans—”

“The Germans will do everything they can to stop you.”

“Even—?”

“Yes, even that. I don’t doubt they’d try to shoot you as you get on the plane. They’ve already, er, disposed of people they didn’t like, and on the flimsiest of pretexts.”

“Oh. I see.”

I told her briefly about the murder of Mme. Verplanck. “There’s no actual proof the Nazis did it. But everybody knows. Even Decae, but I don’t think he’d ever have the backbone to say so. I really ought to be out in the marketplace, Lilli. Do you want to come along?”

“Of course. Exploring it with you would make it that much more fun.”

She finished her drink, I told Franz I’d be gone for a while, and we left.

Outside, the sun was brilliant, as it nearly always was in Marrakesh. And with the sun backlighting her, I could see the lines of her body even more clearly. She had come for information about the Germans, that was pretty clear. But why had she worn something that was translucent, almost transparent?

We reached the Djemaa-el-Fna pretty quickly. Vendors were everywhere, selling food, wine, pots, textiles. It was a riot of color, as if the people wore their gaudiest clothes to the marketplace to make up for the city’s usual austerity. And everywhere we

went, she attracted attention. I tried to tell myself it was not because her dress showed so much in the sunlight, but the interest of the men was unmistakable.

At a booth selling silver jewelry, she stopped to examine some necklaces. The vendor, an ancient Bedouin, watched her with undisguised interest. She was a potential customer, but it was not just that. He began quoting her prices for the various pieces, much lower than he normally would have. There would be very little haggling. This was the kind of behavior the merchants normally reserved for their friends and relatives.

She seemed to like one necklace in particular. It was done in silver wire woven into intricate patterns, with bits of red stone inlaid. The vendor quoted her a price, and she turned to me and asked me whether it was reasonable.

“Very. For a piece like that, I mean, and from a seller like this. There are silversmiths with actual shops, not just tents in the marketplace. You could get a much nicer piece of work for the same price.”

“Are these stones rubies?”

“Not likely. More likely garnet or carnelian. If you want rubies, you’ll have to go to a real jeweler.”

She made a thoughtful face. “Even so. I like this one.” She smiled at the merchant, agreed to his price and paid him.

When she tried to put it on, she had trouble working the clasp. We stepped into a doorway and I helped her.

My fingers on her throat... The touch of her flesh excited me, quite against my will. And she knew it. She leaned playfully back against me, reached a hand up and slapped me lightly on the cheek.

“Stop it, Lilli. That’s all behind us.”

Playful grin. “Is it?”

“Stop it.”

She looked sullen; she was plainly not used to men rejecting her advances. We walked on through the marketplace.

“Frank, there is something I have to ask you.”

“You want to know if you hurt me? Or how badly?”

“Now it is your turn to stop. As you said, that is all in the past.”

“What, then?”

A boy carrying some melons bumped into her and knocked her off balance. I helped steady her. Recovering herself, she said, “I want to know about your relationship with the Nazis.”

I stared at her. “Why? What makes you think I even have one?”

“What brought you to Marrakesh?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

I did not want to make it easy on her. “The same as what brought you, I imagine.”

But she didn’t blink. “And what is that?”

I pretended to inspect some brass teacups at a nearby stall. “Oh, nothing in particular. Except I think you probably want to get on the plane to England. The Germans would like nothing better than to have some pretext to ask Decae to detain you and Thierry.”

Her face was a mask. “The gossip we’ve heard says you are friends with Decae.” She lowered her voice and added suggestively, “Intimate friends.”

But I refused to give her an inch. “I barely know Decae, except professionally. You shouldn’t listen to gossip, Lilli. It’s hard to avoid it in Marrakesh. Everyone gossips about everyone else, and ninety percent of it is baloney.”

“Then you and Dan are still...?”

“Bar owner and employee. Friends. Period.”

“Oh. I used to wonder, back in Paris. Even when you and I were...were...”

I wanted her to say it. “Yes?”

“I want so badly for you to kiss me,” she said. “But I know that cannot happen. Not now. You see—”

“You’re damn right, it can’t. What do you want?” I asked her. “It’s obvious enough why you’ve come to Marrakesh. But what do you want with me? Am I supposed to believe a kiss is all you’re after?”

We had strolled the length of the market. She was obviously trying to decide what move to make next. She looked around like a lost, frightened child. “I should be getting back to my hotel. Do you know which way it is?”

She told me the name of the place, and I gave her directions. “But is it the hotel you’re anxious to get back to, or Thierry?”

I had hit home. For the first time, she looked hurt. “That isn’t fair, Frank.”

“But you want to kiss me.”

She fell silent.

I repeated the directions back to her hotel. “Will you be coming to the club again, tonight? Should I have Franz reserve a good table for you?”

She lowered her veil. "Yes. No. I don't know. Will we be welcome? With the Germans there, I mean?"

"Decae is in the Germans' pocket, not me. You will be valued customers." I grinned. "As long as your money holds out."

"Frank, I—"

"I thought you said you had to get back."

"Yes. Of course. Goodbye, then. Or should I say *au revoir*?"

"Or *auf wiedersehen*?"

"That isn't funny," she said. "Goodbye, for now."

* * * *

When I got back to the club, I found Decae's men there. They were searching the place. Decae himself was sitting at the bar, swirling brandy in a snifter.

I didn't have to ask what his men were looking for. I had barely thought about the diplomatic passports since the night Pinello had left them with me. But I knew the Germans wanted them, and I knew Decae would get them for them if he could.

I put on an artificial smile. "Stephane. How nice to see you again. And so soon. Why do you find me so irresistible?"

"Your secret admirer is Colonel Erhardt, I'm afraid."

"Lucky me. Should I be flattered by his attentions?"

He sipped his brandy. "These old Moroccan buildings have so many interesting hiding places."

"Maybe if you tell me what you're looking for, I could give you a few hints."

Decae laughed. "I can only protect you so far, Frank. You know how relentless the Germans can be. And you know how determined I am to survive."

"After last night? Aren't we betrothed?"

"It would be wise for you to restrain your flippancy, Frankie. It does not serve you well."

"I've done all right so far."

He chuckled. "About last night—"

But I couldn't let him say it. "Nothing happened last night. Nothing. Understand?"

"Yes, of course." He did not try to hide his amusement. "They say one of the pharaohs once tried to deny the existence of the Sphinx. But the Sphinx is still there."

"You say the cutest things. How long are your goons going to be here?"

He ignored the question. "You were out with Thierry's woman. The two of you were seen in the marketplace."

"What of that? Is it against the law to be seen in public with a pretty girl?"

"If it were just any girl, no. But Paul Thierry's 'traveling companion'... People take note of such things. And quite frankly, for as long as you've been in Marrakesh, Frankie, you've never taken an interest in any woman."

"So I'm picky. What of it?"

"You should be more careful, that's all I'm trying to tell you. That kind of pickiness can raise suspicions among our German friends. I want to keep you safe, but there is only so much I can do."

I was in no mood for any more of this. “I’m going up to my room now. Make sure you lock the door when you leave.”

“Frankie, Frankie, will you never learn?”

“Apparently not.”

I crossed the room to the stairs and went quickly up. I could still hear Decae’s men rummaging around, looking for, I presumed, the diplomatic passports.

I stripped and lay down on the bed. Closed my eyes and tried to sleep. The previous night had not left me rested. But the sound of the cops below kept coming to me, mixed with the sound of Dan and his non-twin playmates in the next room.

When I did finally nod off, there were the inevitable dreams. Decae having sex with me among the ruins. Lilli kissing me on a brilliant sunlit afternoon in Paris. Dan and I making love in the barracks.

But it was Lilli I could not get out of my mind.

Marrakesh was supposed to be a haven for me, a refuge from the world. Not any more.

Chapter Eight

Lilli.

Paris.

What I was feeling was all so confusing to me. I wondered if I'd ever manage to make sense of it.

* * * *

Dan and I had arrived in Paris not long after leaving Amsterdam. It was just spring.

We spent some time seeing the sights, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, the Petit Palais, the Palace at Versailles in the Paris suburbs. But as enticing as those places were, their charm was dwarfed by the city itself.

The flowers and trees in the Bois du Bologne were in full bloom, a riot of color, a riot of luscious aromas. There were fountains everywhere in the city, and the bridges over the Seine were beautiful in the spring sunlight.

We made love a few times. This was Paris, after all. But our affair was over, and we both knew it. Our copulation was pro forma: we were in the City of Love, and neither of us had had much for a while.

One afternoon we found a plump little Frenchwoman selling homemade ice cream on the Left Bank. Neither of us had tasted ice cream since we left America. Hers was more delicious than any we had ever tasted. We befriended her, even though neither of us spoke French and she didn't know much English, and we went back for more of her ice cream every day.

Her name was Nathalie. She was a widow, dressed always in black, but she always had a smile for us. On one of our visits, she caught a glimpse of us holding hands. We expected her to react negatively, but all she did was smile and pile more ice cream onto our cones. That was when we realized Paris is not a city like any other. When I think of Paris—when I can manage to forget all the bad things—Nathalie is the one I remember.

We explored the city for weeks, finding wonderful food and wine everywhere. The museums entranced Dan more than they did me, but the buildings themselves were so beautiful, the art almost didn't seem to matter.

But the atmosphere was tense. The Germans had announced their intention of taking the city. The more skittish people were evacuating quietly. But most Parisians went about their daily lives with studied sangfroid, always with an eye to the war news. Leaving was premature, or so most of them thought.

We talked about leaving, ourselves, but decided against it. There had to be opportunities there for two enterprising Americans. And Dan was delighted to find, for the first time in his life, a place where the color of his skin didn't seem to matter to anyone.

Dan and I made love every evening, and it grew more and more passionate, not less so. His kisses were so warm and deep. His body was so firm; touching it, tasting it always thrilled me. He seemed to be naturally fit – he never exercised, yet he never got out of shape. He loved it when I kissed him from the top of his head, to his lips, to the soles of his feet.

And yet as good as it was, it felt...not right. At least, not to me. A lifetime of hearing bad things about men like us, who dared to love other men, had made it impossible for me to open myself to him completely.

He sensed it. "You white boys," he told me one night in bed, "are always so uptight."

I kissed him lightly. "We're an uptight race."

Dan chuckled at this. "Why don't you relax and let what happens, happen?"

"I can't. My good Protestant ancestors would rise up out of their graves."

He pressed his lips to my thighs. "To get some themselves?"

"Stop it." I couldn't help laughing.

"Stop talking or stop making love to you?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I guess I do."

That was the beginning of the end of our affair, though thankfully not our friendship.

We explored Paris for weeks. We made the city ours. Our lovemaking trailed off. Knowing that I was so "uptight" seemed to make Dan sour on it. When I asked him about it, he told me, "Frank, I'm too fond of you."

"You sound kind of uptight yourself."

"That's not what I mean."

"What, then?"

"As much as I care about you," he said, "and as genuinely fond of you as I've become, it's pretty obvious you're conflicted about us. Hell, you've said so enough

times. And I care about you too much to keep hurting you. The thought that my kisses hurt you in any way at all, on any level at all, makes me feel terrible.”

“I want your kisses, Dan.” I moved closer to him.

But he pushed me away. “No, you don’t. I mean, I know a part of you does, but until the time when that part of you becomes the only part...no, Frank, no more.”

“I—”

“Quiet. It’s almost dinner time. Let’s go to that little bistro on the corner, okay?”

We went and ate. We made love one more time, one night when we were both drunk. But things had changed, and there was no going back.

* * * *

Then one afternoon I saw her.

She was sitting on a bench in front of the Opera House, slender and elegant. Her dress was white, and so were her shoes. There was a light breeze that stirred her blond hair, which she wore short, boyish. I took her for a Frenchwoman.

She saw me staring at her. Smiled. Her voice was deep, like a boy’s. “Hello, there.”

I stammered, “H-h-hello.”

“You are an American, aren’t you?”

“Does it show?”

She laughed. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

I took a few steps toward her. “I don’t mean it to.”

“You’re American.” She hadn’t stopped laughing. “You probably can’t help it.”

I wasn't used to being laughed at, and I didn't know how to react to it. "My name is Frank."

"I'm Lilli." She inched to one side, to make room for me on the bench. "And I don't really find Americans that amusing."

"Then why—?"

"You're the most American American I've ever seen. You look so out of place."

"I am."

"Then go home." She wasn't laughing any more, but she couldn't hide the amusement in her voice.

"I can't. We don't have women as pretty as you in America. I'm a dedicated sightseer."

"Americans aren't supposed to be romantic. You're not being true to type."

"I can't help it."

A few minutes later we had introduced ourselves more thoroughly and were at a small café, sharing a bottle of wine. Her dress was more clinging than I had realized at first. Her breasts were small, adding to her boyish appearance. I kept telling myself that was not what I found attractive about her. Her wry sense of humor, and her refusal to take me quite seriously, were powerful turn-ons.

"So," she said as she sipped her Beaujolais, "What are you doing in Paris?"

There was no way I could tell her the honest story. I made my response as vague as possible. "I'm here with a friend. We're fresh out of the Army and we're bumming our way around Europe."

“Fresh out of the Army, and you’ve come toward the Germans? That may not be the wisest choice.”

I tried to sound noncommittal. “There’s so much to see here. We couldn’t bring ourselves to go back to the States before seeing what the Old World has to offer.”

Lilli frowned. “It has Nazis to offer.”

“It’s a beautiful place, even so. Irresistible. My pal’s from Pittsburgh. There’s nothing of Paris there.”

“And what about you? Where is your home?”

“Home? I’ve never really had much of one. But I grew up in Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn?” She drained her glass, and I refilled it for her. “I hear that’s a rough place.”

“Parts of it. If the Germans really want a fight, they should try invading there.”

“Give them time, Frank. That’s what they intend.”

I chuckled and downed some wine. “They won’t find Brooklyn as easy to knock over as they did Norway.”

“The Norse resistance has been fairly fierce, I understand,” she said. “Resistance to the Nazis is growing all across Europe. We want to keep our freedoms.”

“They’re worth fighting for. That’s for sure. Let’s drink a toast, then.”

“To?”

“To resisting the Nazis.” I raised my glass and she raised hers.

“That’s as good a toast as I can imagine.”

I reached across the table and took her hand. “Another toast, then. Here’s to sympathizing with the resistance.”

Lilli laughed again. “You’re trying to seduce me.”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Do you think I’m that easy?”

“I have my hopes.”

“Let’s order some food.”

“Oh.”

We had salads, roast beef sandwiches and more wine. By the time we’d eaten, we were both in a rosy mood. I kept watching her breasts. They were not large but they were perfectly shaped, like Jean Harlow’s. Seeing them rise and fall with her breathing excited me. For those moments, I forgot all about Dan, and all about my dying affair with him. Lilli was a woman whom I could have a proper love affair with.

She watched me as I ate. “You haven’t touched your salad.”

I stammered something about not being very hungry.

“Then why order it?” She was not through making fun of me. “I’ve heard of people who don’t want to eat animal products. But you are a new one. A man who won’t touch vegetables.”

Self-consciously, I forked some lettuce into my mouth. “I wish you didn’t find me so comical.”

“I cannot help it, Frank. I find most men amusing. They can’t help themselves.”

Her salad was topped with anchovies. She took one on the end of her fork and moved it to her lips. Slowly she sucked it into her mouth. Watching her excited me more than anything ever had.

Grinning she asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” I had to look away from her. “Nothing at all is the matter. Except that you...” I felt too awkward to finish the sentence. Desperately I tried to change the subject. “You—you’re from Sweden, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Does it show?”

“Most women don’t have hair that color unless they get it in a Hollywood makeup chair.”

She bit into her sandwich. “Are you comparing me to Garbo?”

“Garbo’s retired.”

“You are kind of retiring yourself, in your way. It’s sweet.”

“I wish you’d stop toying with me, Lilli. Laughing at me.”

“I told you. I cannot help it.” A sip of wine. “American men are the funniest of all.”

Despite myself, her constant ridicule was exciting me. I had never had a woman treat me like that before. Part of me wanted it to stop, but a bigger part of me would have submitted to anything she wanted. She drained her glass, and like an attentive servant, I refilled it without her saying a word.

Timidly, wanting her, not wanting to tell her so, I asked, “Are the men in Sweden this docile?”

“Docile? Is that really the word you mean?”

“Yes. Docile—like housetrained puppies, eager to serve their masters.”

