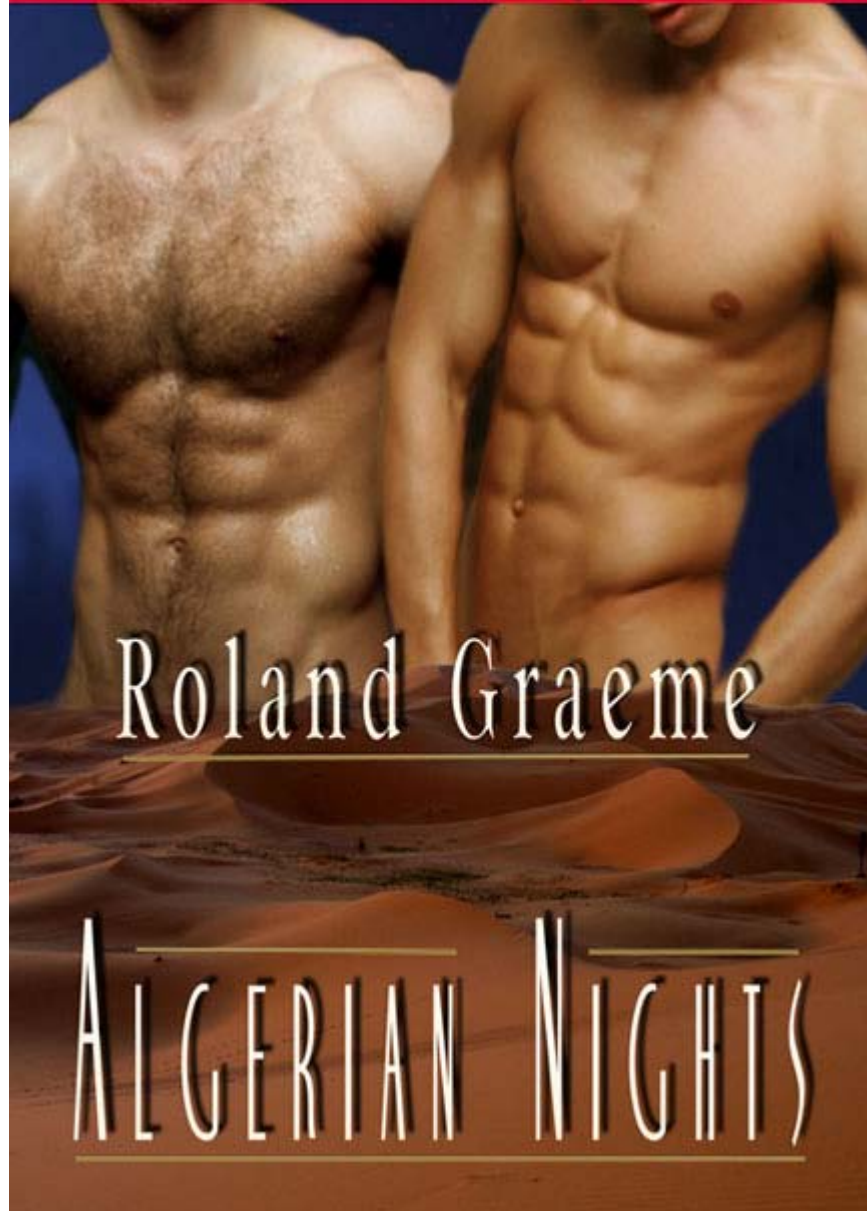


Siren Publishing

*Ménage & More*



## Algerian Nights

In 1900, bored, wealthy Bostonian Perceval Fain finds himself in the French colony of Algeria, amusing himself with a number of local men, including members of the French military.

Falling under the spell of his exotic desert surroundings, unfulfilled by his hedonistic lifestyle, Perceval meets an impoverished English artist, Preston. At first the two men dislike each other and seem to have nothing in common. Almost against their wills, though, an attraction develop between them, fulfilling an enigmatic prophecy.

*Note: This book contains drug use and forced seduction.*

**Genre:** Alternative (M/M or F/F), Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre

**Length:** 73,142 words

# **ALGERIAN NIGHTS**

**Roland Graeme**

**MENAGE AND MORE**



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# **DEDICATION**

For Bill E. and Bob P.

# **ALGERIAN NIGHTS**

**ROLAND GRAEME**

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## **Chapter One Americans in Paris**

“The most exquisite-looking young Frenchman has just walked in, Pamela. You really must take a look at him.”

Mrs. Washburn and Mrs. Remington were two wealthy American women. It was the summer of 1900, and, like many of their fellow Americans, they had come to Paris to attend the Exposition Universelle. But their other, more urgent, reason for coming to Paris was to stock up on the latest fashions, for it would hardly do to be seen back home wearing the previous century’s styles. The two ladies had just come from a most satisfactory fitting at the couturier’s and were having lunch in a suitably elegant and exclusive restaurant.

It was Mrs. Washburn who had spoken. Mrs. Remington, who was rather nearsighted, took the silver-mounted lorgnette suspended from her neck on a rope of pearls, raised it to her eyes, and peered through it. She was so startled by what she saw that she nearly dropped the lorgnette back onto her ample bosom.

“That’s no Frenchman, Georgina,” she said. “He’s as American as you or I. Don’t you recognize him?”

“No,” Georgina Washburn confessed. “Who is he?”

Pamela Remington tightened her grip on her lorgnette and squinted through it to confirm her identification



“Why, that’s Perceval Fain, of *the* Boston Fains. He’s one of the richest young men in Boston—or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“Really? Is he married?” Mrs. Washburn had three unmarried daughters and, as a result, was ever on the alert for matrimonial prospects.

“I should say not. Don’t you know that family’s story?”

“No, I can’t say I do.”

“I do. It’s all really rather sad. Charles Fain—that young gentleman’s father—just died about a year ago. He was quite an elderly man. You see, his first wife couldn’t have children. Fain was devoted to her, though, and after she died, he lived alone for some years. Then he married a much younger woman, who came from a very good family, of course, and they had two sons, Lancelot and Perceval. Of course Fain was thrilled to finally become a father, at such a mature age, after having been disappointed in that regard for so long. But then the second Mrs. Fain died, too, quite young. Fain had to raise the two boys alone. And Perceval, of course, turned out to be such a disappointment to him. They say it broke the old man’s heart. Now I understand that Lancelot Fain runs the family business, while Perceval, who’s the younger brother, travels and amuses himself. Nobody would have been the least bit surprised had he ended up being disinherited, but in fact, I’m told the will divided everything equally—so Perceval Fain now has half of his father’s money, and half of everything that the boys’ mother brought to the marriage, as well.”

Mrs. Washburn studied the younger Fain even more intently.

He was two or three years short of thirty, tall and strongly built, with a candid, guileless face that might have still seemed boyish, except for its impeccably trimmed pencil mustache. He was deeply tanned, which in a man of his class meant that he was a sportsman who enjoyed activities in the outdoors. His dark blond hair was parted in the center and brushed back over his temples. He had gray eyes.

He was wearing an off-white linen suit, with a dull reddish-purple

tie, and he carried his straw boater hat, with its crimson moiré silk ribbon, in his hand. His jewelry—cuff links, tie pin, ring—was of the highest quality, but unostentatious.

A woman can never be too well dressed, but a man who is too well dressed always runs the risk of looking like a fashion plate. Perceval Fain's clothes were immaculately chosen, cut, tailored, coordinated, and maintained. But he wore them as casually as though they had fallen upon him from heaven, and as though he had not given his appearance a moment's thought. This air of negligence saved him from coming across as a dandy.

"He seems extraordinarily handsome and refined to me," Mrs. Washburn remarked. "Why did you seem surprised when I asked you if he was married?"

"Because if he did find a wife—and with all that money, it might not be so difficult for him to do so, on second thought—it would have to be what the French here call *un mariage blanc*. A marriage of convenience, in other words."

"Why? I still don't understand. Is there some...physical impediment?"

"Not a physical one. A moral one. My dear, I'm astonished you haven't heard the rumors. But no doubt people wanted to spare you. After all, it's not the sort of thing that is discussed openly in polite society. But the truth is, that wastrel, Perceval Fain, is a young man with a perfectly *disgusting* reputation. *Shocking*, in fact. He's rumored to be addicted to every sort of unnatural vice. It's almost as much as any other man's reputation is worth just to be seen in his company. That's why I said I'd feel sorry for any woman who might be persuaded to marry him. Let's just say that, in all likelihood, she wouldn't find fulfilling her conjugal duties particularly difficult. The only time her husband would be likely to come knocking on her bedroom door would be to wish her goodnight. And as for what might be going on in her husband's bedroom, behind closed doors...well, we're talking about truly unspeakable things. Of course, there *are*

women who might be willing, and even eager, to enter into such a dishonorable arrangement.” Mrs. Remington agitated her broad shoulders in an incongruously delicate shudder. “I would rather see a daughter of mine lying dead at my feet than married to such a monster of depravity.”

Mrs. Washburn now noticed, as a distinct afterthought, that the monster of depravity had not entered the restaurant alone. His companion was a slightly younger man, perhaps twenty-five, with a compact, stocky build, a confident way of carrying himself, and a habitually alert expression on his agreeably boyish face. He had a pale face, lightly freckled on the forehead and cheeks, and reddish-blond hair. Like Perceval Fain, he sported a thin mustache. He was dressed in a fawn-colored suit that was more subdued than Fain’s ensemble, but his clothes were every bit as well tailored and maintained. His manner toward the other man was almost imperceptibly deferential. As a result, he rather resembled a satellite, orbiting slowly around the gleaming planet that was Perceval Fain.

“Who’s the young man with him?” Mrs. Washburn asked Mrs. Remington.

Pamela scrutinized the red-haired youth, who had seated himself at a table opposite Fain, through her lorgnette. “I can’t be certain, Georgina, but, judging by the descriptions of him I’ve heard, I think it might be Fain’s manservant. His so-called valet. That’s another appalling thing. Fain takes him with him almost everywhere, the way you or I might take a lapdog. I’ve heard Fain treats him practically as though he were an equal and that he actually has been known to *introduce* him to people! Can you imagine? A servant! I mean, of course I believe in democracy as much as anyone, my dear, but there *are* limits. Some things simply are not done.” Mrs. Remington lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Of course...I don’t want to upset you, Georgina, but people can’t help speculating. They say that Fain employs that poor boy not just as his valet, but in *additional capacities*, if you know what I mean. Let’s just say that

those decadent ancient Roman emperors had their male slaves, and Perceval Fain has his valet.” She affected another delicate shudder. “It makes my blood run cold just to think about it. The appalling, indecent things that must go on! I almost feel a little faint from the effort it’s taking me trying to keep myself from picturing them in my imagination...I think I shall order a cordial, a strong one, to keep my strength up. You’d better have one, too, Georgina. You’ll need it if you insist upon my repeating the gossip I heard about what Fain got up to last winter in St. Moritz. You see, a certain member of the Austrian imperial family was there for the winter sports, traveling incognito, of course, and he was accompanied by an Austrian army officer, acting as his bodyguard, and...!”

Meanwhile, Perceval Fain, unaware of the central role he was playing in his compatriot’s lurid anecdote, was studying the menu and giving his order to an attentive waiter. When the waiter left the table, Fain leaned back comfortably in his chair and began to engage his companion in animated conversation. He said something that made his valet—for that was indeed the younger man’s official position—suppress a laugh.

At the other table, Mrs. Remington was concluding her engrossing narrative: “...and when the hotel manager finally unlocked the door of the suite and let the policemen in, there they were, all five of them, as nude as the day they were born—Fain, his valet, the prince, the lieutenant, *and* the waiter who’d delivered the champagne to the room. They say it was like something out of ancient Babylon, a pagan bacchanal. Worse than some of those obscene wall paintings they’ve dug up in Pompeii. They hadn’t even had the decency to *turn out the lights!*”

It was this last revelation that Mrs. Washburn found particularly shocking. “No! Really? Tell me, Pamela...in all the years you’ve been married...have you ever—?”

“What, left a light on in my bedroom when Mr. Remington visits me at night? Of course not. I’ve never even seen him nude, nor has he

ever seen me. There's no need to blush, Georgina. We're both respectable married women. We can talk about such things—to each other! What about you and Mr. Washburn?”

“God forbid! Why, even lying there in the dark, I keep my eyes closed the whole time Harry is there in my room with me! I don't dare to open them again until after he kisses me goodnight and goes out and closes the door and I hear him walking down the hall to his own room!”

Mrs. Washburn was still doing some mental mathematics, calculating the plusses and minuses of having a man like Perceval Fain as a son-in-law, when a further thought suddenly occurred to her. “Pamela...suppose a man like that *did* marry, and turned out to be not altogether indifferent to his wife's charms? Can you imagine the unspeakable things he might expect her to...to participate in?”

Pamela Remington gasped in horror. Then she caught the eye of the waiter, and, when he approached their table, she ordered a second round of the strong, reviving cordials. She and Georgina were going to need them. It was going to be a long luncheon, and, thanks to Perceval Fain, they had further unspeakable matters to discuss.

Meanwhile, Perceval Fain and his valet, still blissfully unaware that they were the objects of the two matrons' conversation, enjoyed their own lunch. When they were finished, they rose from their seats. As the valet engaged the waiter in conversation, Fain glanced toward the table where the two Americans were sitting. He smiled.

“He's coming this way,” Georgina Washburn whispered. “I do believe he's actually going to come over here and speak to us, Pamela! Whatever shall we do?”

“Do? We'll stand our ground, of course, and see what he has to say,” Pamela Remington whispered back. The cordials had infused her with a certain amount of Dutch courage. “At least it looks as though he doesn't intend to introduce his manservant to us! Thank God for small mercies.”

Perceval Fain approached their table, holding his hat in his hand.

“My dear Mrs. Remington,” he said. “You must forgive me for not having recognized you, until just now. When I first glanced in your direction, I assumed that you and your charming companion must be two elegant Parisiennes. You look like two perfect bouquets on display in one of the flower sellers’ stalls.”

“You are very gallant, as always, Mr. Fain,” Pamela replied. “May I present Mrs. Washburn? Mrs. Washburn, this is Mr. Fain.”

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Washburn,” Perceval Fain said, as Georgina deigned to allow him to kiss her hand. “I believe I am acquainted with your nephew, Phillip Winslow. A charming young man.”

“I did not know that you and Phillip were acquainted,” a flustered Georgina admitted.

“Oh, yes. But of course I know everyone in Boston,” Perceval said, carelessly.

Pamela spoke up: “I see you are no longer in mourning, Mr. Fain,” she commented, looking at the young man’s sleeve, where there was a conspicuous, to her, absence of a black mourning band pinned to the fabric.

“Yes. In our modern era, I think prolonged displays of mourning are somewhat ostentatious.” Fain spoke in the same casual tone of voice he had used before.

Pamela compressed her lips in disapproval. “Many people back home would not share your views, Mr. Fain.”

“No doubt. I hope you ladies are enjoying your visit to Paris as much as I am?” Fain asked, deftly changing the subject.

After an exchange of a few more pleasantries, Fain excused himself and, with his valet shadowing him a discreet step behind, left the restaurant.

“Shocking. Absolutely shocking,” Pamela declared. “Charles Fain scarcely cold in his grave, and that wastrel cannot even summon the decency to wear mourning for him!” She narrowed her eyes and looked at Georgina, inquisitively. “And what is this about Perceval

Fain being acquainted with your nephew? Do you think there is any possibility that he and Phillip—?”