Somehow I found the nerve to reach across the table and touch her hand. I expected her to resist, but she turned her hand palm up and let me stroke it with my fingertips.

For the first time she laughed out loud, so forcefully the other diners turned and looked at us. “This is the oddest seduction I have ever experienced. You make me wish I had known more American men.”

“There are American men who would clip you on the jaw for laughing at them this way.”

“Ah.” She drank more. “So we are back in Hollywood.”

“I suppose so.” I said it sheepishly. “But I feel more like Harpo Marx than Gary Cooper.”

“Why don’t we go to my flat and discuss music appreciation, then?”

* * * *

Her apartment was just off the Champs Elysee. You could see the top of the Arc de Triomphe over the intervening rooftops. The place was small and neat, exactly as I imagined it would be. There was a bed, of course, a big old brass thing, and two small tables. She seemed to use one of them as a writing desk. Peach-colored curtains covered the windows. I told her I found them disappointing.

“Why, for goodness sake?”

“I’ve been hoping we might make love in front of an open window, with the neighbors watching.”

“You sound like an overeager schoolboy.”

“I feel like one.”

“Well, don’t get too anxious. I want this to last.”

She kissed me. I kissed back, long and deep. It was almost as if I had never kissed before, it was so exciting. Her tongue in my mouth tasted sweeter than the wine we'd had with our lunch.

She stripped me. "You live alone, don't you?"

"I have my own apartment," I said.

"And who lives in it with you? Another man, right? Another American, fresh out of the Army like you?"

"Yes. Why do you ask me that?"

"You are wearing one black sock and one brown sock. A woman would have noticed and told you."

"I guess I need a woman, then."

She took my socks off and tickled my thighs while she was doing it. Then I stood in front of her, naked as the day I was born, and watched as she slowly undressed. Her body was even leaner than I had thought. I could hardly contain my excitement. She noticed and, inevitably, laughed.

Our lovemaking was ferocious. I wanted her so badly, and it was clear she wanted me. I kissed her entire body, feet, legs, groin, stomach, breasts... She responded to my touch and to my kisses more intensely than anyone else ever had, except Dan. Her thighs were so warm and soft; I kissed her there, long and deep, I gave her pleasure with my tongue. The rhythms of our coupling were so intense. We climaxed together. I had never experienced that kind of intensity with anyone other than Dan. I kept thinking of him as we went at it. But Dan, as a lover, was...over. He had to be. Lilli was everything.

When we were finished we lay side by side, arms around each other. I nibbled her earlobe. “So tell me where you’re from, and why you came to Paris.”

“Oh, no, Frank. No questions. We were born in the moment we met this afternoon.” It was the first time I had seen her perfectly serious. My curiosity was piqued.

“But I want to know everything about you.”

“You first, then.”

“Me? I have no past to tell about.”

“An American.” Her wryness was back.

“I’m here with a buddy. You were right about that.”

“Just discharged from the American Army?”

“You said no questions, Lilli.” I raised a finger and played with her nipple. I kissed it.

“I’m a woman. I have a right to be curious.”

“No, fair’s fair. If you want to know my story—and I’m not certain I want you to—you’ll have to tell me yours first.”

There was not much more actual conversation, just small talk, this or that trivial matter, food, wine, the Parisian sights. Our lovemaking had made us hungry, and we went out to eat again, this time to a little café she knew in the French quarter, the Café Josephine. The waiters all knew her and made a fuss over us. It made me self-conscious. I felt like everyone in France knew what we had done.

Dan and I were staying at a little hotel on the Left Bank, Le Cupole. There was no actual cupola on the building, so the name seemed odd to us. Our room actually had a private bath, the rarest kind of luxury. It cost ten francs extra, but we both agreed it was worth it.

The proprietress was an unpleasant old woman named Micheline. One day I asked her about the place's name. She snapped at me. "It is my hotel. I can call it anything I like."

"Yes, but why—"

"Mind your own business."

Dan had found some Tommy Dorsey records and a hand-wound gramophone in a little shop in Montmartre. He played them loudly, over and over again, 'til finally our neighbors began to complain. Dan looked for work. Paris seemed to have a thousand little jazz clubs, and he was sure an American pianist would be able to find a job in one of them. "We've found a city where are actually in demand. Can you believe it?"

"Maybe I should look for a job, too."

"Maybe you should. Our money won't last forever. It's a pity you're not a musician."

"I could sing. In pig Latin, like Ginger Rogers in that movie."

He laughed. "France isn't ready."

"I'll find something."

"Just do France a favor and stay away from music, all right?"

"Oui, mon commandant."

He stripped to take a shower. Still excited from my afternoon with Lilli, I wanted him. I took a step toward him, and he quickly covered himself with the towel. “Hold it, Frank. We’re past that. Aren’t we?”

“Is anyone ever past that?” I reached out to touch his chest. After the soft whiteness of Lilli, his firm black body seemed more exciting than it ever had.

“Don’t.”

I sat on the bed and covered my face with my hands.

“What the hell’s got into you?” he asked.

I told him about Lilli, about the fierceness of our encounter. “She’s perfect, Dan. She’s the woman I’ve always hoped I’d find.”

“The one who could straighten you out?”

“She already has.”

“Then why do you want to touch me?”

I gaped at him. “I...I don’t know.”

“It’s what I told you, Frank. Go be with her. You’ll never let yourself be happy with me. Or with any man.”

I couldn’t look at him. “I’m so confused. Dan, what the hell’s wrong with me?”

He dropped the towel and walked toward the bathroom. “I’m just a poor piano man, not Doctor Freud. And I need a shower.”

While he was showering, I lay back on my bed and fell asleep.

* * * *

I saw Lilli—Lilli Lindstrom, which I learned was her full name—every afternoon and most evenings after that. Until I found a job, that is. Dan got me work managing the club where he played, the Blue Note, so my evenings were spoken for.

Once that started, Lilli would come to the club most evenings. Dan quickly got into the habit of playing *Isn't It Romantic?* for us when he saw us together. Then we'd leave together when the place closed. This was Paris, so closing time wasn't 'til near dawn. We would spend languorous mornings at her flat, or at my apartment at Le Cupole if Dan was sleeping elsewhere, making love and eating breakfast. It was amazing how often the two got confused.

One bright afternoon I took her to meet Nathalie, our little ice cream lady. Much to my delight, they hit it off at once. Nathalie piled on the ice cream for both of us. When Lilli was out of earshot, watching the river, Nathalie said to me in a big stage whisper in her halting English, "Marry her, Monsieur Frank. Marry her as soon as she'll have you."

I couldn't help laughing at this. "Should I marry a woman I know next to nothing about, then?"

"If it is this woman, *oui*. You only have to look at her to know what you need to know."

"I wish I could be that confident."

"Marry her."

I joined Lilli at the river's edge. "Nathalie says we should get married."

"Frenchwomen are all so romantic."

There was something in her tone that sounded...not right. If I had listened to my instincts, I could have saved myself a lot of pain. But I was existing in a rosy romantic haze myself. "You object to romance? After everything we've done for the last few days?"

Some small inner part of her went cold and distant. But she said, "These last few days have been wonderful, Frank. Heavenly, If I were going to let myself fall in love, you would be the man."

"So?"

Abruptly she shifted gears. "The Seine is flowing so swiftly today. I have never seen it like this."

"Rivers are never quite predictable. I think I love you, Lilli."

"Our Swedish rivers are so much more sedate and predictable."

"Did you hear what I said?" I asked.

She fell silent and watched the Seine.

I walked back to Nathalie's stand for more chocolate ice cream. And Nathalie sensed my mood at once. "The girl isn't willing?"

"I don't know."

"That is too bad. Paris is made for love. You should woo her. Use all your charms. Don't let her get away."

"Love isn't like ice cream, Nathalie. It isn't merely a matter of mixing the ingredients just so. The right ingredients have to be there before you start."

"You can always add more sugar."

"I can manage my own love affair, without any help."

“If you were a Frenchman, I could believe that. But an American...Do not let her go. I can see how much you love her. More than your boyfriend Dan, even.”

I froze. Were Dan and I that obvious, then? But Nathalie broke into an enormous grin. She had only been joking.

* * * *

One afternoon I rented a mini and drove Lilli and myself out to the palace of Versailles, in the Paris suburbs. It was a fair day, sunshine and white puffy clouds. Lilli packed a picnic lunch for the two of us.

The guard at the front gate eyed us suspiciously. Pointing at me, he said, “You are an American.”

I was puzzled by it. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Be careful.”

Odder and odder. “Why? Are there anti-American terrorists lurking about?”

“You do not know where you are.” He took a step toward me.

“Isn’t this Versailles?”

“You do not know what kind of world you have entered. It is more dangerous than you think. Men get hurt.”

I had no idea what to make of any of this. Lilli had been silent through the whole exchange, but now she spoke up. “We are only going to eat a midday meal. There is nothing dangerous in that.” She laughed. “Or do you think our food has been poisoned?”

His face turned to stone. “Go in. Eat.”

We walked past him, puzzling over what he had been trying to warn us about—if that’s what he was actually trying to do. Lilli whispered, “All Frenchmen go crazy as they age. Most of them are halfway there to begin with.”

I stopped walking, threw my arms around her and gave her a long, hot kiss. “There. A good appetizer. Now shall we have lunch?”

“I am not very hungry yet. Can we take some time to see the palace?”

“Sure.”

We walked hand in hand into the palace. I have never been much for old buildings, and I was quite prepared to be unimpressed. But it did not take long for the sheer opulence of the place to overwhelm me. Gold was everywhere – every surface I looked at seemed to be covered in gold leaf. The crystal chandeliers were enormous. Even unlit, they glistened in the afternoon sun. The royal apartments were more plush and luxurious than anything I had ever seen.

Naturally, seeing the kings’ beds turned our thoughts to lovemaking. We stepped into one recess after another and kissed and fondled. I gestured at a huge fur-covered bed and whispered, “Those old boys sure knew how to treat their women.”

“And their men.” She looked around furtively. “Louis XIII, the one who started building here, was—how do you say it in English?—a sodomite.”

“The word is queer.”

“Or—or—is it pansy?”

“That’s only for the more effeminate ones.” I almost went on to say, “Not like Dan and me,” but I caught myself.

“The effeminate ones can be very appealing, Frank. There is something about a masculine man doing—doing that—acting like a woman in bed—that seems so right to me.”

“The masculine ones are much more common.”

“Even so.”

Was I saying too much? Was I revealing knowledge of something that ought to be foreign to me? I groped for a way to change the subject. “Which way is the Hall of Mirrors?”

The abrupt shift seemed to startle her. “Over this way, I think.”

The famous Hall of Mirrors at Versailles was the most magnificent thing I had ever seen. Thousands of mirrors glistened, shined, reflected us and everything else, seemingly to infinity.

There were a dozen other visitors, milling about, gawking at every last detail. But we stood at the center of the huge room—actually more of a gallery—taking it all in. This was the room where the treaty ending World War I was signed; the great men of the age had conferred here. Lilli told me that in the eighteenth century, when Versailles was built, mirrors were rare and more valuable than gold. So this room was a testament to the wealth and power of France.

Gradually the other visitors filtered out to see Versailles’ other wonders. Unexpectedly we found ourselves quite alone. Impulsively I took Lilli in my arms and kissed her. Our images, multiplied a thousand times, kissed too.

The passion of the moment took hold of me. I began to run my hands along her body, fondling her as excitedly as I could. Our kiss grew hotter and deeper. Our reflections, our love, magnified a thousand times, seemed to stretch to infinity.

Then, inevitably, a security guard walked in, and we pulled apart. I honestly think we would have made love then and there if he had not interrupted. The man ambled past us, smirking. “*Toujours l’amour*, eh? But you must not do your lovemaking here. This is a sacred place.”

I couldn’t resist. “Where better to make love, then?”

He chuckled and kept walking. “Even so, monsieur, you must restrain yourselves.” He walked the length of the hall, checking this and that as he went, and now and then looking back at us with an obvious grin on his face. Finally he exited, just as a few more gawkers came in through the same door.

Lilli grinned at me. “We should not have done that.”

“Why not? We can’t be the first.”

“Even so, Frank.”

“Look around. This place was made for love.”

“I am not Pompadour or duBarry. You are certainly no Louis.”

“No. Pompadour and duBarry were ladies.”

She slapped me playfully. “Let us go and eat our lunch.”

“Where? Is there a dining hall? A cafeteria for visitors?”

“Don’t be such an American. This is Versailles, not an amusement park.”

“Then—?”

“I thought we might eat outside. It is such a lovely day. The palace grounds are as impressive as the palace itself.”

“A picnic it is, then.”

We found our way to the nearest exit and went out onto the palace grounds. And the grounds were every bit as impressive as Lilli had said. There among the manicured lawns were hedge mazes, topiaries, little groves everywhere. Among them were structures of all kinds, little mini-palaces, a theater, trianons... There were artfully constructed artificial “ruins” calculated to make the place even more picturesque. An ancient obelisk had been brought from Egypt. A small artificial lake made it possible for visitors to have outings in rowboats. Peacocks strutted about, spreading their magnificent tail feathers. In the brilliant afternoon sunshine, it was all quite wonderful.

We ambled about, trying to find the perfect spot for our meal. Finally we came to a grove of citrus trees, quite fragrant, quite lovely. Lilli announced it was where we would eat. “This is,” she told me as she sat down on the grass, “the Orangerie.”

I was wry. “Leave it to the French not to simply call it a grove.”

“Oranges were very popular in the eighteenth century. Relatively rare and valuable. Madame Pompadour herself might have eaten an orange here, right on this exact spot, just before she nibbled on her Louis.”

“That does not make it any more appealing to me.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Why do you Americans have no sense of history? Is it your schools?”

“We have a keen enough sense of our own history. Just ask me about George Washington or Benjamin Franklin.” I kissed her on the throat.

“Your Franklin was a bit of a goat, too, from what they say.”

I bit her playfully. “I am not a goat.”

“I’ll bet if I put a tin can on the ground, there, you would eat it.”

I bleated at her, “Baaa!” Then I leaned forward and kissed her.

In only a moment we were making love. I undid her blouse, and she slid her hand into my trousers.

Another couple, from the look of them an older married couple, came walking by and pretended shock. We pulled apart, laughing. Lilli reached for the food basket. “We should have our chicken now, before we’re arrested for outrageous public indecency.”

I laughed. “This is France. There is no such thing here as public indecency. Thank God.”

“Be quiet, Frank.” She reached into the basket. “What do you want, a leg or a breast?”

“Keep talking like that, we will be arrested.” I got a bottle of wine and a corkscrew from the basket. “You brought red wine. With chicken.”

“It was all I had.”

“They don’t go together.”

Lilli laughed at me. “All of a sudden you are not an American any more. You are a Frenchman.”

“Don’t be rude.” I kissed her. As always when she refused to take me quite seriously, I was aroused. “Mmm. Let’s move back deeper into the grove.”

“Orangerie.”

“Don’t be difficult. I want to make love.”

“Eat your chicken first.”

“Yes, Madame Pompadour.”

We ate, all the while eyeing each other with undisguised lust. I wanted Lilli more than I had ever wanted anyone in my life. I reached out and fondled her arm as I ate. Then finally we were finished.

There was a deeper, more densely planted part of the Orangerie not far from where we had eaten. I looked around to make certain there was no one nearby who might see us. Then I stripped off my clothes, stripped off hers, and led her laughing back into the more private part of the grove.

We kissed for what seemed eternity, deeper and more passionate with each passing moment. I kissed her breasts, massaged her nipples with my tongue. I kissed her thighs and her privates, as deep as I could manage. Lilli giggled. “I never knew a man’s tongue could be extended to far.”

“I’m a man of many talents.”

“Indeed.”

On the ground not far from us was a length of old rope. Some groundkeeper or other workman must have left it there. Lilli jumped up and ran to get it. A moment later, before I quite realized what was happening, she had tied my hands behind my back.

“There,” she laughed. You’ve been saying all day you want to make love like the kings did. Well, they were very adventurous.” She slapped me on the backside.

“Good.”

“Good, ma’am,” she corrected me.

“Ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

Playfully she slapped my face. “You are mine, Mr. Chandler. The rest of the world may see you as stoic and masculine. But I know what you really want. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I could not stop grinning.

“Get on your knees. Worship me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I “worshipped” every part of her, from the soles of her feet to the tip of her nose. When she wanted it harder, or deeper, she would slap me and call me worthless. It excited me more than anything ever had.