“Oh, Pamela!” Georgina gasped. “Don’t even suggest such a thing! The mere thought gives me the horrors!”

“You look pale, Georgina. We had both better have another cordial before we leave.” Mrs. Remington signaled to the waiter.

\* \* \* \*

When Fain and his valet were outside the restaurant, Fain paused on the sidewalk.

“Did you pay the bill, Tommy, or did I?” he asked. Perceval was prone to absent-mindedness when it came to such mundane matters.

“I did, Mr. Fain,” the other young man replied. “While you were talking to those two overdressed frumps.”

“My dear Tommy,” Fain said, trying to look and sound stern, but failing. “A proper gentleman’s gentleman does not refer to ladies of his employer’s acquaintance as ‘frumps.’ Unless, of course, his employer happens to wholeheartedly endorse his opinion, which in this case—! Oh, hell,” he broke off, with a laugh. “It’s too fine a day to spend lecturing you on etiquette. Did you see how they blushed like a couple of schoolgirls, the whole time I was speaking to them?”

“Yes, sir. I believe you made a couple of conquests, there,” the valet said.

Perceval Fain’s gray eyes widened in mock horror. “Perish the thought! Well, now I have my shopping to do,” Fain said. “I won’t need you again until this evening, when it will be time to dress for dinner. That reminds me—do I have any plans for this evening, Tommy?”

“You have dinner reservations and tickets for the opera, Mr. Fain,” Thomas Flanagan reminded his employer. “To hear Madame Calvé and the de Reszke brothers, in Massenet’s *Le Cid*.”

“That’s right. I had forgotten. And who will be accompanying

me—besides yourself, of course?”

“Mr. Roger Delmotte, the son of Delmotte the cabinet minister.”

“Oh, that dullard. However did I let Roger talk me into that? I suppose I can’t break the engagement on such short notice. Well, Roger does have one talent, which I’m sure he’ll want to demonstrate for my benefit, again, before the evening is over.” Perceval grinned at his manservant, who—because they were in a public place—responded with no more than a hint of a smile. “Well, you find something to amuse yourself, Tommy. I will see you back at the hotel.”

The two men separated. Not for the first time, Perceval Fain congratulated himself on possessing such a jewel of a servant—a jewel which may have originated as very much of a diamond in the rough, but a treasure, nonetheless.

Thomas Flanagan’s association with Perceval Fain, as scandalous as it might seem in some people’s eyes, had given him a considerable degree of polish—especially considering that he was an Irish-American lad who had grown up in poverty on the wrong side of the tracks in Boston. Tommy always addressed his employer and referred to him as “Mr. Fain” or “sir” in public, whatever intimacies there might be between them in private. He was not simply Perceval’s valet—a function he performed admirably, with scrupulous attention to detail, taking care of his master’s person and his clothes as though they were precious artifacts—but his secretary and travel agent, as well. He also made an excellent sparring and wrestling partner. In the course of their travels, Tommy had acquired enough basic command of at least four languages—French, Italian, Spanish, and German—so that he could not only make travel arrangements and conduct day-to-day business in them, he could harangue and intimidate his peers—that is, other members of the servant class—in them as well. There were few things quite so satisfying, for a gentleman’s gentleman, as putting other gentlemen’s gentlemen in their place, should they dare to get uppity. At such moments, beneath his veneer of sophistication,



Tommy's boyhood experiences as a member of a tough Boston gang of hoodlums served him well. Among his many talents was the ability to pick locks, which came in handy whenever Perceval misplaced a key—which the somewhat absentminded Perceval was known to do with some frequency.

Tommy, Perceval was confident, would have no difficulty finding something to amuse himself in Paris on a summer afternoon.

Perceval, whose nickname among his family members and intimates was "Perce," strolled along the boulevard, enjoying the warm air and light breeze, the sights and sounds of the city.

He had "done" the Exposition, although his real reason for coming to Paris had been to attend some of the second Olympic Games, the events of which were spread over five months. Now he wanted to do some shopping—shopping of a highly personal nature.

He took a little notebook out of his pocket and consulted it. He soon found the address he was looking for: it was a small, elegant bookstore that also offered framed prints and maps, and small *objets d'art*, for sale. Perceval entered. The dapper-looking shopkeeper was giving his assistant some instructions, but he immediately interrupted himself to greet his distinguished-looking customer.

"Good afternoon, m'sieur. How may I assist you?"

"Might you be M. Robineaux?"

"I am."

"Your shop was recommended to me by my friend, M. William Patrick Leonard."

"Ah." The one syllable, in M. Robineux's mouth, spoke volumes. "M. Leonard! A gentleman of taste. M'sieur is also an American?"

"Yes."

"But m'sieur speaks French like a Parisian!"

"You flatter me, m'sieur. I'm often told that I have a very strong and distinctive American accent. My friend, M. Leonard, showed me some most interesting items that he said he purchased from you, during his last trip to Paris."

“Would m’sieur be interested in seeing my selection of similar items?”

“I would.”

M. Robineaux told the assistant to mind the front of the shop. He then escorted Perceval into a back room. It was a small, intimate haven, very stylishly furnished, with bookcases, an Oriental rug on the floor, vases, and bronzes. The framed prints and drawings displayed on the walls in here were all of male nudes, all with exposed genitalia. M. Robineaux invited Perceval to be seated at a small mahogany desk. A bronze figurine of a satyr, with a broad leer and a juttingly erect phallus, adorned one corner of the desk.

The shopkeeper took a key ring from his pocket. “M’sieur would perhaps be interested in photographs? The type of photographs that artists make use of in lieu of live models?”

“Yes.”

“I have some exquisite photographic studies of adolescent boys in neoclassical poses.”

“No, thank you, M. Robineaux. I prefer men my own age, or older. Strongmen, and athletes, in particular. I am greatly interested in *la culture physique*.”

“Excellent. These portfolios may interest you. Any of the photos shown in them may be purchased individually or as sets.” Robineaux unlocked the glass doors of one of the bookcases, pulled out a handsome album bound in morocco leather, and placed it on the desk for Perceval’s inspection.

The pages were filled with large gelatin silver photographic prints of naked men, all of them muscular, posing and flexing their muscles for the camera. There was not a *cache-sexe* or posing strap, nor a fig leaf, to be seen in the entire collection.

“These are very high quality,” Perceval remarked.

“Thank you, m’sieur. They are taken by a well-known photographer, here in Paris, who often takes portraits of the aristocracy, and of celebrities. Of course, for these purposes, he

prefers to remain anonymous.”

Perceval was not the kind of man who ever allowed himself to be rushed. He accepted M. Robineaux’s offer of a cognac and sipped it as he examined no fewer than five albums, one after the other.

“I like this man,” he said finally, indicating a brawny blond Hercules, “and this one,” he added, indicating a sequence of photographs of a densely muscled strongman with pomaded dark hair and a neatly waxed mustache. “I will buy them.”

“Which photos in particular, m’sieur?”

“All of them. Both sets.”

“M’sieur is very discriminating. I happen to have another series of photographs, of the same blond model, and another model, posing together...in poses that are somewhat more dynamic. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes, please.”

The photographs in this album showed the blond bodybuilder and another muscleman, dark-eyed, sensuous, Italian-looking—he was probably the kind of Italian immigrant laborer who made extra money by posing for artists in Paris—in a variety of activities that began with embracing and kissing, then progressed to mutual masturbation, fellatio, and anal intercourse. Along the way, there were a few surprises, even for a connoisseur like Perceval.

“Whatever are they doing in the photos on these pages?” he asked.

“It is called ‘body worship,’ m’sieur. One of the playful young men admires his partner’s physique so much that he washes it with his tongue, from head to foot. It is very amusing, is it not? And here, of course, you will notice how they take turns teasing and exploring each other’s anuses with their fingers and their tongues. Observe how well the photographer has caught the contrast between the fair skin of the blond youth and the darker olive-toned flesh of his friend.”

“Very amusing, as you say. I will take these, as well. The complete set.”

“Can I show you anything else, m’sieur?”

“Perhaps some books. The kind of books that cannot be imported directly to England or the United States. The kind that provide amusing light reading in bed at night.”

“I have novels filled with exciting amorous episodes, in several languages.”

“Let me see some English-language ones.”

Perceval examined the handsomely bound volumes that M. Robineaux selected for him. He opened each one, read a few paragraphs here and there at random, discarded several of the books, but chose two: they were titled, respectively, *Love Among the Uranians*, by that prolific author, Anonymous, and *The Memoirs of an Olympic Athlete*, by a writer who concealed his identity behind the initials R.G. The latter book, M. Robineaux claimed, was especially popular, because of the Olympic Games currently taking place in Paris.

“I will take these two. I believe that will be all, M. Robineaux. You have been very helpful. I apologize for taking up so much of your valuable time.”

“Not at all, m’sieur. I am delighted to be of assistance. I shall wrap everything up discreetly. Shall I have the parcel sent to your hotel, or—?”

“No, I will take it with me.”

Perce stood up, and, as M. Robineaux busied himself, he looked at the pictures on the walls. One immediately caught his eye. It was a small watercolor, about twelve inches square, handsomely matted and framed. The image was a muscular black man, standing nude with his arms raised above his head, as though he was worshipping the sun. Against the background of tawny gold sand and pale blue sky, in which an orange sun blazed, the man’s flesh, dark brown with bluish highlights, stood out vividly.

Perce examined the watercolor more closely. Incredibly, the face, rendered with no more than a few simple, sure strokes of the brush, was alive and expressive. The body, too, was expertly done and, with

its combination of energy and repose, seemed ready to leap out from the paper. Penciled in the lower right-hand corner of the image were the initials *G.P.M.*

“Wait a moment, M. Robineaux. What can you tell me about this little aquarelle?”

“It is charming, is it not? The artist is an Englishman who travels extensively. At the present, he is traveling about the Mediterranean—Italy, Greece, Egypt, Northern Africa. As you see, his style is simple, but bold. I advance him a little money from time to time, and he sends me these figure studies. That one, I believe, is of a young Algerian man. Many of my customers like this artist’s work. These aquarelles—they are sensual, but not too provocative, so a gentleman may display them in his bedroom, for example, without needing to concern himself about possibly scandalizing his servants.”

Perce smiled. “I am fortunate in my servants, M. Robineaux. They are not easily scandalized. I will take the picture, as well.”

In the front room, Perceval paid for his purchases and tucked the bulky, but undeniably discreet, parcel, which was wrapped in a tasteful light blue paper, under his arm. M. Robineaux escorted him to the door and thanked him effusively.

“Please recommend my shop to your friends, m’sieur. And do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further service.”

“I certainly will. Good day, M. Robineaux.”

Perce idly looked at the window displays of some other shops, but he had no real reason to go inside any of them. On his way back to his hotel, he stopped at a certain café. It was a small, unfashionable place, patronized by working-class people, which was why Perce liked it. He made a point of going there, for a coffee and a pastry, most days when he was in Paris.

This afternoon, he was surprised to see Mme Jolivet, the plump, good-natured owner of the café, dabbing at her tear-reddened eyes with a handkerchief as she worked.

“Why, Mme Jolivet, whatever is the matter?” Perce demanded.

“Ah, M. Fain!” she replied. “I am so unhappy! You know my son, Jacques, the one who is in the army? He has been sent to Algeria! I saw him off at the train station this morning. Poor boy...and all those other brave boys who left with him. They have to go by train to Marseilles, then across the sea to Tunis, and from there they will take another train to some wretched town in the middle of the desert. My poor Jacques! I just know he will be killed by one of those terrible Arabs. They’re all savages, aren’t they? They don’t even believe in our Lord and Savior, Jesus.”

“They are Muslims, most of them,” Perce replied. “They believe that Jesus was a prophet, but I don’t think they believe he was divine.” Perce’s knowledge of world religions was sketchy: theology was not a subject in which he took much interest. “Now, you must sit down here beside me, and we will have a drink together. I’m sure everything will be all right. I can’t have the prettiest woman in Paris spoiling her good looks by crying, now, can I? Let me tell you this joke I heard last night. It’s rather naughty, but I know you are a woman of the world...!”

By the time Perce left the café, he had managed to reassure, cajole, tease, and flatter Mme Jolivet back into her usual good humor, and into a much more optimistic frame of mind. His jokes, all of which were decidedly risqué, soon had Mme Jolivet shaking with laughter. She embraced him and gave him a motherly kiss on his cheek when he took his leave of her.

On his walk back to the hotel, Perce stopped to buy a newspaper. Sure enough, there was a story on the front page about recent developments in Algeria. There was always trouble, or the potential for trouble, in Algeria, where some of the natives kept resisting the French colonization efforts. The French government kept sending more and more troops there to maintain order.

The evening turned out to be more enjoyable than Perce had anticipated. Roger Delmotte, his dinner and opera companion, was a handsome, empty-headed, irresponsible young man, about Perce’s

own age. His gossip was at least amusing, and his blatant lust for Perce was flattering. Immediately after the performance of *Le Cid*, Perce took Roger to his suite of rooms at the hotel, and he got down to business with his very American directness and efficiency. Roger, he knew from other such nights in the recent past, was not the sort of man who needed to be seduced.

“Take off your clothes,” Perce urged before either of them had even had a chance to touch the drinks Perce poured out for them.

“What about your manservant?”

“He won’t come in until—I mean, unless I ring for him.”

They stripped, flinging their clothes negligently about on the furniture and the floor—the long-standing, thoughtless habit of men who always had servants nearby to pick up after them. When they were naked, Perce unceremoniously grabbed Roger and kissed him on the mouth, using his tongue to explore and stimulate inside the other man’s mouth. He soon had Roger moaning and squirming against him in helpless response.

Like most men, Perce had a preferred lovemaking style: in his case, one that tended to be direct and unashamed in a way that, he had discovered, was uncharacteristic of Roger and his fellow aristocratic Frenchmen—some of whom had an irritating tendency to preserve the fiction that they were “not really doing anything” with another male, even while they were thrashing about with him in the throes of orgasm.

Perce had no such mental reservations. As usual, the fact that they were doing something that would be condemned by most people in the outside world, no matter how natural it seemed to Perce, was like a hot spur applied to the flank of his galloping lust. He glutted himself on the forbidden pleasure of taking another naked man in his arms, kissing him, fondling his erection, offering his own hard cock to the other man to grasp and stroke and suck. Roger was an experienced and uninhibited fellator. He was soon down on his knees on the soft carpet, emitting an extraordinary repertory of slurping and suctioning

and choking sounds as he fed voraciously upon the full length of Perce's throbbing shaft.

Perce was not a selfish sex partner. He believed in full reciprocation, and he could usually be relied upon to return any attention given to him, with interest. He pulled Roger down onto the carpet with him and maneuvered their bodies into a *soixante-neuf* position. He engaged Roger in a playful but intense oral competition, to see which of them could the more effectively tease and torment his partner with fingers, lips, and tongue.

It was Roger who admitted defeat, reluctantly breaking away from Perce.

"I don't want to climax yet," he gasped. "Not so soon."

"I don't want to, either. Catch your breath." They stood up, and Perce handed Roger his neglected drink. They drank, eyeing each other's nudity with unabashed pleasure. Both men were sporting inflexible and almost painful erections.

Perce set down his empty glass on a table and rummaged through his opened light blue paper-wrapped parcel, which happened to be on the same table. "Look at what I bought today."