Finally she ordered me to mount her. It took all my self-control not to climax then and there. But I held back, and the passion in me just kept mounting.

A peacock strutted up to us as we coupled so ferociously. It stood a few feet away, watching curiously. After a few moments it strutted closer.

I wanted to stop. “Let me chase this damn bird away.”

“Leave it there. Let it do what it wants. I want it to watch us.”

“But—”

She slapped me. “Leave it!”

I did my best to ignore the feathered voyeur and went on with lovemaking. The bird walked even closer and pecked at my thigh. It hurt, like pinpricks. But it also excited me. I fucked Lilli even harder. And I had the most intense climax I’d ever known. She groaned and climaxed too.

When I rolled off of her, it seemed to startle the bird and it ran off into some hedges. I was exhausted, but I was also suddenly self-conscious. “We should get dressed.”

Lilli undid the rope from my wrists. “How nice of them to leave this for us.”

“That’s supposed to be the English vice, not Swedish. You are a fraud, Lilli.”

“Be quiet or I will tie you up again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you seen enough of Versailles? Shall we return to Paris now?”

I nodded. “I’ll never forget this place. Mirrors, oranges, and a *ménage a trois* with a bird.”

“Shut up and get dressed.”

* * * *

Back in Paris, we spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening, ’til I had to get to the club, at her apartment. She announced she didn’t feel like going out. She wanted to cook dinner for me. “Nothing fancy, just steak and potatoes.”

“You might be from Brooklyn, do you know that? Next it’ll be corned beef and cabbage.”

My mother had always told me to make sure the girl I chose could cook. Lilli couldn’t. The steaks were burnt and the potatoes Lyonnais were runny with too much butter. I put on a game face and pretended to enjoy the meal anyway. At least there was nothing she could do to ruin the wine.

After dinner we made love again. She ordered me to do this and that—all of which I loved doing, even though I pretended to mind—and she humiliated me every way she could think of.

Much to my enjoyment, she insisted we not cover the windows. “I want everyone to see you grovel before me. I want the world to see you worship my feet, and kiss my crotch.”

“You should have an SS uniform.”

“Be quiet and do as I order you. You told me it is what you want, remember?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She took one of the curtain cords and lashed my backside with it. It was not exactly a proper whip, but it stung pleasantly and I could not have enjoyed it more. From the corner of my eye I saw a young woman watching from a room across the street. It excited me wildly.

When we were finished, we showered together. I put my arms around her and nibbled at her throat. But she stopped me. “Aren’t you due at the club?”

“The hell with the club. Lash me some more. Isn’t it romantic?”

“Fun is fun. But we are grownups. We have to be responsible.”

“You sound like a nun. Get out your rosary beads and whip me with them.”

“Frank.”

Just then, there was a noise like distant thunder. Neither of us was sure what it was. For a moment I thought the building might be collapsing. But whatever it was passed. The interruption had taken the edge off my desire. I kissed her once more, stepped out of the shower, dried myself and got dressed.

Lilli followed and began to get into her things. I asked her what she would be doing that evening.

“There is a little patisserie on the corner, where they make the most exquisite cream pastries. I thought I might get some.”

“Go easy, Lilli. You have to keep your figure for me.”

“Do I have to look a certain way for you, then? Is it me you love, or just my body?”

Love. It was the first time the word had been spoken between us—by her. I had been less circumspect. But the ice had been broken, and I followed her lead. “I’d love you if you were a hunchbacked dwarf. But I like you even more this way. Why don’t you stop by the club later?”

I kissed her, more than just once, and left.

* * * *

That night at the club, everyone was on edge. It turned out that that distant thundering sound we had heard was distant cannon fire. It continued, on and off, all evening. The Germans were nearing the city, and the news reports said that so far the Allies had only managed to slow them down, not stop them. Everyone was assuming the Nazis would be in Paris within a matter of days, unless some kind of miracle happened. The atmosphere was usually gay and convivial. Not that night. People sat in small groups and kept to their own circles. There was none of the usual bon vivant socializing. The liquor kept flowing. More than one patron had to be ejected by the bouncers for being too drunk. The musicians played downbeat tunes.

I kept an eye on Dan. Between sets he was hanging out with a French guy in a tuxedo—unusual, the tone of the club as was lot more casual than that. This guy was dressed like someone on a Fred Astaire movie. But they seemed to be hitting it off.

During a break for the band, Dan found me. “What do you think, Frank? You’ve heard the news?”

I was in no mood for small talk. “Everybody’s heard the news.”

“It’s time for us to get out of Paris.” This was the first time I’d seen Dan at all on edge. Usually, nothing ruffled him.

“A good idea, except for one thing.”

“Hm?”

“Lilli.” I said her name forcefully, so he’d know I was serious.

“It’s that serious? I thought she was just someone you were playing with.”

“It started that way. But...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh. It kind of looks like you’ve found somebody too.”

He blinked. It took him a moment to realize who I meant. “You mean Jean-Michel? That’s nothing serious. At least not on my end.”

“I thought—”

“We’ve paired off a few times, but he’s so...so...”

I looked across the room to where Jean-Michel was sitting. White tie and tails in a room full of sneakers, jeans and T-shirts; so completely out of place. He was watching us fairly intently. “So...what? He looks like he’s hooked on you.”

“He’s a spoiled rich guy. I’m his latest toy. That’s all. He keeps calling me his big, black American teddy bear.”

“Ugh.”

“You said it. Seriously, Frank, we ought to get out of Paris. As soon as we can. Bring Lilli if you want. But this city will be hell in a few days.”

“You’re right. She’ll be stopping in here later tonight, I think. I hope. I’ll talk to her about it.”

“Good.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m due back on the bandstand. Is there anything you want to hear?”

“Nothing special. How about playing *Teddy Bears’ Picnic*?”

Dan laughed. “For a masculine guy, you can be a real bitch. I’ll catch you later.”

Not much later, Lilli came in. She was wearing that same white dress she had on on that first day when we met. But her manner was odd. She was more distant, more reserved than I had ever known her. I assumed it was the Germans: the impending occupation was affecting a lot of people that way. We grabbed a table in the corner.

“You look gorgeous, Lilli.” I leaned across the table and kissed her.

“And you look like an American expatriate in a Parisian jazz club.”

“Is that bad?”

She laughed and kissed me back. It seemed to me there was a little hesitation in her kiss, but I put it down once again to the atmosphere in Paris.

“Lilli, we have to talk.” I told her Dan and I were planning to leave the city as soon as possible. “I want you to come with me.”

“Come with you where?”

“We don’t know yet. Anywhere the Germans are not. This is going to get bad.”

“You do not have to tell me what the Germans are like, Frank. Or what they do to places they ‘occupy.’”

“Come, then. We’ll be going soon. Tomorrow, if we can,” I said. “I want you to be with me.”

Hesitantly she said, “Of course. You are right. I would not want to be here when the Nazis...”

“That’s wonderful. I was so afraid you’d...you’d, I don’t know. But I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. Without you, my life would be only half a life.”

There were tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Dan was playing *Isn’t It Romantic?* She seemed lost inside herself, inside her thoughts, for a moment. Then she snapped out of it, looked at me and told me she had to be going.

“But Lilli—”

“I have a lot of business to attend to.”

“Please, I want to spend the night with you.”

“I have been in Paris a while now,” she said. “Longer than you. If I am to leave with you, there is a lot I have to do first.” She kissed me. On the cheek. “Good night.”

“Good night, then, love. I’ll send word to your hotel what our plans are. With luck we can book passage on a train tomorrow.”

“Good.” Again her manner was strangely distant.

That should have told me what was coming.

Just then Dan came through the crowd and joined us. “Hi, Lilli. We have some good news. Jean-Michel has a friend who works for the railroad. He just called him for

us. We have tickets on a train that leaves for Marseilles at ten tomorrow morning. From there, we should be able to get to anyplace we want.”

“Terrific,” I said. “You hear, Lilli?”

“Yes. I heard.” She wasn’t smiling.

“Listen, I have to get back to the piano,” Dan said. “I just wanted to tell you both. Our train leaves from the Gare du Nord at ten.” He walked briskly back to the bandstand.

“Well, that’s that, then,” I said. “What a fantastic piece of luck.”

“Yes,” she said.

“I’ll see you at ten in the morning, then.”

“Good night, Frank.”

We kissed again, lightly, and she walked slowly out of the club. As she went, Dan was reprising *Isn’t It Romantic?* Her manner was so odd. It almost seemed as if she was studying the place, trying to remember every detail. It should have told me what was coming.

I never saw her again. Not until she came to Marrakesh.

* * * *

All night long, the thunder of the cannons went on. At times it was so loud I had trouble sleeping. For a time it would be almost deafening, then that would be followed by a period of relative quiet, punctuated now and then, not often, by another blast.

Not that I slept well anyway. Lilli had behaved so strangely earlier. I had a premonition of what was coming, but I couldn’t make myself think about it. My time with her, brief as it was, has been too perfect. I supposed it had to come to an end. Everything good did.

During the night it began to rain. At first it was heavy, almost torrential. Later it slowed to a steady downpour. There were occasional claps of thunder and flashes of lightning, counterpoint to the awful manmade thunder that kept shattering the night.

Morning was gray. The rain continued, as steady and single-minded as if it were alive and had a purpose. Drops streaked the windows. Rivulets flowed through the streets. I found myself thinking about the Eiffel Tower, wondering why it doesn't rust.

I was up before Dan. He had gone out with his boyfriend Jean-Michel to another club after the Blue Note closed. He had come back to Le Cupole drunk. All night long he snored. Once I woke to find he had thrown an arm across my chest in his sleep and was kissing my throat. I pushed him away, rolled onto my side and went back to sleep. I showered, dressed and began to pack. It was likely to be a long trip. We were heading to Marseilles, but where we would be going after that was not clear.

Dan woke groggily, got up and walked to the window. Naked, he stood there and yawned a wide yawn. "What time is it?"

"Seven thirty."

"Too damn early. It would be raining."

"Why don't you get a shower? I'll call for some coffee."

Michelline did not answer my calls. I went down to the front desk and found a note saying she had left the city and advising everyone else to do the same. "The wolves are coming," it said.

So once Dan was dressed and packed, we went to a little café and had croissants and coffee. The place was nearly deserted. We ate accompanied by the sound of cannon fire, louder than it had been the night before.

I ate halfheartedly. "Paris will be a ghost town soon."

He shook his head. "People will stay. People can get used to anything."

"Is Jean-Michel coming with us?"

"His family has a chateau near Lyons. He thinks he'll be safe there."

"He's a fool."

"Probably. We pick up our tickets at the station."

I sipped my coffee. "Are you sure they'll be there? All these people leaving the city..."

"His family owns part of the railroad."

"Oh."

There were no taxis. I thought it an ominous sign, but I kept quiet about it. Dan actually seemed in good spirits even though we had to walk to the station through driving rain. I kept scanning the crowds in the street for Lilli. Periodic cannon fire split the air. It was getting closer and closer. At times, the ground actually seemed to tremble with it. I had a thought. "Should we notify the Blue Note that we're leaving?"

"The hell with them."

"But we—"

"For what they were paying us? Be serious, Frank."

Fortunately, the train station wasn't far from Le Cupole, only a ten-minute walk. We saw a large number of people with suitcases or other luggage, most of them heading in the same direction as us. But weirdly, there were even more people going about their daily business, or trying to, or at least trying to keep up the appearance of normalcy. Not even the intermittent cannon fire seemed to faze them. I wondered about our little friend

Nathalie. She had let slip once that she was Jewish. I said a silent prayer that she'd be all right. But my thoughts were mostly on Lilli. I couldn't wait to see her.

In one street, we ran across an acquaintance of Dan's, and he introduced us. The man's name was Pierre. He had a newspaper over his head, no umbrella. He was, he told us, on his way to his shop. "I sell umbrellas. Would you believe it? Me. Caught in the rain like this."

Dan asked him why he wasn't leaving the city.

"And why should I? The Nazis can be no worse than the French police. Prices may go up, but they always do anyway." He shrugged. "Who knows? They may even go down. And Nazis need umbrellas too. Here is my shop."

He left us. I commented that he wouldn't make much of a spokesman for his product, soaking wet.

Then we were at the Gare du Nord, the famous old cast-iron, glass-roofed train station that was one of Paris' nineteenth century wonders, along with the Eiffel Tower. The place was mobbed. People were coming and going every which way. The mob scene was quite furious. A sign posted near the entrance announced that morning's trains would be the last to leave Paris.

We checked our luggage with a redcap. Then Dan went to the ticket booth to get our tickets. The line was long; he had to wait more than twenty minutes, time I spent watching the crowd, hoping for my first glimpse of Lilli. But Jean-Michel had come through for us. When Dan left the ticket window, he had three fares to Marseilles in his hand.

There was a little snack stand. We waited in the line there and had more coffee and croissants. I wasn't especially hungry, but Dan pointed out there might not be much food available on the train.

Despite that, I didn't eat much. Anxiety over Lilli—where was she?—dominated my mood. Dan seemed to read my mind. “She'll be here, Frank. She's as crazy about you as you are about her.”

“Where is she, then?”

“You saw how crowded the streets are.”

“Yeah. She'll come. She'll have to. But she was in such a strange mood last night. I should have gone to her hotel to get her.”

“Frank, she'll be here.”

“Yeah. Damn it, this coffee is like mud.”

Dan wrinkled his nose. “French coffee. They never know how to make it. Let's go out and wait on the platform.”

“Yeah. Good idea. That's where Lilli will be. She knows which train we're taking.”

We didn't talk at all as we walked side by side to the train. I glanced at my watch. It was five minutes to ten. She would come. I kept telling myself she would come.

There was a loud noise, almost deafening. It took me a moment to realize it was actual thunder, not cannon fire. Ran pelted the glass roof of the station ferociously. A voice on the loudspeaker announced our train was about to leave for Marseilles. I scanned the crowd. Faces, hundreds of them, not the one I was looking for.

A redcap worked his way through the crowd. “Monsieur Chandler!” he called.

“Monsieur Frank Chandler!”

I flagged him down.

“Message for you, monsieur.”

I took it and tipped him. The envelope had my name on it. Her handwriting. I knew it well enough. Anxiously, almost frantically I tore it open. The pit of my stomach sank. I knew what it would say. I was fighting back tears as I read it.

Frank,

Darling, I cannot come with you. And I cannot tell you why. Please believe I have loved you. I will always remember the wonderful time we have had together.

Please understand. Please believe I do not want to hurt you. You will always be a part of me. Be well, darling,

Lilli

I went numb. I crumpled the note and tossed it into the gutter, then stood there on the platform, shaking. The only person I had ever truly loved and wanted had done this to me.

The train let out a cloud of steam. It enveloped us. That felt right to me.

Dan did not have to see the note. He knew. He took me by the arm. “Come on. The train’s leaving.”

I didn’t move. I couldn’t.

Dan pulled me. A conductor was just about to close the train door when he saw us moving toward it. He extended a hand, and between them, he and Dan managed to hoist me up onto the moving car.

As the train left the station, driving rain hit us. A moment later, Paris was receding into the rain. Another moment and it was gone.

Chapter Nine

“Frank, get up!”

I rolled over in bed. Decae was standing there, looking serious. Outside was bright sunlight, bright enough to hurt my eyes. I closed them tightly. “Go away.”

“Frank, come on. It’s two in the afternoon.”

“What of it?” I buried my face in the pillow.

He sat down beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. We all hate seeing you like this.”

“It’s not exactly a barrel of laughs to be like this.”

“Stop it, then. You’ve been drunk out of your senses every night for a week.”

I opened one eye and looked at him again. “So what? That’s my business.”

“Frank’s American Nightclub is your business.”

On the nightstand next to the bed was a gin bottle. I could see there was just enough gin left in it for one good swallow. I reached for it.

But Decae snatched it away. “I won’t let you do this to yourself. Over a woman. You can’t do this for such a...such a flimsy reason.”

My head was aching. It had ached every morning for a week. “Get me a couple of aspirin, will you?”

He got up and walked to the bathroom. From there he shouted, “Do you remember getting into a fight with a customer last night?”

I sat up in the bed. Every bone in my body ached. I realized I was naked under the sheet. “No. But whoever it was probably deserved it.”

Decae came back into the room, carrying a glass of water and two pills. “But do you? He was a Syrian importer, and he beat the tar out of you.”