M. Robineaux had neatly enclosed each of the three sets of photographs that Perce had bought in its own discreet envelope. Perce pulled out the ones that depicted "body worship" and propped them up next to each other on the tabletop using an array of objects—a lamp, a cigarette box, a bronze figurine, and the two pornographic novels he had also purchased—to hold them upright so that the photographs formed a coherent narrative sequence.

"Do to me what they're doing in those photographs," Perce urged.

"But that's disgusting, Perce. How can one man abase himself with another, like that?"

"Do it!" Perce seized Roger by the back of his neck and kissed him again, brutally, then kept his grip on Roger's neck and forced the other man's face against his armpit as he raised his free arm to expose it. "You know you want to," Perce taunted his friend. "Don't make



me force you!”

As Perce had anticipated, Roger was immediately, wildly excited by the thought of being “forced” by the powerfully muscled American to do anything. He kissed Perce’s sweat-moistened armpit, then pushed his tongue out from between his lips and tasted the salt of Perce’s sweat. He moaned with pleasure as the taste and smell of Perce’s flesh further aroused him. Perce felt a perverse satisfaction at the effect his sexual bullying had on the aristocratic Frenchman.

“That’s right,” Perce grunted. “Lick and suck me, you dirty *putain*. Everywhere. All over my body.”

He gave Roger curt, explicit instructions as the other man frantically worked on him: “My tits, suck them—harder! Bite them! Ah, you bitch, you horny little bitch...My navel, get the tip of your tongue inside it...My balls, lick them, get them both inside your mouth, and suck on them...My feet, kiss my feet. Suck on my toes...That’s right, you filthy *cochon*! Now my ass. Stick your tongue up my ass.”

To facilitate this last request, Perce lay belly-down on a tufted, leather-upholstered ottoman that stood on the floor nearby. He reached back behind himself with both hands, grasped his hard-muscled buttocks, pulled them as far apart as he could, and blindly shoved his *derriere* back against Roger Delmotte’s face. Roger’s tongue penetrated his anus, probing deep.

“*Putain*,” Perce panted. “Dirty *putain*!” He added, in plain English, “Ass-licking whore!”

When he had enjoyed enough of the rimming, he stood up, pushing the red-faced Roger away from him.

“Now you’re going to do the same thing for my valet,” Perce announced, reverting to French. “I want to watch you service him, in exactly the same way.”

“Really, Perce!” a breathless Roger protested. “That man of yours is a handsome little devil, but this propensity of yours to mingle with the hired help, as though they were our equals—”

“You’re going to do it, though, aren’t you?” Perce grinned at Roger cajolingly—and when Perce chose to use his charm on another man, he was hard to resist. “You’ll do it to please me, won’t you?”

“If you insist.”

Perce rang the bell. Almost immediately, Tommy appeared, his face inscrutable as he pretended not to notice the two men’s nudity and arousal.

“You rang, sir?”

“Yes. M. Delmotte would like to perform a service for you. Take off your clothes.”

“As you wish, Mr. Fain.”

Tommy stripped—taking care to fold each item of clothing he removed and deposit it neatly on a chair—then approached Roger, waiting for him to make the first explicit move. Roger consulted the row of photographs, then began to recreate the images with Tommy.

Perce seated himself comfortably in an armchair and masturbated himself casually, to maintain his erection, while he watched. Roger—who was being encouraged now by a considerably less passive Tommy—was turning out to be surprisingly good at this body worship business. He made good use of the ottoman, first sitting on it himself while Tommy stood in front of him, then having the agile Tommy assume a variety of positions on the ottoman while Roger serviced him as abjectly as any hundred-franc male whore one might pick up on a Parisian street.

As he sat and toyed with his erection, Perce was particularly excited by the sight of Roger Delmotte’s handsome face pressed between Tommy buttocks, of Roger’s lips glued to Tommy’s pink sphincter muscle, of Roger’s agile tongue darting in and out of Tommy’s asshole. It was, as M. Robineaux would say, very amusing. Very amusing, indeed!

It wasn’t long before Roger had assumed the belly-down position on the ottoman, and Tommy, standing behind him with knees slightly bent, was fucking Roger, easing his saliva-wetted prick in and out of

Roger's eagerly receptive ass.

"Ah, *foutre-moi! Foutre-moi!*" Roger panted. "*Foutre-moi*, deep and hard! Oh, yes, like that...deep and hard!" He lifted his disheveled head and stared at Perce with pleading, lust-widened eyes. "Come here, Perce! Let me suck you while this young brute of yours fucks me! Oh, he's so potent...so cruel...He fucks me so well!"

"I'm glad that my performance is satisfactory, M. Delmotte, and that you are enjoying yourself," Tommy said politely. He and Perce exchanged knowing smirks over Roger's squirming body as Perce stood up and approached the ottoman. He stood facing Tommy and allowed Roger to stuff his cock inside his mouth and gorge himself on its heft.

The two Americans pumped away, in synchronization, like two pistons that were part of the same steam engine. They changed their positions, repeatedly, taking turns violating Roger's mouth and ass. Roger, sandwiched between the other two men and the recipient of their full phallic fury, writhed in ecstasy—and was soon ejaculating, helplessly, spraying his semen over the ottoman and the carpet. The hotel's maid would have her cleaning work ready for her the next morning—a common hazard wherever Perceval Fain registered as a guest. Perce and Tommy ignored Roger's orgasm and continued to use him, in one way or another, until they, too, were both spent.

"Help M. Delmotte to dress, Tommy," Perce instructed. "And then you can draw me a hot bath—make it *very* hot—before I go to bed."

His unspoken *alone* was his none-too-subtle way of dismissing Roger, who had served his purpose for the night. Not that the decidedly enervated, but satisfied, Roger was offended. He understood the rules of the game. Perce was not interested in a romantic relationship with him. They'd had their fun, and now Roger was more than willing to go home and sleep in his own bed.

Even a man as urbane as Roger Delmotte felt a slight awkwardness as Tommy escorted him to the door and opened it for

him after handing him his evening cloak, hat, and gloves.

“Thank you, Flanagan—that is your name, isn’t it? I hope you realize what a privilege it is for a man like you to, ah, serve gentlemen such as M. Fain and myself.” He handed Tommy a silver thousand-franc coin.

Tommy fought his sudden urge to smirk. Long ago, even before he’d entered Perce’s employ, Tommy had discovered that there was nothing quite like a stiff penis to erase the usual class distinctions between men.

“You do me too much honor, m’sieur,” Tommy replied, with no irony audible in his carefully modulated tone of voice. “Goodnight.”

When Roger was gone, however, and Tommy went to run Perce’s bath, he scoffed, “Cheapskate!” to himself as he pocketed the coin. A thousand francs was a little more than forty dollars in American money. Tommy flattered himself that he was at least a fifty-buck fuck!

Perce always enjoyed immersing himself in a steaming hot bath to relax in preparation for bed, especially after sex. As he soaked in the hotel’s luxurious tub, into which Tommy had tossed a handful of bath salts, Perce indulged in some private meditations, as he often did in such circumstances.

He thought about his father’s death. He remembered his father as cold and harsh. Even when his two sons were still toddlers, Charles Fain had expected them to think, speak, and behave as though they were miniature adults. Lancelot had adapted to these expectations readily enough. His younger sibling had struggled, and all too often failed. Perce had dreaded the innumerable occasions on which he had been summoned to his father’s study by a servant. Perce would stand there, literally “on the carpet,” in front of his father’s huge desk—feeling like a criminal hauled before a judge, for sentencing.

He remembered how, back home in Boston, shortly after their father’s funeral, his brother Lancelot had asked him to come into their father’s study, where—among the other papers Lance had been

sorting through, with the help of the family's lawyers—there was a hefty file.

Looking at his brother was usually, for Perce, like seeing a less animated version of his own face in a mirror. On this occasion, though, Lancelot Fain's blandly handsome features had tensed into a stern mask, and there was steel in his gray eyes. He reminded Perce, all too vividly, of their father.

"I found this among Dad's things, Perce," Lance explained. "I wasn't sure whether I should tell you about it or not. But then I decided you probably have the right to know."

"Know what?"

"About a certain person Dad had in his employ. I've told this man his services are no longer required."

"I still don't understand, Lance."

"Are you telling me you really didn't know? You weren't aware...You never noticed...Oh, hell, Perce! What I'm trying to say is, for the past year or so, Dad hired a private detective to...well, to spy on you and report back to Dad on a regular basis about your activities."

"Ah...when you say my activities...do you mean *all* of them?"

"Only the illegal and immoral and potentially embarrassing ones," Lance retorted. "God knows that was enough to keep this man busy! All the papers in this file are the detective's reports."

"May I see them?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you about it. Let's burn them, right now, in the fireplace."

"No, please, Lance. I'd like to read them. Have you read them?"

"I only glanced through enough of them to see exactly what they were. Really, Perce. You're not a boy anymore. You're a grown man. If you can't bring yourself to behave...can't you at least make an effort to be a little more discreet?"

Perce had smiled rather sheepishly—which was not inappropriate, considering that he was definitely the black sheep of the family.

Perce took possession of the file, promising he'd burn its contents once he had examined them. But he didn't destroy the reports. They were part of his inheritance, in a sense, after all. The reports, uniformly dry and objective in tone, itemized the places he'd been, where he'd stayed when he'd traveled, how he'd amused himself, the parties he'd been invited to, the sporting events he'd participated in, and—above all, and obsessively—the men in whose company he'd been seen.

Charles Fain had also, evidently, written to a famous Viennese doctor, a specialist in sexual dysfunctions. There was no copy of the elder Fain's original letter in the file, but the doctor's reply was there.

*In our society, admittedly, homosexuality is no advantage, the doctor wrote. But, in my professional opinion, it need not necessarily be an obstacle, or a disgrace. Much depends upon the character of the invert...If you could persuade your son to come to Vienna for a consultation and course of treatment, it might be possible to moderate his undesirable behavior, if not to change his essential nature, and lay to rest some of your fears.*

This letter was dated three weeks prior to Charles Fain's death.

The most extraordinary document, however, was a separate list, in the detective's handwriting, complete with dates and places, of men's names—or, in some cases, brief descriptions of anonymous men. The list was also dated shortly before his father's death and was headed: *Men believed to have engaged in unnatural acts with P.F. during the past year.*

Perce had scrutinized the list with embarrassment, at first, but then with a growing sense of amusement:

*Thomas Flanagan, his valet  
Italian gigolo, in Rome, and his houseguests (orgies)  
Douglas Kenney*

*Phillip Winslow (?)*  
*French boxer, south of France (?)*  
*William Patrick Leonard, on board his yacht, during cruise*  
*Two (!) men at once, the entire week, camping trip, Maine*  
*Austrian prince and his bodyguard, St. Moritz (orgy)*  
*Turkish bath masseur, in Boston*  
*Turkish bath masseur, in New York City*  
*Jonathan Sandford, the actor*  
*Charles Moore and Robert MacNeil, two men living together (!)*  
*(orgies)*  
*Turkish bath masseur, in Chicago*  
*Negro (!!!) tavern keeper, in New York City*  
*Turkish bath masseur, in Paris*  
*Turkish bath masseur, in London*  
*Spanish soccer player*  
*French swimmer and diver*  
*Three members of rowing team at P.F.'s club, in Boston (orgies)*  
*Turkish bath masseur, Istanbul*

What struck him was that his father had, essentially, wasted his money. In the unlikely event that Charles Fain would ever have been able to bring himself to discuss such things with his wayward younger son, Perce would have gladly supplied him with these names, and many more. For the list was far from complete: Perce could easily have extended it by a dozen more names, without even having to search his memory. Missing from the list were the son of a Supreme Court justice, a naval lieutenant, a prominent New York City banker (married, and twice Perce's age), an internationally renowned ballet dancer, and two world-famous professional athletes—to say nothing of assorted waiters, bellboys, stable boys, tourist guides, male prostitutes, and, yes, a genuine Venetian gondolier. Finally, in Perce's opinion, the detective hadn't been very good at his job, even so far as his wretched little list went.

For example, Prince Niccolo Ferraleone, a scion of an aristocratic Roman family, probably didn't care much what an American private detective thought of him, but even Niccolo might be taken aback for a moment at seeing himself dismissed as an "Italian gigolo." It wasn't his fault that he didn't have the money to quite live up to his title. And his ancestral villa in the countryside near Rome, in disrepair and crumbling though it was, was still a most picturesque place in which to host neo-ancient Roman all-male orgies.

And putting Douglas Kenney on that list was just plain silly. He'd been Perce's roommate at Harvard, but he had been back then, and was now, an incorrigible womanizer, despite Perce's ongoing efforts to convert him. When they'd traveled together last year, they'd shared the same hotel rooms as a matter of course. True, they'd indulged in some drunken mutual masturbation in those hotel rooms, as they had back at school. But that was nothing, just two old friends having a bit of harmless fun together. To Perce's way of thinking, mutual masturbation scarcely deserved to be considered foreplay. It certainly wasn't real sex.

It was silly, too, to include Phillip Winslow, even with the question mark next to his name. He and Perce had been put up in adjacent bedrooms during a particularly dull house party in Newport. Phillip was an enthusiastic sportsman and amateur athlete, like Perce. He had a beautiful body, if no brains. He and Perce had slept together that weekend out of sheer boredom. Perce would have to remind their hostess, the next time he saw her, to be more careful with her servants. The only way that detective could have known about him and Phillip was if some housemaid or footman had been snooping at a keyhole and later on blabbed to the detective, no doubt in exchange for money. It was so hard to find reliable help nowadays! Thank God Perce had Tommy.

And of course Perce had slept with William Patrick Leonard, in the main cabin of his yacht. Perce had known that would be expected of him, when Billy Leonard had invited him on the cruise, in the first



place. That was what Perce called a “courtesy fuck,” although, in fact, Billy had turned out to be more than satisfactory as a lover.

And that bigoted, snobbish reference to a “Negro (!!!) tavern keeper” with no fewer than three exclamation marks. That was Danny Taylor, a delightful, cultivated gentleman, and his “tavern” was an exclusive nightclub in Manhattan. Of course this lout of a detective whom Charles Fain had hired *would* be shocked by the thought of a white man and a black man enjoying each other’s company—in bed or out. But Perce had long ago overcome any such prejudices. If homosexuality had taught him anything, he had learned that all men were potential brothers beneath the skin.

But what really piqued Perce was the question mark next to “boxer, south of France.” He’d spent no fewer than six weeks with the man, last summer, in the south of France, and that stupid detective hadn’t even found out his name? It was Yves Dinaux, and he was, indeed, a successful and popular professional boxer who came from hearty Provençal peasant stock. He was an earthy, uncomplicated man, and Perce had been crazy about him. Thanks to Yves, Perce now understood how some women could become so infatuated with a man that they were willing to be utterly subservient to him, cooking and cleaning and keeping house for him, and, yes, bearing his children—although that, at least, was one thing Perce hadn’t needed to worry about! But Yves Dinaux was all man, and Perce had been happy to be his bitch. When they’d parted, Perce had given Yves a gift of money, knowing perfectly well that the dutiful Yves would give most of it to his family, who lived modestly in the area. Perce and Yves had visited them on their farm, and, far from being in awe of Perce’s wealth and sophistication, they’d treated Perce as though he was a member of the family—and had put him to work. Perce had enjoyed that almost as much as he’d enjoyed the energetic sex he and Yves had reveled in every night throughout their entire six weeks together. Yves’s trainer believed that, far from depleting an athlete’s reserves of strength and stamina, regular sex actually replenished them. Perce had to smile at

the memory of how Tommy, whom he'd taken along with him to Provence as a matter of course, had been scandalized by the way Perce had neglected his clothes, and, to some extent, even his personal grooming and hygiene as he enjoyed the rustic life with Yves.