So that was why my body was hurting so badly. “Give me those.” I swallowed the aspirins as if my life depended on it. Quite honestly, I felt like it did. Groggily I looked at Decae. “How bad do I look, Stephane?”

He put on a wry smile. “Not as bad as you might. I was expecting to find black eyes. There is a cut on your lip, but that is all.”

“Damn.” I looked around the room as if I might find someone else there. “Where’s Dan? And what are you doing here, anyway?”

“Trying to sober you up, of course.”

“I’m touched.”

“Besides, our friend Colonel Erhardt asked me to search your premises again. Now that Mr. and Mrs. Thierry are here, it is more important than ever to find those missing diplomatic passports.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“That is what I told the colonel. But I am afraid he insisted.”

“Why don’t you just arrest me, then?”

“Even under the influence of the Germans, that would require proof of wrongdoing. You have become too important in Marrakesh for a, shall we say, sloppy procedure.”

I was starting to wake up. “Leave me alone, then.”

He shrugged and took a step toward the door.

Then it hit me. “Wait a minute. What did you call them?”

His face was blank. “Why, the Germans.”

“No, you said Mr. and Mrs.—”

“Thierry. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Thierry.”

It hit me even harder than her showing up had. “They’re married?!”

Decae was cool. “Really, Frankie, you surprise me. Involved with a married woman and not knowing it? Tsk, tsk.”

I had no idea what to say. A dozen things ran through my mind. So she had married him. Why was she flirting with me, then? I stammered, “I am not involved with her.”

“No, of course not.” He didn’t believe me, and he let it show.

“When did they...how long have they...?”

He got to his feet. I think I hear one of my men calling. You will excuse me, I hope.”

“Gladly.”

He left. I lay in my bed, trying to make sense of the little bombshell he had dropped. There was still a bit of gin in the bottle on my nightstand. I drained it and wished there was more.

* * * *

When I finally woke up—without actually sobering up—I went downstairs to see if everything was ready for that night. Michel assured me he had enough provisions to feed the usual number of customers. Jan had all the liquor we needed, “even though someone has been pilfering gin.” It was a mild accusation. I decided to let it pass.

But Jan wasn’t about to drop it. “Frank, are you all right? Is everything...?”

“Everything is just fine, Jan. Haven’t you got some glasses to wash or something?”

“Yes, boss.” He was glum. There would be no confidences from me.

Franz was sitting near the front door, supervising the cleaning crew. I crossed to him. “Isn’t it a bit late in the day for this? The place should have been cleaned first thing in the morning.”

“It should.” He frowned at me. “But none of the regular crew showed up, for some reason.”

“Is it some kind of Moslem holy day?”

“No. No one would be working. I had to hire new people. I know that is something you would usually do. But you were...indisposed.”

Another veiled accusation. It was obviously “Have a Go at Frank Day.” I scowled at Franz, but he pretended to be watching the new crew. One of them, a young Moroccan guy, looked up from his mop and winked at me. It was the last thing I wanted to see.

I told Franz I was going out for a walk and would be back in plenty of time for to open that night.

But I wasn’t going to get away so easily. Franz caught my sleeve and whispered, “Frank, can I ask you something? Confidentially?”

I sighed. “Hm?”

“Well, I just noticed the police prefect coming down from upstairs. Can I ask...are you and he...are the two of you...?”

I couldn't let him finish. In the most authoritative voice I could muster, I said, "No. We are not. Understand?"

Franz was crestfallen. "Yes, boss."

"Good." I stomped out, slamming the door behind me.

* * * *

The Djemaa-el-Fna was unusually quiet. For a moment I thought it might be a Moslem holy day, but then the place would have been deserted, and it wasn't. All the usual vendors were at their usual stands, even more aggressive with potential customers than they normally were. For whatever reason, people were staying home.

I braced myself for all the merchants and all their come-ons. And I had not even entered the marketplace proper before the first of them approached me.

"Monsieur Chandler, good morning." He was a wine merchant. He had been to the club a few times.

"Good morning to you, Aziz."

"I have some wonderful new Beaujolais. You really must try a glass."

It was too early for wine. "No, thank you."

"Monsieur, I insist. This is a most excellent vintage. I would be most remiss in not having you taste it."

"I said no, thank you."

"But, monsieur, you have been such a gracious host to me at your fine American nightclub. I would be most rude of me not to return your kindness."

I looked away from him. Farther down the street, to my alarm, I saw Thierry and Lilli walking hand in hand. They were the last people in the world I wanted to meet that day.

I stared at Aziz. “Now, listen to me. I am not saying no to you to be difficult. I am not haggling. I leave all our liquor purchases to my man Jan. He manages the bar at the club. I am not involved.”

“But, monsieur—”

“No.” I walked away from his kiosk.

When I looked again, there was no sign of the newlyweds. Relieved, I kept walking.

At a barber’s stand, I found Verplanck sitting in a chair, evidently enjoying a shave. Verplanck had not been the same since his wife’s death, less sprightly, less prone to enjoy life. I actually had the impression he was losing weight. I said hello to both him and the barber.

Verplanck had been resting, his eyes closed. He opened them, blinked a few times, recognized me and returned my greeting.

“How are you?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “You have not been to the Bijou lately.”

I shrugged in return. “Business. What are you running?”

“*Dinner at Eight*, with the divine Jean Harlow.”

“Oh.” Harlow. Lilli had always reminded me of her. I made a mental note to avoid the Bijou while the movie was on.

“You do not approve?” he asked.

I made myself smile. “No, on the contrary, I approve very much. But *Dinner at Eight* is one of those movies I’ve already seen a lot of times.” I lied smoothly.

“I see. You should come next week, then. We will be screening *The Invisible Man*.”

Two Nazi soldiers strolled past us. I recognized one of them as Herman Schwimpf. “We’d all be better off if we could turn invisible these days,” I commented.

“So right.” He looked around and lowered his voice. “Frank, are you happy here in Marrakesh?”

I turned suspicious. What could make him say that? “Moderately. Why?”

“You will be staying permanently, then?”

“Nothing is permanent, Verplanck. Not life, not love, not anything.”

He lowered his voice still further. “I am thinking of selling the theater.”

It quite surprised me. I’d always had the impression movies were the only thing he loved, besides his wife.

“Naturally, when I made the decision, I thought of you.”

“You flatter me, Verplanck.”

“You are the only businessman I know who also knows a good deal about the movies.”

Thierry and Lilli were in sight again, closer than before. They were on the next corner, locked in a passionate embrace, kissing. I froze. Against my will, the sight of them excited me. I tried to imagine her in my arms instead of his. Then I caught myself. There was no way I could ever trust her again. I hoped she’d treat him better than she had treated me.

“Frank?”

Verplanck pulled me out of my little reverie. “Hm?”

“The Bijou.”

“Oh. Sorry. There’s something on my mind today, that’s all.”

He followed my gaze to where they were standing. “She is very pretty, isn’t she?”

“I guess so. Listen, I’ll give some thought to your proposition. We’ll talk later in the week, all right?”

“Certainly, Frank.”

“I’ll see you, then.” I said good day to the barber and moved on—in a direction away from the loving couple.

Poppa Cherry was in the souk. He was walking arm in arm with a young Moroccan guy in a djellaba. As a general rule I avoided Cherry, even when he was in the club. I had never met anyone so obviously sleazy and salacious. But he had seen me, and there was no convenient way to avoid him. I decided to make the best of it and put on a smile. “Hello, Cherry.”

“Hello.” He ostentatiously put an arm around his date. “We are glad to see you.”

I looked at the guy with him. He could not have been past his early twenties. He smiled a shy smile at me, and his smile is most ingratiating. “I am Ahriman, sir. I am most pleased to meet you.”

Cherry cut him off. “Rumor has it,” he said to me, “that you are becoming quite intimate with our police prefect.”

“Then rumor has it wrong.”

“I am told he was seen leaving your bedroom only this morning.” His grin could not have looked more wicked. “Decae is a good catch, Frank. But beware thinking you can ever tame him. The fox does not willingly give up his position guarding the henhouse.”

I was in no mood for this. I decided to take the offense. “What is your story, Cherry? If that really is your name, I mean. You’re a Brit. That much is obvious. But why are you in Marrakesh?”

“The reasons that bring men to Marrakesh are as varied as the sands of the Great Desert.”

I laughed at him. “Did you read that in a fortune cookie? Grains of sand don’t differ from one another much. What really brought you here? I like to think you were a vicar who got too gay with the choirboys.”

He ignored this and turned to his boyfriend. “Come, Ahriman, we have a great deal of shopping to do.”

Without another word, they walked off down the street.

I turned to go on my way. And there, thirty feet in front of me were Thierry and Lilli. Thankfully they were not locked in another embrace. Lilli parted from him and walked lightly into a hairdresser’s parlor. Thierry saw me watching. And quite unexpectedly he winked at me.

What on earth could he be trying to convey? He slid his hand down the front of his suit in an unmistakable manner. If I had seen one of the city’s numerous hustlers do it, I’d have known exactly what to make of it. But from Thierry...? I waved a little wave at him and walked on.

It was awful enough to have Lilli back in my life. Having her husband behave in this untoward manner was too much to deal with. But Thierry followed me. “Mr. Chandler! Mr. Chandler!”

Glumly I stopped walking and turned to face him. “M. Thierry. How are you?”

He ignored my attempt at pleasantries. “May I have a word with you, please?”

“Certainly. But...should you be leaving Lilli in that shop? Marrakesh is not the friendliest place for a Western woman alone.”

“I’m certain she will be fine. That hairdresser’s shop was recommended to us by a friend.”

“Friend?” Carefully chosen word. Thierry was the most famous anti-German underground fighter in Europe. He must certainly be in contact with the resistance in Marrakesh. Not that I expected him to say so. But the thought that Lilli might be working with him...might be making covert contacts for him... Against my will, I found myself resenting his using her that way.

“Well,” he smiled a rueful smile, “let us say an acquaintance, then. At any rate, someone I trust.”

“Prefect Decae tells me the two of you are married. Congratulations.”

Alarm flickered in his features, then disappeared quickly, to be replaced by a look of puzzlement. “Married? Where could the prefect have heard such a thing?”

I shrugged. “From the Germans, I presume.”

There was an awkward pause. Thierry looked around as if he was afraid someone might see us, even though we were standing in the center of an open marketplace. “Mr. Chandler—may I call you Frank?”

“Please do. Everyone does.”

“Well, Frank, I must ask you something. Something personal.”

I was breezy. “Ask away. My life is an open book.”

“I see. What sort of book?”

This threw me. “If there’s something on your mind, say so. I have shopping to do.”

“Well...” He shifted his weight awkwardly. Somehow I knew what he would say next. “Well...you are an attractive man, Frank.”

“A minority viewpoint, but thanks.”

“And I hear...I hear your proclivities are...” He made a twisting gesture with his right hand. Then he took a step closer to me and stared directly into my eyes. And smiled an ingratiating smile.

“Surely you’ve learned better than to listen to idle gossip in the souk, Thierry.”

His face fell. “It is not true, then?”

“There’s talk around town that you’re trying to find a way to London. Right under Colonel Erhardt’s nose, too. Is that true?”

“Point taken, Mr. Chandler. Please excuse my impertinence in asking.”

“Don’t give it another thought. It’s Frank, remember?”

“Frank, then. I hope we can be friends.”

“We already are.” I didn’t mean a word of it, and he knew it. But I was grateful he had dropped his attempted pass at me. I had never heard a word of gossip about him liking men. If anything at all had happened between us, it would have been quite forced on his part. I had no intention of being hustled, especially not by a married man.

* * * *

That night the pair came to the club. Franz seated them, and I made a point of stopping by their table.

“Good evening. You’re turning into regulars here.”

They both said hello, and Lilli added, “You sound surprised by that.”

“No, not at all. Except that...well, Frank’s American Nightclub has a reputation that some might find questionable.”

“You cater to a clientele of international expatriates. As certain amount of wheeling and dealing is inevitable.” He wasn’t giving a thing away.

“That’s not exactly what I meant. Among our most faithful customers are a number of...er...longhaired men and shorthaired women.”

He sipped his drink. He was a cool customer, that’s for sure. But then, if the Germans hadn’t been able to shake him, why should I think I might? I made a few pleasantries and moved on to another table.

The Germans arrived. In force. It was usual for a contingent of them to show up, but not all of them. That night there were more than a dozen of them. Including Erhardt—he hadn’t shown himself for almost a week. I wondered who was left to go around killing theater owners’ wives. Decae, for once, was not with them.

“Colonel Erhardt.” I made a point of stopping at the three tables they had filled up. Erhardt was at the middle one, presiding like a minor lord over his subjects. “We haven’t seen you for a few days. I was beginning to wonder if you’d left Marrakesh.”

“That is not very likely, Herr Chandler.”

“I hope you have not been away because of some problem for the Reich.”

“Not at all.”

I signaled Franz to give him a bottle of champagne on the house—our usual bribe—and started to move on.

But Erhardt jumped to his feet and stood there, stiff as a ramrod. “Might I have a word with you in private, Herr Chandler?”

“Yes, of course, if you want. It’ll be my pleasure.” I told the lie with an ingratiating smile and led him to my table in the corner of the back room, which wasn’t open yet. Jan caught the scent and brought us two drinks without me having to ask him. I sat down, drink in hand. Erhardt stood in front of me, still ludicrously erect like a caricature of a German officer. “What can I do for you, colonel?”

“Herr Chandler.” His manner was as stiff as his posture. “Prefect Decae has vouched most strongly for your character.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Should I be flattered?”

“Relief might be a more appropriate reaction.”

I chuckled at him. He was trying to scare me, no doubt about it. “What do I have to be relieved about?”

He sat his drink on the edge of the table. He had not tasted it. “The prefect assures me—us – that you have never indulged in any activities that are even mildly, shall we say, questionable?”

“Say anything you like.”

“There is that unfailing American forthrightness.” He smiled to show he didn’t mean it. “Therefore I shall be forthright too.”

“For someone who wants to be forthright, you’re beating around an awfully big bush, colonel.”

Tight smile. He was annoyed. It took him forever to go on.

“Herr Chandler, you must recall that several months ago two of our couriers were murdered near Marrakesh.”

“Yes, it was too bad. Am I a suspect, then?”

“You will also recall that the unfortunate men were carrying...certain documents.”

I drank. “As opposed to uncertain documents?”

He was unamused by my little joke. “The murderer was arrested here, in this establishment, Herr Chandler. He was seen consorting with you early in the evening.”

“Consorting? What on earth does that mean?”

He ignored this. “And those documents were never found. Herr Chandler, I shall be frank.”

“It’s about time.”

“We believe you are in possession of those papers. We are watching you.”

So that was what he had on his mind. “I hope I’m not boring you.” I stood up. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Colonel Erhardt, I have a nightclub to run.”

He caught me by the sleeve as I tried to pass him. “Prefect Decae can only offer you so much protection, Herr Chandler. I would not be too flip.”

“If you don’t take your hands off me, you’re the one who’ll be flipping.”

Slowly, stiffly as usual, he released my arm. “Just so. But there are two people in Marrakesh who would give a great deal for those documents. The Third Reich would be most unhappy should they manage to obtain them.”

“Perish the thought that the Third Reich should be unhappy.”

“Ah, that American insolence. You have been warned, Herr Chandler. If I were you, I would take the warning most carefully to heart.”

“Excuse me, colonel. The boy who empties the ashtrays needs me.”

He stiffened. “Just so, Herr Chandler.”

I walked briskly away from him.

Jan flagged me down. “Frank, we’re running low on Scotch.”

“Why didn’t you check inventory earlier?”

“I did, boss. And normally we would have had enough. But every Scotch drinker in Marrakesh is here tonight. And you know how touchy a Scotch drinker can be.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s nothing you can do but serve them bourbon or blended whiskey, and hope for the best. Offer them discounts or something. Give them extra olives in their drinks. And make sure we have a lot more Scotch on hand in the future.”

“But—”

“There’s nothing else to be done. We’ll just have to hope they develop a sudden taste for bourbon, that’s all.”

“Yes, boss. Oh, and boss?”

“What now?”

He nodded toward the end of the bar. Emmy Lou Lee was sitting at the bar, staring into her drink and swirling it. I sighed. As many times as I’d kicked her out, she

always managed to sneak back in. Then she inevitably made a scene when she was asked to leave.

I leaned close to Jan. "Don't serve her anything else, that's all."

"She can be a regular hellcat."

"Don't serve her."

"Not anything at all? What if she wants a Coca-Cola?"

"Don't serve her, I said. She's not welcome here. Understand?"

"Yes, boss."

I walked over to her. "Miss Lee."

She didn't look up from the drink in her hand. "You."

"Yes, me. Who did you expect, Roosevelt?"

"Leave me alone."

"If you were outside, I'd be happy to do just that."

She looked up at me with a confrontational attitude. "Well?"

"How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of here?"

Pouting, she got to her feet. "All right, I'll go. But—"

"And don't come back."

She raised a hand to slap me. "You—!"

I caught her hand and muscled her toward the door. Franz was at his station there.

"Is everything all right, Frank?"

"Did you let this woman in?"

He looked abashed. "She promised to behave."

"What else did she promise you?"

He didn't know whether to be affronted or flattered. "Boss."

"I don't want to see her in here again. Ever. You understand?"

"Yes, Frank."

A moment later I had her outside.

The rest of the evening was uneventful, except that Vanessa sprained her ankle. I went to see her in her dressing room. Vincent was there, on his knees in front of her, bandaging the injury. I tried my best to sound upbeat. "How are you?"

"Not well. I doubt I'll be able to dance for at least a week, maybe two. I'm so sorry."

"Worry about yourself, not the club. We'll get by somehow."

Just as I was leaving the dressing room, I ran into Franz. "How is she?" he asked.

"She's all right, I guess. But she won't be dancing any time soon."

He clucked his tongue. "Such a pretty woman, too. Going to waste like that."

"What to you mean, 'going to waste'? It's not like she has cancer."

"But who knows when she'll be able to get back to work?"

This was not a conversation I wanted to have. "Do you have to worry so much about everything? She'll be dancing again before you know it."

Suddenly he looked embarrassed. "It isn't dancing I'm talking about. "She—what is the American expression?—she turns tricks."

"*What?*"

"You didn't know? Frank, we all assumed—"

"No." I made my voice stern, and it wasn't difficult. I was genuinely angry. "I did *not* know."

“She flirts with customers while she’s dancing. Then later she... Surely you’ve noticed.”

It was exactly the thing Decae could use to shut us down. If the Germans knew about it— “I’ll have to have a strong talk with her when she’s feeling better.” A thought hit me. “What about Vincent?”

Franz looked like he wanted to hide somewhere. “Him too. Countess Prevenskaya, in particular, is very—”

“God.” I put on a brave face. “Go on, get back to your station.”

“Are you all right, Frank?”

“Just peachy. Go on, I told you.”

He went, looking vaguely concerned. As well he should have been. A thing like this could turn unpleasant in all sorts of ways. Dan had been auditioning new performers. I’d have to make sure he’d speed up the process.

When I got back to the club I saw that Lilli and Thierry had come in. She waved to me, and so did he. I smiled and waved back, then headed back to the casino. Except for my dancer-whore’s ankle, everything was running smoothly.

Dan and his sidemen played a medley of songs from *Show Boat*. Decae won less than usual at roulette and left quickly. Jan spilled a bottle of champagne. A normal night, nothing exceptional at all.

I shouldn’t have let myself be fooled by it.

* * * *

When we closed—when the lights were turned off and everyone had gone home—Dan sat at his piano playing sad Rodgers and Hart songs, over and over again. Customers had kept buying him drinks all evening, and he had overdone it.

I tried to pull him out of whatever had made him so melancholy. “Dan, come on. Let’s go upstairs and get some sleep.”

He didn’t even look up from the keyboard. “Leave me alone.”

“Dan, please. Come on.”

“They’re gone. They don’t want to see me any more.”

It took me a moment to realize who he was talking about. “The twins?”

He nodded. “My funny valentines.”

“I don’t think I knew they meant to much to you. I thought they were just...”

He pounded the keys and made a loud discord. “They got married.”

I was lost. “To each other?”

Dan nodded. “Just goes to show, you can’t trust any human being. I want to get a dog.”

Softly I said, “In the morning. You can’t do that ’til the morning. Come upstairs and got to bed.”

“No.” He started playing *Ten Cents a Dance*.

“Dan, please. This isn’t good.”

“Go away. Leave me alone.”

There was no use. I said good night and climbed the stairs to my room. Dan would be all right in the morning, or at least I told myself that. Sooner or later he would fall asleep, and when morning came he would be himself again. He had never talked

about the twins as anything but bedmates. He would come to realize that's all they were, and this would pass.

In my bedroom, a small lamp was on. I had not left it on; I was certain. Light from the full moon poured in through the window. Someone was there.

"Emmy Lou?"

In the shadowed corner someone moved, I couldn't see who. But it had to be her.

"Emmy Lou? You've tried this before, and it didn't get you anywhere. Why bother trying again?"

Again, there came no answer. I stepped closer to the bed, and to that dark corner. My eyes were adjusting to the light. And I saw who was there. My heart sank. "Lilli."

She was sitting in a plush chair. Wearing that same white dress I always thought of her in. She didn't say a word but shifted her weight slightly, and crossed her legs.

"What are you doing here, Lilli?"

Softly she said—almost whispered—"I thought you would be glad to see me, Frank. You've been so nice to us when we come to the club."

"I'm a professional host. I would never have thought you'd be taken in by a whore's smile."

She lit a cigarette. "Is that what you are?"

So it was verbal sparring she wanted. "One of us is. I wouldn't swear which."

"Come and sit with me. Or let us go outside and take a walk in the moonlight."

"You go, Lilli. Walk back to your husband."

"Husband?" She sounded shocked. "What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean. You and Thierry are married."

“How can you know that?” She sounded genuinely shocked. She paused and thought for a moment. “The Germans?”

“The next best thing. The prefect of police.”

Lilli fell silent for a long moment. “We didn’t want anyone to know. Or rather, Paul didn’t.”

“I’m sure. What on earth are you doing here?”

“Yes, Paul and I are married. What you didn’t know is that we were already married, even when you and I knew each other in Paris. Paul had disappeared months before. Everyone was afraid he was dead. Then, on that last night, I had word he was still alive and in hiding. The next morning I had it confirmed definitely. So, you see, I had to go to him. There was no way I could...you know...with you.”

“The devoted wife.” I dripped with irony. “The grieving widow. Am I supposed to believe that’s what you were? That day in the grove at Versailles?”

“Yes, Frank. The grieving widow. That is exactly what I was, or what I thought myself.” She stepped into the moonlight. It lit her hair brilliantly and outlined her body. “Until that day when I met you.”

I kept a bottle of gin in the nightstand drawer. I pulled it out, uncorked it, drank. “Very touching.

But she went on. “I’ve never loved Paul, not the way I loved you. I’ve tried, and I’ve never been able to get you out of my mind. When we came to Marrakesh...when I saw you that first night we came to the club...I...”

“You what? Saw another chance to hurt me?” I held the bottle to my lips and took a long swallow.

Lilli was still standing in the moonlight. It made her look so beautiful, yet so cold. “Please don’t talk like that, Frank, darling.”

Against every instinct I had, I wanted her again. Her breasts, her hips were so... I forced myself to remember that horrible day at the train station. “So it’s ‘darling,’ is it?”

“Yes, I—”

“Why did you come here?” I didn’t know what I meant—why did she come to Marrakesh or why did she come to my room that night? “Nobody asked you to.”

Softly she said, “Paul did.”

I gaped at her. So his own attempt to seduce me failed and he sent his wife, pimped her. I didn’t know whether to laugh or be appalled. “Everybody knows Paul Thierry’s reputation. Everybody knows how much he’s done to hurt the Germans, and to encourage others to hurt them, too.”

“My husband is a great man.”

“Go back to him, then. He needs you. I don’t.”

I realized she had started to cry. It was unexpected, and it made me uncomfortable. She took a few steps toward me. “Please, Frank, don’t.”

“I told you to get out of here. You can’t really think I’d give you an opening to hurt me more than you have already.”

She couldn’t control her tears. She began sobbing. “I never meant to, dearest.”

“*Dearest.*” I knew I sounded horribly bitter. “So now it’s ‘dearest.’”

“Oh, Frank.” She lurched forward into my arms. “I’ve never stopped loving you.” She was crying horribly. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to see. Quite

against my will, I found myself softening. “I know how you feel about me. I know how you hate me. You would be a fool not to.”

I kissed her. Lightly—it was not at all sexual. “I don’t hate you.”

“Yes, you do.” She sobbed and buried her face in my chest.

Again I kissed her, this time on the top of her head. She looked up at me. Her tears were glistening in the moonlight. I kissed her on the lips again. It was warm. It felt right. “Lilli,” I whispered. “All this time I thought I’ve hated you. But it was really love. The same love I felt in Paris, filtered through my disappointment. There was no way I could understand.”

She wrapped her arms around me more tightly. “Please, let’s go somewhere. Let’s take a walk. If we stay here, we’ll... I don’t want to do anything to make life even harder for us than it’s been.”

“You won’t. You couldn’t.”

“I’d give anything to have never come to Marrakesh.” She wiped tears from her eyes, trying to regain her composure.

“But you did. And we’re here, now, together.”

“Please, Frank, let’s go.”

We walked. That late at night, the city was all but deserted. People were in their homes, in their beds. The marketplace seemed alien with no stalls, no vendors, no business. The minaret of the Koutouba Mosque towered over everything, glowing white in the moonlight.

Occasionally someone would move in the city’s shadows, distant, indistinct. A beggar, out long after business hours, scuttled away when he heard us coming. Cats

prowled, dogs slept in doorways. I decided to be bold, and I took Lilli's hand. She let me. We walked hand in hand through the sleeping city.

"This is marvelous." She had stopped sobbing, and was smiling. "This Moorish architecture is so lovely. When we first came here, I found the city strange and forbidding. But now it seems too wonderful to be true, like something out of the *Arabian Nights*."

I chuckled. "Just rub me and you'll get your wish."

Lilli slapped me playfully, and we kept walking.

Soon we were at the edge of town. Subconsciously I had steered us toward the desert and the ruins where I had always gone for solitude. There, in the distance, lit by the moon, the stones seemed to glow.

"Frank, where are we?"

"That place there," I pointed, "is called Tifniss. They say it was as far south as the Roman Empire ever stretched. A timeless place."

She seemed to not know what to make of it. "Roman ruins? Why are we—?"

"You'll see."

We strolled across the sand. There was a desert breeze—unusual, since it normally only blew in the morning and at sunset. There were a million stars, and the moon seemed impossibly bright. The Milky Way shone so brightly it was easy to see why the ancients had thought of it as a road in the sky. A half-dozen meteors blazed over our heads, flared brightly, and died. In that situation, it was easy to forget what she did to me in Paris. It didn't seem to matter, at least not so much.

A snake slithered out of our way. Lilli jumped into my arms. I kissed her.

“I thought you didn’t want to...?” She seemed genuinely surprised.

“I thought so too. I don’t know what I want.”

Soon we were at the ruins. We sat on the desert sand, side by side. “See?” I pointed to the name of the goddess of love, carved into the stone. “For us.”

“No, Frank. I can’t—”

I could no longer contain myself. “Lilli, why did you do it? If you loved me as much as you say, why did you go back to him?”

She fell silent and a bit distant. “I do love Paul. Not in the same way. Not with the same intensity. He is such a great man. So important to so many people. He was a friend of our family. I’ve known him since I was a girl. And he needs me. Or so he says. He tells me I’m the thing that keeps him going. How could I...? I had to go back to him. The Germans had him, in one of their camps. They did the most horrible things to him. Our friends told me he was dead, because they didn’t want me worrying about what those fiends were doing to him. If I hadn’t been there for him, waiting when he escaped...I don’t know what would have happened to him.”

She fell silent. So did I. I started to reach for her, to take her hand, but I felt her stiffen and I stopped.

The breeze kicked up. Sand blew. We laughed like schoolchildren on a picnic and ran into the ruins of the temple. Roofless, it seemed almost to glow in the moonlight. It wasn’t very large, as Roman temples go. The wind stirred the sand and uncovered part of a mosaic on the floor. It was of the sea. Fish and octopi surrounded the goddess as she rose from the waters. A stray cloud covered the moon, and it faded.

Lilli turned away from me. “Why did it have to be Venus? Why couldn’t it have been Vulcan or Mercury or any of the others?”

I moved very close to her and put a hand on her shoulder. Softly I said, “Maybe it’s for us. Maybe the goddess knew, in her wisdom, that the two of us would be here one day, and would need her.”

Lilli laughed gently. “It isn’t like you to spout that kind of romantic nonsense.”

“It isn’t like me to be here at all.” I spun her around to face me. I kissed her fully, passionately.

She started to resist. Then she yielded and kissed me back.

We couldn’t stop. We stood there in the remains of the temple of the goddess of love, and we only kissed, for what seemed eternity.

More meteors blazed overhead. That cloud uncovered the moon. It was too corny, it was too perfect.

We made love. There in the ruins, with the desert breeze caressing our bodies, we made love. The moon, the stars, the meteors, the goddess...I was conscious of it all, and it all seemed too perfect, and yet none of it seemed to matter. None of it but Lilli.

I wanted to stop at kissing. But despite myself I could not resist. The old passion flamed up in me, as hot and bright as one of those meteors.

I undressed her; she undressed me. There was none of the old role playing – no dominance, no submissiveness. We kissed each other’s bodies, lips, necks, nipples, stomachs, privates, legs, feet. We fucked long and hard. And when the moment came, we climaxed together.

I never thought I could feel anything as intense as our lovemaking in Paris, but this was even more overwhelming. After we came, we lay together in the sand, not able to stop kissing, not able to let go of one another. Before I quite realized what was happening, we fucked a second time, and it was even more wildly satisfying than the first had been.

Lilli cried, “Oh, my God!” when she reached orgasm.

I had to struggle to catch my breath. I looked around us at the temple, the desert, the moon. I whispered, “Oh, my goddess, you mean.”

She laughed softly. And, as exhausted as she was, she buried her face in my chest. “That was so wonderful.”

I was too spent to say anything. We lay in one another’s arms for what seemed like eternity. When I glanced at the temple again, from the corner of my eye, an owl was perched there, staring at us curiously. The desert owls prey on mice, lizards, snakes. I wondered which it thought we might be. It tilted its head slightly, and its eyes caught the moonlight and glowed. Softly it cooed, “Who?”

Lilli looked up. “What was that?”

I nodded toward the temple. “We have a voyeur.”

She chuckled. “Will we ever make love without a bird?”

“I’ll fill our house with canaries if that’s the secret.”

She sat up. “It is not. We are the secret, Frank. The spark is there, between us.”
“Tell that to the owl.”

I kissed her. In moments we were making love still again. And again. When we finished, the sky was beginning to lighten. From the city, faintly, came the sound of the muezzin, calling the Moslem faithful to morning prayer.

I reached for my pants. "Time for us to get back."

She turned glum. "Do we have to?"

"Yes, we have to. I don't think either of us wants to. But I have a business to attend to, and you have—" I couldn't make myself say it.

"Go on. I have Paul."

The word almost literally hurt as I said it. "Yes."

Neither of us said much more then. We got dressed slowly and began walking back to Marrakesh.

The city lay before us, lit faintly by the warring light of the setting full moon and the first light of the sun. The red stone of the buildings looked like something alive. Even the desert sand seemed to shimmer in the morning's first light, the night's dying glow. Lilli had been right before: It was a magical landscape, something out of the *Arabian Nights*.

"Frank, I have to confess something."

"You have another husband? You're a bigamist? Aiming for three?"

"No, don't be silly."

"I can't help it. I've never felt so giddy before."

"Don't," she said. "Please."

Her mood had changed so quickly it left me reeling. "Then tell me what's wrong."

She took a deep breath. "I didn't come to you for...for this."

My heart sank. I had a feeling I knew what was coming.

"Paul sent me."

I took a step farther away from her but kept walking.

"He thinks you have those diplomatic passports we've heard about. Everybody we've talked to says you do. He sent me to get them. That's the only reason I came. But now..."

"You'd have been wasting your time. I don't have them." I hoped my lie was convincing.

But she could see right through me. "Everyone thinks you do."

"Everyone." It seemed an odd choice of words. They hadn't been in Marrakesh long enough to know "everyone."

"We went to the Prefect of Police, for help getting to London." She looked at me, a hopeful expression in her eyes, then turned quickly away. "He said he couldn't help us but that we should ask my 'old friend' Frank Chandler."