And, finally, did this moron of a detective think that the masseurs in Turkish baths were there *just* to give massages? Did he think those poor, hardworking men lived off their meager wages, and tips? How incredibly naïve!

Perce wondered if Roger Delmotte's father, the stuffy French cabinet minister, was compiling a similar list, and if there would now be two more names on it—his and Tommy's.

There was a discreet knock on the bathroom door.

"Come in, Tommy," Perce said.

Tommy came in and examined the parts of Perce's body that were not submerged. "You're sweating and turning very red, Mr. Fain. You've been in there long enough. Let me run some cold water into the tub, to close your pores, and then I'll dry you off."

"Bossy, aren't you?" Perce complained. But he let Tommy have his way, and soon, after being dried from head to foot with thick Turkish towels by Tommy, Perce was in his silk pajama bottoms—despite Tommy's disapproval, he usually dispensed with the tops—and was in bed, propped up on pillows, with the sheet drawn part of the way up over his bare torso.

"I won't need you any more, tonight, Tommy. Go to bed."

"Very good, Mr. Fain."

Perce and Tommy were never coy about their sleeping arrangements. When Perce dismissed him, as he had just done, Tommy understood that he was expected to sleep in his own bed. Often, however, Perce would simply say something like, "*I would enjoy having some company tonight,*" and Tommy knew that this was an invitation to climb into Perce's bed with him. This might or might not lead to sexual activity, because Perce did enjoy, literally, sleeping

with other men—provided he liked them enough. Unfortunately for Roger Delmotte, he had not made the cut. Tommy never refused these invitations. Quite apart from the fact that Perce was his employer, who paid him well for *all* of the services he provided, Tommy idolized his master and was always willing and eager to share an erotic romp with him—whether it was just the two of them or including others, as they had tonight. In the morning, no matter what did or did not happen during the night, Tommy was invariably the first one up and about, and their relationship as master and servant was immediately, seamlessly restored. Anyone who saw the carefully dressed and groomed Tommy, bringing Perce his breakfast in bed, and greeting him with a polite, “*Time to wake up, sir,*” would never have suspected that, a few hours earlier, the two men had been enmeshed in a playful nude wrestling bout to mutual orgasm on that very same bed.

After his hot bath, Perce felt delightfully relaxed, but not particularly sleepy.

He read the first chapter of *Love Among the Uranians*. The protagonist longed for love with another man, but for the time being, he had to be content with purely physical gratification. And with *repeated* acts of purely physical gratification, judging by the subsequent pages that Perce idly skimmed.

He put the book aside, picked up *The Memoirs of an Olympic Athlete*, and read several pages at random. The book, though fiction, purported to be the reminiscences of a champion of the first modern Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896. As he read lurid accounts of various couplings, Perce had to smile. He couldn’t understand how this horny bastard found the time and energy to train, let alone to compete, as busy as he seemed to be whoring around. In one respect, however, the book rang true and corresponded to Perce’s own experiences. A gymnasium was an excellent place in which to find likely prospects for athletic competitions in the bedroom.

Perce thought about the Olympic events he’d attended here in

Paris. Over the objections of Pierre de Coubertin and his Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques, of which Perce was a member, the French government had taken over the running of the games—and, preoccupied by the need to manage the Exhibition, as well, the government had not done a very impressive job. Coubertin had been disappointed, and so, to some extent, was Perce. Ah well, at least Perce had been able to admire some fine athletic bodies—both on and off the field!

Perce realized that he was bored with Paris. And, when a man is bored with Paris, he must truly be jaded.

He suddenly remembered Mme Jolivet, and her soldier son, Jacques. On an impulse, Perce got out of bed and found the pocket atlas that he always took with him when he traveled. Back in bed, he found the pages he was looking for.

*Paris to Marseilles, by train*, he thought, studying a map. *Then by steamer from Marseilles to Tunis*. He consulted the map of Tunisia and Algeria, on a separate page. These regions of Northern Africa were dotted with place names, many of them exotic in appearance and sound: Touggourt, Ouargla, Ghadames, Colomb-Béchar. As you looked further south, though, the names began to thin out, until, finally, there was only the single word—SAHARA—printed across a broad, empty space on the map.

Perce closed the atlas, set it on the bedside table, turned out the light, and went to sleep.

In the morning, when Tommy brought him his breakfast, Perce said, “I think we will leave Paris in a few days, Tommy. Get us a compartment on a train to Marseilles. And book us passage on a steamer from there to Tunis. I want to spend some time in Algeria, and see the Sahara desert.”

Tommy was delighted. One of the parts of his job that he enjoyed the most was making travel arrangements and packing Perce’s things in anticipation of accompanying his master on some new adventure. He knew little about Algeria. But he would willingly follow Perceval

not only to the Sahara desert, but to hell, provided there was a decent hotel there.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Stoking the Fires**

Perce was a seasoned traveler, who loved the sea and in fact had sailed on the Mediterranean before. Those voyages, however, had been leisurely circumnavigations of the Italian peninsula and the Greek isles. As Perce and Tommy prepared to board the steamer at Marseilles, Perce eyed the vessel with a hint of dismay.

“Well, Tommy, I know this isn’t going to be a pleasure cruise,” Perce commented to his valet. “But this boat looks like little more than a glorified ferry.”

“We’ll manage, Mr. Fain,” Tommy assured him. “I’ll do my best to make you comfortable. And we shouldn’t be on board all that long.”

The passage from Marseilles to Tunis in fact took about thirty hours. Fortunately, the Mediterranean was calm. Perce was a good sailor, who was never seasick, but the steamer was filled with young French recruits for the Algerian regiments, and it was painfully obvious that most of these raw peasants had never set foot outside their native provinces and had never been out on the water in anything larger than a rowboat. Perce could easily imagine the mass panic that might have ensued had the seas been high and the passage been a rough one.

Even so, the new soldiers were nervous. Perce had watched them come on board, driven like cattle by the big, muscular, sun-bronzed Zouave, magnificently dressed in bright red balloon trousers, snowy white blouse, and red fez, who had them in his charge, and who bullied them unmercifully. The recruits gaped at the Zouave as though

he were some terrible pagan god who might only be placated with their blood.

Perce and Tommy were among the comparatively few civilian passengers on this particular voyage. A few of the bolder recruits, as they came on board, stared up at Perce as he leaned over the ship's rail, up on the first-class deck. Perce, like the Zouave, must have seemed to them like some exotic creature from another world, although in Perce's case, he suggested a rather more benevolent deity.

Perce felt sorry for the recruits, as he might have felt sorry for so many uncomfortably caged animals. But this did not prevent him from indulging in one of his favorite mental games: glancing at the faces and bodies of the young men as they filed along, and trying to decide which of them he found the most attractive as a purely theoretical sex partner.

Even though the recruits were officially confined to third class, Perce could see them, and overhear their coarse exclamations and laughter, and their half-timid, half-defiant conversations, during the voyage.

Perce and Tommy had adjacent cabins, small but adequate. Tommy busied himself with the routine maintenance of his master's clothes, but Perce spent as little time in his cabin as possible. He strolled about the decks, engaged his fellow passengers and the ship's officers in casual conversation, and lingered over his lunch and dinner, to kill time. He even sat on a deck chair and read more of *Love Among the Uranians* and *The Memoirs of an Olympic Athlete*. It was while he was idly perusing a particularly lurid chapter of the latter that Perce got the shock of his life.