I chuckled at this. "Decae likes to believe everybody's as corrupt as he is himself. He's had his goons search my place—twice. And they weren't able to turn up any passports."

Lilli stopped walking. She turned me to face her. "You don't understand what I'm suggesting. You don't understand what I want now."

"Now'?"

"Frank." She lowered her eyes. "I don't want the passports so Paul and I can get to London."

“Then?”

“I want them for us. For you and me.”

“Oh.” It caught me completely off guard. But in that moment my last reservation about her disappeared. The thought of Lilli and me, together in London—and maybe eventually in the States...

But my native caution kicked in. “London’s a bombed-out ruin.”

“I know that. Everyone knows it. But I would be there with you. It wouldn’t seem like a ruin to me.”

This was too much for me. I needed time to think. “All of that may be true, Lilli.

But the fact remains that I don’t have the passports.”

Her face sank. “Oh.”

“If I had them, do you think I’d still be here? In a backwater like Marrakesh?”

“I—I don’t know.”

We were two blocks from her hotel. I took her in my arms and kissed her goodnight, or good morning. She walked slowly—sadly, I think—back to her husband.

And that was the end of my night of passion.

First there had been Decae, and now Lilli. I made a mental note for myself to stay away from those Roman ruins. Life kept getting too complicated there.

* * * *

I hadn’t given much thought to the passports, or to what I might do with them. To the extent I had thought about them at all, I had had a vague idea that I might use them for myself and Dan if we ever decided we wanted to return to the States. But now, with Lilli on the scene...

There was one person who might give me the information I needed to make a decision. Police headquarters was directly across the street from the al-Koutouba Mosque. It was nearly noon, and Moslems would be gathering for their noonday prayer. I waited until they had time to file into the mosque, then headed for Decae's office.

He was busy with someone. The receptionist told me to have a seat, that the prefect would be with me as soon as possible. I sat and waited—and tried to avoid thinking about what might be going on behind the prefect's door. But there was no way to avoid the thought that he was taking advantage of one of the city's unfortunate petty criminals.

As I sat there a young Moslem guy, thirtyish, came in. He exchanged a few words with the receptionist and took the chair beside me. Had I been too quick to judge? Was this Decae's "afternoon delight," then? I felt so awkward.

But the young man, apparently, did not. "You are Mister Frank Chandler, of Frank's American Nightclub, are you not?"

"Yes, I guess I am." I wanted to make any conversation as short as possible.

"My name is Aziz am-Mokhtar, sir." He smiled a smile he obviously hoped would ingratiate him to me.

I shook his hand. "How do you do?"

"I am the cousin of your doorman, Ahmed."

"Oh." I looked him up and down. There was not much of a physical resemblance.

"My cousin tells me you are an excellent employer, sir."

"Really? That's nice to hear." So it was that—he was looking for a job.

“Oh, yes sir. He says there is no finer man to work for in all Marrakesh.”

“Good.” What the hell was Decae doing? Why didn’t he come out?

“I personally am in the employ of the prefect.” He nodded toward Stephane’s door.

“Good for you.” I couldn’t help being curious. I had never talked with one of Decae’s men before. “But tell me. Don’t you mind his...advances?”

The word puzzled him. “Advances, sir? Oh—you mean sex.”

“Yes, I imagine I do.”

He was still not sure what to make of the question. “But sex is pleasurable. Surely you know that, sir.”

“I’ve had my suspicions, yes.”

“Then how could anyone dislike it?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t it matter who else is involved?”

“Not at all, sir. My pleasure is the same with a fat man or a thin one, a plump woman or one who is thin as a pipe. One focuses on one’s self, that is all. At the moment of climax, nothing else is possible. Concern with one’s partner is not only impossible, but beside the point.”

“That’s a neat trick if you can do it.”

“Thank you, sir.” Irony was lost on him.

At that moment the prefect’s door opened. Out he walked, chatting amiably with Colonel Erhardt. I couldn’t make out any of their conversation, but they shook hands like old friends. Erhardt put on his cap and headed for the exit. When he realized I was sitting there, his smile turned quickly to a frown. Then, thankfully, he was gone.

Stephane was still at his office door. He looked from me to Aziz like a small boy unable to decide which piece of candy to eat next. Finally he said, "Frank! How interesting to see you."

I got to my feet. "Hello, Stephane."

"Come in and let's talk." He asked the receptionist to bring us mint tea and closed the door behind us.

"Well, well, well." He beamed. "The colonel and I were just discussing you. What exactly brings you here to my office?" Frowning, he added, "For the first time."

I ignored the bait. "What could Erhardt possibly want to discuss about me?"

"Oh, your comings and goings. Your friends and your enemies. This and that." He made his face a blank. "You know the kind of chitchat."

"You must have been awfully hard up for conversation to be talking about saloon keepers."

The receptionist knocked and came in with a tray for us. I took a glass of tea and sipped it. Decae did likewise. It was too hot for me but he drank it cheerfully. When the receptionist had made his exit, he went on. "Not at all. Colonel Erhardt finds you fascinating."

"What a dull life he must lead."

He chuckled. The smile disappeared from his face. "You were seen last night with Thierry's wife." It was an accusation."

"Yes, I was. There's no secret about that. What of it?"

"You were intimate with her."

“You’re good, Stephane. Did you get that from one of your people or one of Erhardt’s?” I drank my tea. “Or is there any difference, any more?”

He put his glass down. “I keep trying to show you I’m your friend. Or want to be. But you will never permit it. Public indecency is a serious crime in Morocco. The two of you could be in jail cells now.”

“If having sex in the ruins is such a crime, the two of us would have company.”

He stiffened. “Frank, what is your relationship to that woman?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Wasn’t that in the report?”

“I would advise you not to be flippant with me. I am in a position to either help your case or hurt it gravely.”

“Do I have a case, then?”

He sat down in his desk chair and threw his hands up in frustration. It pleased me to know I was bothering him that much. He all but shouted, “I have never known anyone like you. You rebuff friendly gestures as if they were threats. I have spent most of the last hour persuading Colonel Erhardt—still again—that you are no threat to his interests. I could easily have told him about your tryst with Madame Thierry last night, but I kept it to myself.”

“Thank you. But your kind of friendship nearly always has strings attached.”

He was smug; he was a mandarin. “All friendships do.”

“So, what are the strings here?”

He leaned back in his chair. “Colonel Erhardt is most interested in our lady friend and her husband.”

I spread my hands in a gesture that said, what of that? “So?”

“You appear to know them—or her—better than anyone in Marrakesh.”

“So? You’re not asking me to be an informer, are you?”

“Good heavens, no, Frankie.”

“Then?”

He had growing tense. Now he seemed to relax. “Really, Frankie. Mousing around with a married woman. And a woman whose husband is one of the most wanted men in Europe, at that. I mean, honestly. I thought better of you.”

“Is that a compliment?”

He threw his hands up in exasperation. “Can you not see what a spectacle you are making of yourself? To the Germans, if to no one else?”

I saw the opening I wanted. “If you’re so concerned, why don’t you grant them permission to leave? It would get them out of your hair. And—” I took a shot in the dark “—it would give you a clear field with me.” He started to protest, so I added quickly, “If that’s what you want, of course.”

He fell silent. Made his fingers into a little steeple. When he finally spoke again, it was in a much softer tone. “As a matter of fact, Monsieur and Madame Thierry came to my office last week, seeking exit visas. I reluctantly explained to them that Colonel Erhardt would take a very dim view of it if I were to issue them. Not that I take orders from him, mind you.” He added this a bit too quickly to be convincing. “But his anger would be...let us say, inconvenient.”

“For Thierry or for you?”

“Oh, come to your senses. I want to know what you want for them, that is all.”

“‘Them’? Do you mean the Thierrys or the diplomatic passports?”

“Everyone know you have them,” he said. “The Germans are quite certain of it.”

“Nobody knows I have them, Stephane. Nobody could. But if you could give Paul and Lilli their exit visas, it would make my life a lot less complicated.”

“You make it sound as if they haven’t contacted you about the passports. Would you like a brandy?”

“No, thanks.”

“Excuse me while I have one.” He poured a snifter for himself. “I will tell you again, Frank. Colonel Erhardt would be most displeased should the two of them leave Marrakesh with those missing passports in their possession. He wants the Thierrys here.”

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “And if anyone else should get them?”

He sipped his brandy. “Like whom, for instance?”

“Like whoever has those passports.”

Annoyed, he slammed his snifter on the desk. “You must realize that I can only protect you so far. If the Germans really want to take you, there is not much I can do to stop them. These games you keep playing with me... What is the point?”

“Sorry, Stephane. I can’t help sparring. In the neighborhood where I grew up, it was a survival skill. With the Nazis running around here, spying on me, it looks like it’s still one. And you’re their cop. Besides, nobody asked you to protect me.”

His frustration showed clearly in his features.

We went on like that for a few more minutes. Finally, frustrated beyond his capacity to bear, he showed me to the door. Feeling good about nettling him as well as I had, I walked home.

* * * *

Despite all the banter, I had managed to get Decae to tell me what he wanted to know. He had no intention of letting Lilli and her husband leave Marrakesh. I wished he would let that happen. I would have made my life so much simpler. It would have relieved me of the need to make a decision.

Dan was showering when I got home. My first impulse was to let him have his privacy. But all the recent events had left me feeling...well, a bit lost. There was no one else I could talk to.

I stood and watched him as he stepped out of the shower stall. His body was even more beautiful than I remembered. Life in Marrakesh was agreeing with him. He spotted me instantly when he opened the curtain. With a grin he told me, "If you're not happy with our new Jerome Kern charts, there has to be a better time to discuss them."

I smiled. "*A Fine Romance*. That's what I wish I had."

He toweled himself. It was fairly clear he knew what I had on my mind. He flexed his body so every last muscle seemed to stand out. Slowly, so I wouldn't miss the point. "What's bothering you, Frank?"

"Right at this moment, it's you. Why don't you stop that?"

He played dumb. "Stop what?"

"Stop trying to seduce me."

He was beginning to get hard, and it was exciting me despite myself. More dumb: "Is that what I'm doing?"

"You know perfectly well you are."

Dan laughed at me. "How pathetic is it that you have to be 'seduced'?"

This deflated me. "I was just at Decae's office. He tried too."

Dry now, he pulled on his socks. "He always tries. You should give him a tumble sometime. He's good."

So Dan had had him too. Or he had had Dan. The news was sobering. I found myself telling him, "I know it. I was with him once. He wants sex with every guy he meets, as far as I can tell. I want something more than that."

"Give him a chance, Frank. He might surprise you."

This was getting more and more unexpected. "Has he surprised you, then?"

Dan laughed at me and pulled on his pants. "Or should I leave these off?"

Too much was happening. My head was in a whirl. "Keep them on." But I couldn't resist adding, "For now."

Still laughing, he zipped up. "I'm not like you,," he said. "You want something lasting. I live in the moment. At least, ever since the twins left me, I have."

"How do you know what I want?"

He crossed the room and kissed me. "Isn't it romantic?"

I stiffened. I wasn't at all sure why. Just in that moment, I wanted him. "Let's continue this in my room. I have to finish dressing."

And continue, we did. Made love, hotly, passionately. Used our mouths on each other, on every part. Fucked each other, first with me on top, then Dan.

Afterwards, we talked. I explained my problem. Lilli was here, if not to stay, then at least for a long while. I could have her if I wanted her. We could leave together and be free. But I couldn't make up my mind if that was what I wanted.

"What do you want?" Dan sat on the bed. I stretched out on the floor beside him.

"I wish I knew."

“Do you love her?”

Again, I said, “I wish I knew. I mean, when I’m with her it seems like I do. The minute we’re apart...I don’t think I trust her. She left me to go back to Thierry once. How can I believe she won’t do it again, for him or some other guy? Besides...”

“Yes?” He lit a cigarette.

“I don’t think I know what the hell love is. Her body excites me. More than I can say. But...I don’t know, the connection just doesn’t feel right. I don’t relate to her—to women in general—the way I relate to other men. Emotionally, psychologically...shit, I don’t know. How the hell do you figure out what you want?”

“For me, it’s always come naturally. I just go with my gut. You white guys—you make everything so complicated.”

“You mean it isn’t just me?”

He laughed. “Nope. Listen, I’m auditioning some new sidemen. I have to get downstairs. We can talk again later, okay?”

“Sure, Dan. Thanks for listening to this dumb white guy.”

Again he chuckled. “I’ve been doing it since we met. See you later.”

He changed his shirt and went. I was alone with my thoughts, or what passed for thoughts. Dan. Lilli. Even Decae. They seemed to spin around in my mind like birds of prey circling a wounded animal.

What did I want? I had no idea.

Chapter Ten

Two days later, I was relaxing on our patio/courtyard, lying in a hammock and sipping a mint julep, which I made for myself over Jan's objections. He kept telling me it wasn't a proper drink for a man. He fumed and sputtered, but I mixed it and brought it outside, to relax.

The club had been especially busy the previous night. This little problem and that one piled up to drive me crazy. Thierry had shown up, but there had been no sign of Lilli. Franz was homesick, so I had to deal with it all myself. I tried to recruit Jan to act as *maître d'*, but he was hopeless, too excitable, too excited. When I finally got to bed, I was too keyed up to sleep. Making it up that next afternoon seemed only reasonable.

Dan was off with his new boyfriend, a wine merchant who kept a shop in the Djemaa-el-Fna but had his main business in Tangier. Most of the staff weren't due to report for another two hours. Everything was perfect for a lovely spell of relaxation. I sipped my drink, closed my eyes and lulled myself to sleep.

"Monsieur Chandler."

I had no idea who was calling me, and I didn't care. I waved him away.

"Monsieur Chandler, please."

Without opening my eyes I said, "Go away."

Loudly, firmly, the man said, "Monsieur Chandler, I must insist."

So much for sleep. So much for my peaceful afternoon. I opened my eyes. The bright afternoon sun made me blink. "What the devil is it?"

He was a cop. One of Decae's men. He was in full dress uniform, all spic and span; Gary Cooper in a Foreign Legion movie never looked nattier. When he saw that I was awake and aware of him, he saluted. "Your presence is required, monsieur."

It was not something I wanted to hear. "Wanted where?"

"You will come with me immediately, Monsieur Chandler."

Wearily, wishing plague on all of Morocco, I climbed out of my hammock and stretched. "What is this all about?"

"Your presence is required." He was at rigid attention.

"Are you a cop or a parrot?"

Like a good German, he clicked his heels. "I regret that you find this amusing, monsieur. Nevertheless, your presence is required."

I sighed wearily. "There really is no rest for the wicked, it seems."

"I beg your pardon, monsieur?"

"Skip it. Where are we going?"

"You will see." He gestured at the gate.

I walked ahead of him. Quite unhappily so. Not only was I being deprived of my nap, I had to put up with this mysterious police nonsense. "Might I know the name of the officer who is arresting me?"

He looked at me but said nothing.

"That is what's happening, isn't it? I'm under arrest? Because if this is some kind of joke, some game Decae has decided to play with me—"

"It is no joke, monsieur. You will see."

The streets were busy, full of people doing their shopping. As we walked past a fruit stand, I took an apple and tossed the merchant a coin. A moment later, I realized that we weren't heading for police headquarters. For the first time I became alarmed. Turning to the cop, I stopped walking and asked him, "What is this? Where are you taking me?"

"Please, relax, Monsieur Chandler. Everything will be quite all right. Everything will be to your liking."

"It is already not to my liking. What is your name?"

He smiled. "I am Officer Messier."

"Well, Officer Messier, you better explain what's going on, or you're going to have a very angry bar owner on your hands."

"Please calm down, monsieur. Here we are."

We had come to a large, blank building at the edge of the marketplace. I had noticed it before, but I was reasonably certain it was not an official site. The sort of place the Germans might use for "unofficial" interrogations. I glared at Messier. "If you don't explain this now—"

He opened the door. Inside was another of Decae's cops, leaning against a table. This was so odd. Even if the Marrakesh police were cooperating with the Nazis, this didn't seem at all like the way they'd be doing it.

The cop at the table stood up. "Jean-Claude. So you've brought him."

Messier nodded. "Is everyone here?"

"Ali hasn't shown. His wife and daughter have been ill. Other than him, yes, everyone has come."

“Good.”

I had had enough of this. “If one of you doesn’t tell me what’s going on—”

Just at that moment, a door opened. A man in a German uniform came out of a back room. He was unbuttoning his tunic. I recognized him as one of the Germans who frequented the club, a blond kid named Schwimpf. I couldn’t resist—and I had nothing to lose, it seemed. “Well, Herman. So Colonel Erhardt has been reduced to kidnapping.”

The kid looked at me, puzzled. He couldn’t have been more than twenty one. In thickly accented English he said, “Kidnapping?” He looked at Messier. “Have you not explained?”

Messier shrugged. “How could I?”

It was beginning to dawn on me what was happening. Herman kept undressing, first his tunic, then his trousers. And he had, as they say, the body of a god, an Aryan god. Perfectly defined pectorals, muscles everywhere, but he wasn’t muscle-bound. As he began slipping off his underwear, he glanced at me. Blue eyes flashed. “We have wanted you to join us for some time, Herr Chandler.”

So it was that. “You have a mighty strange way of issuing invitations.” Herman was quite naked by now. His cock was not huge but it was well-proportioned, and the foreskin was thick. He rubbed his stomach, not in a suggestive way, and said to Messier, “You didn’t use force on Herr Chandler, did you?”

“Of course not.”

“No,” I interjected. “It’s just that hanging around with you has made the Marrakesh police seem awfully...German.”

“Please don’t judge us all by the awful stories you must have heard, Herr Chandler. We are merely soldiers, like your American soldiers, fighting for our fatherland.”

It was baloney, and I knew it, but there didn’t seem any point saying so.

Herman smiled. “Come and join us.” Quite casually he undid the top three buttons on his tunic.

A door opened, and another man came in. I recognized him as another of Decae’s policemen, a native Moroccan. I had seen him at the club a lot, but I wasn’t sure of his name. He was naked to the waist, and his fly was halfway open. He was a handsome man, with those large eyes so many North Africans have, and a huge smile. Despite myself—and despite my growing discomfort, I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

He saw me and stood there, grinning. “Mr. Chandler. Good afternoon, Mr. Chandler.” He opened the rest of his fly buttons.

Messier, told him, “Monsieur Chandler has been invited to join us, Abdul.”

“Join you?” I backed a step away from them. “What the devil is this? If Decae and Erhardt think they’re going to—”

“The prefect and Colonel Erhardt have nothing to do with this.” Herman said. For the first time, his smile disappeared. “This is more of a...what would you say?...more of a social gathering.”

“You’ve brought me here for a party?!”

“Party would not be the precise word,” Herman told me. Abdul slipped off his trousers. He stood there in white boxer shorts and white sweat socks. His body was magnificent – he was as fit as any cop on the planet. Herman held out a hand to him. A

moment later they were kissing. Abdul reached down and opened Herman's fly and slid his hand inside.

I refused to give anything away. "Even if this really is just a 'party,' what makes you think I'd be interested in anything like this?"

"Come now, Monsieur Chandler." Messier sounded like Decae, toying with an innocent victim. "Everyone in Marrakesh knows about you and your companion, that pianist. Did you think it was a secret?"

Herman broke off kissing Abdul to add, "We have wanted you to join us for some time. You are the most fascinating man in Marrakesh."

I laughed. "Poor Marrakesh."

"Come, now, Monsieur Chandler." He was not about to give up. "We are not bourgeois. We are not petty. Maybe between nightclub owners and musicians this is unusual. But among Moroccan police and German soldiers..." He grinned at me and licked his lips. "...it is very usual."

Herman got down on his knees and began kissing the crotch of Abdul's uniform. The sight excited me. I wanted to be doing it. But I could never admit it to them. "Let's say you're right about Dan and me, Messier. What makes you think I want this?"

Herman opened Abdul's pants and began sucking him. Abdul looked at me and with a half-grin, half-leer, said to me, "Everyone wants this."

"If you wanted me to 'join you' so badly, why didn't you just tell me what you were up to and invite me? Where are those famous French manners, Messier?"

Instead of answering, he undid his fly and pulled his cock out. It was enormous, with a thick foreskin. I was getting more and more aroused, and the three of them knew it.

Herman stopped what he was doing and looked at me. Abdul had a raging erection.

“Will you be next?” Herman asked me. “I want you, Herr Chandler. I have since the moment I saw you.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever wanted to be a pinup for the Third Reich.”

“Now, now, that is no attitude to have. We are all men here. Men friends. There is no need for politics to corrupt the moment.”

Abdul got to his feet and went to the door he had entered through. “Come this way, monsieur.”

Inside were a half-dozen more men. Most of them were buck naked, and all of them were engaged in some sex act or other. I recognized all but two of them as Marrakesh police. Among them was Sergeant Flaudenturm, the Nazi I had met at the club. And there was one more man, a Moroccan I didn’t recognize, who was busily licking Flaudenturm’s boot.

The rational side of me was horrified at what I was seeing. In occupied France, the resistance was executing women who had sex with the occupying German soldiers. What, I wondered, would the resistance make of this scene?

But the irrational side of me...They were all beautiful, all lean and muscular. The air smelled of sex. For that instant, I wanted nothing in the world but to be with them.

“Come inside.” Abdul stroked his cock invitingly. “We will see that you enjoy yourself. What brand of man-sex do you prefer? Do you like the top or the bottom position?”

I stared. Herman let his trousers drop. With a smile he said, “I have never been sucked by an American.”

His cock was pulsing, bouncing up and down. I was so tempted. But there was no way I could let myself become one of them, become a collaborationist. “You’re a good-looking man, Herman. But I have bigger fish to fry. When do Decae and Erhardt get here?”

His features fell. “Colonel Erhardt is not one of our number. Likewise Prefect Decae. We are quite an exclusive group.”

“I thought Decae must have been behind this.”

“Not at all, Herr Chandler. Now, come join us in the back room.”

“Is that an invitation or an order?”

“As you like. But remember, we are armed.”

I turned to Messier. “Who is in charge of this? Who’s responsible?”

The Frenchman took a step toward the room where the group was cavorting. “In charge, monsieur? This is a...what is the English word?...a celebration. A party. No one is ‘in charge,’ as you say.”

“I see. So I’m free to go, if I like?”

Abdul came back in. His body was moist with sweat. I wanted to touch him, to touch all of them, even the Nazis. But there was no way I could do it. I forced myself to

smile. "Sorry, Messier, Herman, boys. But I've heard what the Germans are doing to men who like men. I'm hardly dippy enough to give them any evidence."

Abdul threw himself at my feet. "Please do not go, Monsieur Chandler. Many pleasures await you."

I glanced at Herman. From somewhere, I couldn't imagine where, he had produced a long knife. He tossed it casually from hand to hand. "Yes, Herr Chandler," he said with a smile. "Do not go. You are not the only one who would be missing many pleasures."

From his tunic, Messier produced another knife. Like Schwimpf, he was smiling.

I could have fought. Fighting a man armed with a knife is one of the skills you learn growing up in Brooklyn. I might even have been able to take both of them, though it would have been rough. But nine of them...there was no way I stood a chance. None of the others were brandishing knives, but the gaggle of them could easily overcome me.

Still smiling, Herman took a step toward me. "Now get down on your knees."

Glumly, I did so. Abdul moved behind me and put his hands on both sides of my head. Herman stepped in front of me. "Now, Herr Chandler. Suck me."

His cock was not big. The foreskin barely covered the head. I couldn't resist goading him. "The Master Race. Hah."

Herman slapped me, hard. "Suck!" Another slap. "American pig!"

Slowly, knowing I didn't have any choice, I took his cock in my mouth. Herman was a beautiful man. Under other circumstances, I might have enjoyed sex with him. But like this... I found myself gagging.

Herman pushed the tip of his knife into the side of my throat. Softly he hissed, “Deeper! Take it all!”

I felt the knife point prick my skin. I felt a drop of blood trickle down my throat. I went as deep on him as I could.

Then suddenly the front door flew open. The bright sunlight outside outlined the figure of a man. It was possible to make out that he was wearing a uniform of some kind, but no more than that. The flood of light dazzled everyone’s eyes. I took advantage of the distraction to roll away from Herman. Lying on the floor, I put my fingers to my throat to try and feel how heavy the bleeding was. There was a lot of blood.

“No one move,” said the man in the doorway. I knew the voice. It was Stephane Decae.

“Steph—” I tried to speak, but my throat was too sore.

He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. In a manner that was wry and almost detached, he said, “I would normally ask what is going on here. But that is all too obvious. Drop your knives.”

The men in the back room stopped what they were doing and scrambled for their clothes. Flausenthurm reached for the Mauser in his uniform’s holster, which was hanging on a nearby chair. Decae drew his own pistol and fired a shot at the ceiling to warn him not to.

He pointed at Messier. “I am disappointed at you, Lieutenant Messier. Marrakesh provides ample opportunities for pleasure. You know that well enough. It is hardly necessary to resort to—” He wrinkled his nose. “This.”

Messier looked on the brink of panic. “Sorry, Monsieur le Prefect. We only thought—”

“There are more than enough willing men in this city. And you, Herman. What would Colonel Erhardt think if he were to learn about this? You know perfectly well the Reich frowns on this sort of thing. For heaven’s sake, button your trousers.” He raised his voice. “All of you! Get dressed! Quickly!”

“But sir,” Messier protested as he pulled his shirt on, “you sponsor such orgies all the time. I have attended them myself.”

“With willing partners.” Stephane pointed the gun at him. “Men who do not wish to participate are free not to. As you well know. Hurry up and finish dressing.” He turned to me. “Are you all right, Frank?”

Weakly I told him, “I think so. This doesn’t feel too deep.”

“Never the less, it ought to be bandaged. It seems my men have been infected by the spirit of the Third Reich. You have my profoundest apologies.”

“Apology accepted.” I sat up. “I think.”

“We must get you to a doctor. Are you strong enough to walk?”

“I think so.”

“Excellent. The rest of you—” He looked from Messier to Schwimpf and back again— “The rest of you may go on with what you were doing. If you feel the need to knife someone, knife each other.”

He helped me to my feet, and for the first time I caught a glimpse of the floor. I had lost more blood than I thought. I felt horribly weak. I leaned on Stephane and we walked out of the building into the sunlight.

“Doctor Karemi’s office is just around the corner. Let me take you there.”

“I think I’ll be all right, Stephane.”

“Ah, that American determination never to show weakness. It is one of the things I admire about you. Nonetheless, that cut should be cleaned and bandaged. Come along.”

Decae got us in past the half-dozen patients in the doctor’s outer office. Karemi was a plump, middle-aged Moroccan. He chain smoked as he examined me.

“Happily,” he told Decae, “this cut is not very deep. Bloody but not dangerous. Let me bandage it.”

By the time he finished, I was feeling stronger. I was able to walk back to the club without Decae helping me. At the front door, we paused and faced each other. “You’re certain you will be all right?” Stephane asked.

“I’ll be fine as soon as I find a bottle of bourbon. You’re not exactly going to be popular with our German friends, Stephane.”

He brushed it aside. “Colonel Erhardt is quite prejudiced against men of our sort. If he were to know that his men...The very oppressiveness of the Third Reich will protect me.”

“Erhardt doesn’t know that you’re...?”

“He knows. But he needs me to control the city. So he tolerates me.”

“A shaky kind of safety. But you know what you’re doing, I suppose. You always do.”

Then suddenly, quite unexpectedly, he kissed me. A long, deep, passionate kiss. I let him, and I kissed back.

“You will be seeing me again. Soon,” he said breezily.

“I can always count on that, as long as we have a roulette table.”

We both laughed. He kissed me goodbye, and it felt good. I almost forgot the day’s horrors.

Inside, I found myself some liquor, poured a glass and sat at my usual table, thinking. For the first time since Lilli came to Marrakesh, I knew what to do.

* * * *

I spent two days explaining to people that my neck was bandaged because I had cut my it shaving.

Thierry and Lilli’s hotel was the best in Marrakesh, not exactly posh, not by international standards, but considerably better than most. Two afternoons later, I went there.

The two of them were in the bar, sipping cocktails. I approached them with a biggest smile I could manage. “Drinking, somewhere other than Frank’s American? I should be offended.”

Thierry smiled back at me and said good afternoon. Lilli said nothing. She looked as if she didn’t know what to think or feel. I understood that. Than, after a moment’s pause, she smiled a shy, timid little smile. I had the impression she was worried what I might be about to say to her husband.

“How are you both today?”

“We are quite fine, Mr. Chandler.” Thierry sipped his drink. “The world always looks much more rosy when viewed through the perspective of a brandy Alexander.”

“Alcohol is gift of the gods, to make human life more bearable.”

He drank more. "Are you quoting someone, Mr. Chandler?"

A waiter came to the table and I ordered bourbon on the rocks. Then I turned back to Thierry. "I'm quoting myself. It's a poor bar owner who doesn't come equipped with snappy patter about drinking."

He drained his glass and put it down. "You are selling yourself short. You are far from a typical bar owner."

"I have far from typical bills to pay."

He chuckled. "Rumor has it you were in the American Army, Mr. Chandler. May I ask what you did there?"

"I just told you. I got drunk every chance I had."

Through all this, Lilli had sat silently. Now for the first time, she spoke up. "I like to believe you enlisted to fight that Germans, that you are a true hero."

"I'm no hero, not by any reasonable standard. I was drafted. My first and only loyalty is to myself. I regard everyone else with the same indifference. I am a true democrat."

Thierry signaled the waiter to bring him another drink. "Surely you are not indifferent about the Nazis."

I took a long swallow of my drink. "Let's just say I prefer being indifferent under a free government."

"Excellent. Then we may count on you, may we not?"

"Count on me? For what? Do you want to get into the club with no cover charge?"

“Mr. Chandler.” The paused while the waiter brought his drink and sat it on the table. Then he looked around and lowered his voice. “Several months ago some diplomatic passports...shall we say, disappeared? Gossip everywhere in Marrakesh holds that they are in your possession. Is this so?”

“Yes, it is so that gossip holds that.”

For the briefest instant he looked exasperated. But I was pleased. He was taking the bait.

“Please do not be coy with me,” he said. “I have made inquiry after inquiry since arriving here. You are the only one who might plausibly have those documents.”

“Maybe the killer hid them somewhere before he died. Maybe the Germans have them and won’t admit it. Maybe the police have them. With the passports still missing, they have all the pretext they need to conduct all kinds of unreasonable searches. They’ve searched my place twice now.”

“Those passports are vital to continuing my work,” Thierry said. “From London, I can make contacts that will enable me to keep organizing the underground. Here in Marrakesh, there is little I can do. That is why Colonel Erhardt is so anxious to keep me here.”

I took a deep breath and glanced at Lilli. She had listened to all this, stone-faced. Now she said, “Mr. Chandler is being much too self-effacing. I am sure he wants to help the resistance.” She avoided looking at me as she said this.

I made what I hoped was a properly dramatic pause. “Both of you come to the club tonight. We have a great deal to discuss.”

Relief showed in Thierry’s face. “Excellent. We will be there without fail.”

“Fine. I’ll see you both then.”

I stood to go. Just at that moment Poppa Cherry strolled into the bar. On his arm was Emmy Lou Lee. I passed them as I was leaving. “Well. Business is looking up.”

Cherry was cheerful. “Did you mean that comment for myself or for Miss Lee?”

“For both of you.” I matched his joviality. “I have only good wishes for everyone, like Santa Claus.”

“I would never have thought to cast you in the role of Father Christmas. I see you have been dining with Monsieur and Madame Thierry.”

“Dining? Hardly. We were just having drinks.”

“The famous Frank Chandler, drinking with his clientele?” He clucked his tongue.

“This isn’t my place. Listen, Cherry, you’ve said you want to buy my place.”

His features perked up. “Do you mean to tell me you might be willing to sell, at long last?”

“I might, if the price is right.”

“Excuse my reticence, but what has brought you to this decision after all these months?”

“Don’t spread it around, but I’m getting out of Marrakesh.”

His eyes narrowed. “I see. While I am willing to make you a generous offer for your club...”

“Yes?”

“I would pay you even more handsomely for those diplomatic passports.”

I laughed at him. “You listen to too much gossip, Cherry. This is a city full of old women with nothing better to do than spin fantasies about their neighbors. I didn’t know you were one of them.”

He laughed back. “I have been called considerably worse things than an old woman.”

“Do you want to buy the club or not?”

“I do, indeed.”

“There’s one condition. All the staff stays on.”

“Of course. They are an integral part of what makes Frank’s the best club in town. Naturally I will want Dan to remain in charge of the entertainment. Name your price.”

I named a figure I thought he’d find excessively high. “In cash,” I added. But he agreed to it without hesitation. “The deal is done, then. It has been a pleasure doing business with you, Frank. To be honest, I think the place is worth twice what you asked.”

“Silly me.” I shook his hand and turned to go. “Bring the cash tonight when we open, understand?”

“Perfectly. Until then.” He made a little mock salute and chuckled.

“So long, Emmy Lou.”

She turned up her nose at me. I left.

* * * *

“Dan.” He was lying on his bed asleep, naked. “Dan, I’ve decided to leave.”
Seeing him, I wanted him.

Groggily he opened his eyes. “Hm? What did you say?”

“I’m leaving Marrakesh.”

“You’re crazy. We’ve got it made here.” He sat up and reached for his trousers.

“Not any more. I’ve had an...an encounter with the Germans.”

He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Encounter? What happened?”

I gave him a brief account of their little orgy with knives. “They won’t be happy with me.”

“It sounds like you still have Decae on your side. That should count for something, shouldn’t it? The Germans can’t—”

“Stephane can only do so much. He couldn’t keep Madame Verplanck alive. The Nazis are masters of the knife in the dark. And Marrakesh has a lot of dark places.”

Again he yawned. “Sorry. I was up late. Cute guy, too, a cousin of our doorman Ahmed.”

Oh—the one I had met in Decae’s waiting room. An image of him with Dan flashed into my mind. I forced it out. “Dan, you’re not listening to me. We have to get out of here. It’s going to get ugly.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, massaging his feet. “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere the Nazis are not. Maybe even back to England. Or the States.”

“Back where we’re criminals?” He stood and stretched. Then he went on dressing. “I like it here, Frank. Look at the people. Everything from light tan to black as midnight. I fit in. And nobody here cares what anybody else does. I was made for this city.”

I walked to the window and looked out at Marrakesh. “I thought I was too. Until now.”

Dan moved behind me and put his arms around me. “Frank, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I love you, in my way. But I don’t want to leave. Don’t ask me to.”

“I am asking you.”

He released me. “Then I have to think about it. I really don’t want to.”

“Dan, think. They’ll want you for a playmate next. What happens then?”

He laughed. “No, you think. Look at me.” He held a hand in front of his face. “I’m as black as they come. As non-Aryan as they come. They won’t want me.”

“Don’t be too sure.”

He took me by the shoulders, spun me around and kissed me. “You can never be too sure of anything. Even love.”

I stood still for along moment, leaning against him. “You won’t come with me, then?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“Oh.”

I don’t believe I had ever felt a deeper disappointment.

* * * *

The crowd at the club was thankfully light that night. No problems, no whores or pickpockets, no drunken arguments to deal with. I had time to sit by myself and think. About an hour after we opened, Lilli and Thierry came in. I chatted with them for a

while and asked them to stay after the club closed for the night. They seemed puzzled, but I assured them it was important.

Dan was in fine form. He played everything from Victor Herbert operetta tunes to the latest Duke Ellington jazz to Fats Waller-style stride piano. He was in the groove, and the audience was right there with him. Me, I sat and watched.

Dan was such a beautiful man. I had known him less than a year, but he had become so important to me. My friendship with him had opened so many new doors for me, had exposed me to such thrilling new experiences. I knew, but did not want to acknowledge—not in words, anyway—that I was a bit in love with him.

But my gut told me I had to leave Marrakesh. I knew, after our conversation that afternoon, that he would not come with me. He had made it clear. Watching him, I already felt a keen sense of loss. Without Dan, it seemed to me I would be lost wherever I went.

The Germans came in. All of them, more than a dozen. I had never seen them in such force before. Usually at least a few of them had to remain at their unofficial headquarters. I greeted them and was met with looks of undisguised hostility. Schwimpf and Flausenthurm glared. They did not try to disguise their hatred. But, playing the gracious host, I saw them to their tables personally.

Erhardt was his usual imperious self, arrogant, above all the rest of us. I decided to tease him a bit. “There are more of you than usual, colonel. Who’s minding the store?”

“It is not your ‘store’ to worry about, Herr Chandler. As it happens, today is the führer’s birthday. We are celebrating. You will please see that the champagne keeps coming.”

“Of course, colonel.” I left them. But I couldn’t help noticing, every time I looked their way, that Erhardt was keeping an eye on Lilli and Thierry. I was more sure than ever that what I had in mind was the right thing to do.

Jan came to my table with a drink. “He sent it,” he told me.

I looked. Poppa Cherry. He sat at the bar, dressed to the nines, tapping his fingers in time to the music and watching me. When he saw I was looking, he made a little wave, and I waved back. Then he got up from his stool and started walking toward me. I took the drink he had sent and downed it in one gulp.

Beaming, he said hello. “You look glum.”

“I’ve been drinking rum,” I said. “It always affects me that way.”

He chuckled to himself. “You drink to become melancholy?”

“What better reason could there be?”

“I fail to see what you have to be melancholy about. By the end of the evening, I will have given you quite a substantial sum for this establishment.”

I was in no mood for him. The liquor was hitting home. “So you fail to see. So what? There are all kinds of things you fail to see.”

“No doubt. Nevertheless—”

“Did you bring the money?” I interrupted.

“No, but that is not a problem. My attorney will be here with it by closing time.”

“Why don’t you go back to the bar and get drunk, then?”

He laughed again. "I have no idea why you are being so disagreeable. However, there is one more thing."

"What?" I wanted him to go away. "What is it now?"

"Well..." He put on a mock-bashful air. "It is a matter of some delicacy. I am not certain how to raise it."

"You've never been shy before. Tell me what you want or go away."

He snickered. "Such a blunt man you are. Very well, then."

"Out with it, Cherry."

"Well...you are selling me the club lock, stock and barrel, are you not?"

"Of course. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"With all of its contents?"

"Look, why don't you just tell me what you have on your mind? I'm not in a mood for this."

"As I said, blunt fellow. Well, there is the matter of those missing diplomatic passports. If they are here in the club, they will become my property. Is that not correct?"

So that was it. "If they are here, that would be right. Decae has had his goons search the place twice now, looking for them. Why don't you ask him if they're here?"

"My lawyer will attend to that. We are in agreement, then."

He made a little bow, which I assumed he meant ironically, turned on his heel and went back to his bar stool.

Stephane Decae came in and headed straight for the casino. But he made a point of stopping at my table. "Good evening, Frank. I hope you are well."

"As well as can be expected, thanks to those thugs of yours."

“That is good to hear. I am concerned about you, you know.”

I laughed at him. Stephane was proving a better friend than I’d ever thought possible. His rescuing me from his men and the Germans had been so unexpected. I’d have expected him to join in their fun. He kept surprising me. But I couldn’t resist toying with him. “Why does that not make me feel safer?”

“Relax, Frankie. Everything will be all right.”

“Good. I’m so relieved.” My voice dripped with irony. Stephane headed for the roulette table and his usual bribe.

About an hour later, while Movita was doing her act, the croupier came over to me. “Boss, Decae is taking us for a small fortune.”

“He does that every night, doesn’t he?”

“This is worse than usual. He’s always contented himself with the house limit. But tonight he won’t stop betting.”

“I see.” He probably thought I owed him for saving me from that little orgy. And I did. What the hell? It was Poppa Cherry’s money now. “Let him.”

“But—”

“Let him, I said.”

“Yes, boss.” Glum and puzzled, he went back to his table.

The rest of the evening went smoothly and without surprise. The Germans drank too much, as they nearly always did. The dance team Dan had hired to fill in for Vincent and Vanessa, and who billed themselves as “the Moroccan Fred and Ginger,” went over with a thud. They got the weakest, least enthusiastic round of applause I had ever heard. Dan got back to his piano, still in good form, and heated the crowd up again.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. There were the usual little problems, broken dishware, a guy trying to walk without paying his tab, nothing big. At closing time the crowd filtered out, the entertainers changed and went home, and the staff cleaned up and got ready to leave.

From the back room, Poppa Cherry emerged. “A pleasant night, Mr. Chandler. Are you prepared to conclude our business now?”

I told him I was.

“Excellent. My attorney was here earlier. He brought this.” He reached into his breast pocket and produced an envelope. “In cash, as you requested.”

I opened the envelope and counted the bills. “Just exactly right.” From my own pocket I pulled the deed. “Made out to you. Everything’s proper. You own this place now, signed, sealed and delivered.”

“Excellent, Mr. Chandler. How soon may I expect you to vacate?”

“As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning, if I can manage it. But give me a day or two, just in case.”

“Very good, sir.” He shook my hand—more vigorously than seemed necessary—and headed for the door. With luck it would be the last time I’d ever see him or have to deal with him.

Thierry and Lilli had stayed at their table, talking softly and watching all the end-of-night activity. I kept their drinks coming personally, along with snacks to take the edge off. Then, when Cherry was gone and the place was empty except for Franz, I went to their table.

“You wanted to see us?” Thierry munched on a breadstick. “Dare we hope that—”

“Later,” I hushed him. “After Franz is gone.”

Franz was giving the books a quick going-over. I went to his station. “You can leave that for tomorrow, Franz.”

“You don’t want to know how much we netted?”

“It’s no longer my concern.”

Bafflement showed in his face.

“I’ve sold the place, Franz. Your new employer is Poppa Cherry.”

He held his hands up to his cheeks in astonishment. “That awful old man?”

“That is no way to talk about your new boss. I’m getting out of Marrakesh. I’ve had enough of it.”

“But—”

“The deal is already done, Franz. And you don’t have to worry. I’ve made sure he’ll keep everyone on.”

“But this is so sudden. What could have—”

“Just relax, will you?” I said. “You won’t have me nagging you all the time. Other than that, I doubt if you’ll notice any difference.”

His manner suggested he was not only confused, but a bit hurt. I did everything I could to reassure him, then I sent him on his way.

It was time to deal with Lilli and her husband.

* * * *

They were still seated at their table, sipping cocktails, talking in low voices. I went to the table, and Thierry looked up at me. “Now, Mr. Chandler, would you mind telling us what his is all about?”

I glanced at Lilli, and she looked away from me. So I told Thierry, “Come this way.”

Looking at each other, puzzled, they both got to their feet. I led them across the room to the bandstand. Got down on one knee and began to unscrew the bolts that held the bass drum together. When it was open, the diplomatic passports fell out. I picked them up, got to my feet and held them out. “These are what everyone has been fussing over for months. The police have searched this place twice, looking for them, but they never thought of looking in here.”

I could see a mix of hope and apprehension in Thierry’s face. Would I give them the passports? Lilli was still not looking at me.

I smiled, hoping it would dispel some of the tension. “Monsieur Thierry, I believe you have a right to these. It is more important that you have them than anyone else in Marrakesh.”

He reached out his hand to take them. For the first time all night, Lilli looked at me, with a alarm in her face. “Frank! I thought—”

But I cut her off. “You know, monsieur, that Lilli and I knew each other before you came to Marrakesh, that we knew each other in Paris.”

“I knew that you were friends, yes. That is why I—”

“We were more than friends.”

They both fell silent and motionless.

“You sent her here a few nights ago to try to get these. What you didn’t know is that we made love again, that night.”

He glanced at her, then back at me. Lilli gasped and said, “Frank, I—”

But again I cut her off. “Yes, we made love. It was good, it was satisfying. We talked about leaving this city together. With these.” I handed him the passports.

Lilli started to say something. But I couldn’t let her talk, couldn’t let her say anything that might change my mind.

“No, Lilli. I know now that what we planned isn’t right—for either of us. If you leave Paul, you’ll never forgive yourself. It may take a while, but you’ll regret it. You are too important to him. As for me, well, let’s just say you’ve been an anomaly in my love life. I realized that two days ago, when I found myself attracted to—excited by—some men I would ordinarily find loathsome. The two of us—it wouldn’t work. Sooner or later I’d want to— Well, I could never love you the way Paul does. I know that now.

“Take the passports. Use them. Tonight. The late plane for London doesn’t leave for another hour. Go. Be happy together.”

Lilli took an impulsive step toward me. “Frank, I—”

“Go, I said! Don’t make this any harder for me than it already is.”

Suddenly from out of the darkness around us came a voice. “Do not move. If you attempt to leave, I will shoot you on the spot.”

From out of the shadows stepped Erhardt. Just behind him was Herman Schwimpf, grinning like a naughty schoolboy. Erhardt’s face was granite; he showed no signs of the drinking he had done earlier. His pistol was drawn and pointing at the three

of us. A victorious little smirk crossed his face. "I have known all along you had those passports, Herr Chandler. How nice of you now to deliver them into my hands."

None of us moved. Thierry said, "Erhardt, you are making a serious mistake. You have no authority in Marrakesh. Not anywhere in Morocco."

Erhardt made a little wave with his pistol. "This gives me all the authority I require." Schwimpf put his hand on his own gun but did not draw it.

"You would not dare to shoot us."

"Would I not?" He moved closer.

I looked to Lilli and Thierry. "You're right. He has to know the international repercussions there would be if he killed you. Go now. If you hurry, you can still make that plane."

Erhardt stepped still closer and pointed his gun directly at Lilli's head. "You are a gambling man, Herr Chandler. Would you care to bet on that?"

I ignored him. "Go, I said! Get moving!"

They took a step toward the door.

Erhardt raised his pistol and tightened his finger on the trigger. He cocked it. He meant to shoot.

But a shot rang out of the shadows, so loud it was almost deafening. Erhardt crumpled and fell to the floor. The three of us looked at one another, astonished. A faint gurgling sound came from Erhardt's throat, then stopped. Schwimpf turned on his heels and bolted out the door.

Stephane Decae stepped out of the shadow that had been hiding him. "Yes," he said in a manner so casual it almost sounded offhand. "Go, the two of you. You do not

require exit visas signed by me. Those passports carry all the authority you will need. The flight personnel will not question them.” He said all of this such a relaxed way, you would never know he had just killed a man.

The two of them had the look of animals frightened by hunters. After a moment Thierry caught Lilli by the arm and pulled her toward the door. “Come.”

But she pulled free of him and rushed to me. To my astonishment, she kissed me. “I’ll never forget you, Frank. Never.” Then she ran to her husband’s side, and the two of them ran out the door.

Seeing them go filled me with doubts. Had I made the right decision? Lilli, for better or worse, had been important to me. I had thought I was in love with her. And now she was gone. I knew—I positively knew—that what I told her had been accurate. I could never love her the way Thierry did. An affair with her could never be wholly satisfying for either of us.

Yet there was a sense of loss as I watched her go, undeniable, almost overwhelming. A door had closed, and it had closed in the most final way possible.

Lost in thought, I had quite forgotten that Stephane was there. In the half-light I heard him chuckle. “So, Frankie, you’ve come to your senses.”

I felt lost. “Senses?”

“It seems I have to leave Marrakesh too, now. Shall we go together?”

I was fighting to shake off the numbness that had come over me. “This is the second time you’ve rescued me in a matter of days. I’ll never be able to thank you.”

“Thanks is not exactly what I want from you. It never has been.”

“Then what—”

“You are a movie buff, Frank. Surely you have seen that film where Charles Boyer tells Hedy Lamarr, ‘We could make beautiful music together.’ I have friends in Tangier. From there, we can go most anywhere we choose.”

“Anywhere?”

“Where there are no Nazis. We have the money Poppa Cherry gave you for the club. We have my winnings from roulette, which are considerable—and which were also donated by Cherry, though quite unknowingly. The world is ours, Frank.”

“It could never work. Men like us—”

He cut me off. “Have you forgotten what you just told poor Lilli? Ah, the innocent abroad. The world is not like Puritan America, Frank. It is ours.”

He walked slowly toward me and kissed me. It seemed the best, the warmest kiss I had ever had. I did not want it to end, ever. But Stephane pulled away from me. For a moment we stared into each other’s eyes. Then he took my hand. “Come on, Frank. It is time to go.”

“Where—?”

“Anywhere we like. I told you. But first there is a local stop we must make.”

I let him lead me.

Outside, the night as cool and clear. There were a million stars; there was a crescent moon. We walked hand in hand out into the desert and left Marrakesh behind. It took a moment for me to realize where Stephane was taking me.

There ahead of us, lit by the moon and the stars, was the Temple of Venus. We kissed. We made love. We had the hottest, most passionate sex I had ever experienced.

And I knew it was silly of me, but I could swear I heard, coming across the sand
from the city, the strains of Dan at his piano playing *Isn't It Romantic?*

THE END