*The next gentleman who took a personal interest in my athletic career was Galahad Fayne, the son of a wealthy Bostonian, Perce read. The dark blond, mustachioed Fayne, who was an avid sportsman, had the body of a young Hercules as a result, and might well have competed in the Games himself—had he not been too*

*preoccupied with engaging the athletes in other, much more intimate tests of strength and endurance. He was notorious for his unbridled lust and for his penchant for taking on two or three competitors at the same time. He was aided and abetted in these orgies by his valet, an impudent young red-haired satyr who had earned his position on the basis of his oversized endowment, and who kept it because of his shameless willingness to do anything in his power to gratify his master's lust. From the moment he saw me, nude in the gymnasium, while we were both being massaged, Fayne developed a desperate passion for me. He swore to be my slave and to give me anything I asked for, if I would only let him worship my body with his hands and his mouth, and—*

“Son of a bitch!” Perce exploded. “Olympic athlete, my ass!”

Some slimy, unprincipled hack writer had written this book, which, Perce now realized, was a *roman à clef*, the fictional characters based on real persons whose identities were all too thinly disguised. The filthy pornographer, R.G., didn't even have the decency to invent his characters and events out of his own no-doubt-diseased imagination. He had to drag respectable gentlemen like Perce down into the dirt!

Well, R.G., whoever he was, wasn't going to get away with it. Perce would write to M. Robineaux, demanding that the book dealer provide him with the name and address of the publisher of this filth, and then he'd write to the Fains' family lawyer, in Boston, instructing him to sue the publisher for libel. Perce was tempted to fling the book overboard, but he thought better of that. He would need it, for evidence.

He began to turn the pages feverishly, trying to see whether he recognized anybody else, besides himself.

*In Rome, Fayne introduced me to his friend, Prince Zuccolo Fieralemonne, a modern-day Caligula whose sumptuous Palladian*



*villa was the scene of nightly orgies. Prince Fieralemonne instantly became enamored of me, and the two dissipated friends might even have come to blows over me had not Fayne suggested that, instead of competing for my favors, they could share them. Drunk on absinthe, I let myself be persuaded to strip and pose nude, like a classical statue, in the garden of the villa, for the prince and his guests to admire. Then Fayne announced to the amused assembly that he and the prince would demonstrate, for their edification, how two naked men could most effectively service a third, namely myself. Fayne urged the guests to place their bets on which of the two, he or the prince, would be able to first bring me to orgasm—*

“Shit!” Perce roared. He closed the book, shoved it back in his pocket, got up, and strode up and down the deck in a vile temper. It was even worse than he’d thought. At this rate, he was going to have to write to several of his friends, encouraging them to sue, as well!

That night, Tommy—also known as the impudent young red-haired satyr with the oversized endowment (a not inaccurate description, Perce had to admit)—asked Perce, “Will you be needing me any more tonight, Mr. Fain?”

“No. Why? Don’t tell me you have a rendezvous?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. With one of the ship’s officers. He’s invited me to come to his cabin, for a few drinks, and so he can show me his navigational charts, and his compass, and his chronometer, and his sextant, and...his other maritime implements.”

Perce grinned. “Fast worker, aren’t you? All right, you run along and have yourself some fun. You deserve it.”

When he was alone, Perce got undressed, and was about to climb into his bed, naked, when he thought better of it. It was a hot night, and the air in the cabin was close, so he decided to take a walk about the deck, and have a cigarette, before he tried to sleep. He pulled on his trousers and shirt, searched for his discarded shoes in vain, and then, with a shrug, went out onto the deck just as he was, barefoot. It

was a vulgar thing for a man of his breeding and social status to do, and he knew that Tommy, if he could see him, would chastise him severely, but Perce didn't care. The polished wooden planks of the deck had absorbed the heat of the sun all day long and, in fact, felt delightfully smooth and warm against the soles of his feet.

He strolled about the deck, looking up at the stars, down at the waves, straight ahead at the distant horizon. There seemed to be no one about on this part of the ship.

He felt restless, agitated. It was no doubt because of that disgusting book. Well, if he was really the vile degenerate depicted in those pages, then he might as well live up to his reputation. He was tempted to try to make his way, furtively, below decks, to third class, and enlist a half dozen of those young French recruits for a nocturnal maritime orgy.

But, as soon as he formed the indecent notion, Perce rejected it. For one thing, that no-nonsense Zouave, who obviously kept a tight rein on the soldiers in his charge, might catch them in the act and make trouble. Perce would have to bribe the man to keep quiet, either with money or—if the ugly brute were so inclined—with sex. And Perce doubted that many of the recruits would be very satisfactory partners, under the circumstances. They were no doubt already homesick, and they were the kind of inexperienced peasant types who didn't even know how to fuck properly, yet. Well, a few months in the military would change that.

Perce resigned himself to a night spent alone in his cabin, with nothing to entertain him except his reliable right hand. He would walk on a little farther, toward the stern, enjoy the night sea air for a few more minutes, and then retrace his steps.

It wasn't until he reached a small flight of steel steps, leading up to a slightly higher level of the deck, that Perce saw another human being. A small sign, swaying on a chain stretched across the bottom part of the steps, warned that this particular area was off-limits to passengers. On the upper level, Perce saw a sailor—a stoker, from the

looks of him—leaning on the railing. The man had a lean, hard-muscled body, naked except for a pair of tight-fitting and ruinously dirt-blackened trousers, which were rolled up well above his ankles. His feet were bare, as was his torso. His dirty slip-on canvas shoes, and his grimy sleeveless shirt, lay on the deck near his feet. His face and the front of his body and his forearms and hands were black with dirt. Many men of Perce's class would have wrinkled their noses in disgust at the mere sight of him—even before they got close enough to get a whiff of the stoker's no doubt strong body odor. Perce, however, devoured the man with his eyes. He liked what he saw. This man could be the answer to a lusty young gentleman's prayer!

The sailor happened to turn his head and saw Perce standing on the lower level, staring up at him.

"Ah. Pardon me, m'sieur. You will not tell the captain, or one of the officers, will you?" the sailor asked, sounding a bit anxious.

Perce's sportman's instincts were instantly engaged. He had scented the prey, and was already in pursuit.

"Tell them what?" he inquired, treating the sailor to his most open and disarming smile.

"That you saw me here. I am not supposed to be on deck, in this...state of undress."

"Nonsense," Perce replied, easily and dismissively. "But you need not fear. I will say nothing."

"M'sieur is very kind. You see, it is so hot. And I have been down below, stoking the furnaces under the boilers, all day long. I just wanted to take the air before I went to bed."

"As did I. How long is your shift?" Perce asked.

"Ten hours on, then two hours off for lunch and a rest, then another four hours on, and eight hours off, to eat and to sleep."

"That is inhumane! Don't you men have a labor union?"

"No, m'sieur."

"Incredible. Have you eaten, at least?"

"Yes, m'sieur. Soon I will go to bed."

“Would you like a cigarette?”

“I would, m’sieur, but I am not allowed to cross this barricade.” The stoker gestured with one grimy hand toward the steps and the chain.

“Then I will come to you.” Perce did so, stepping adroitly over the chain, and, when he, too, was on the upper level, he offered the sailor his open cigarette case. Both men took cigarettes, lit them on the same match, and stood there, smoking.

“I’m not permitted to mingle with passengers, and passengers are not allowed up here,” the sailor pointed out—belatedly.

Perce smiled at the sailor and blew out smoke. “Nonsense. I will take the responsibility. It’s late, and no one is likely to spy on us. If they do...I will say that I came up here to ask you for a match, and to ask you a question. About the stars, about navigation—about something.”

“M’sieur is very democratic.”

“M’sieur likes sailors. I have respect for them. For soldiers, as well. Perhaps you would like to come to my cabin and have a drink with me? A nightcap before you go to bed, to help you sleep, after your hard day’s work?”

“I would like to, m’sieur, very much, but again—it is forbidden. It is against the rules.”

“Ah, but rules are meant to be broken, are they not?”

“I could get into trouble.”

“Nonsense,” Perce said again. “It is very simple. If you are observed leaving my cabin...I will simply say that I could not find a steward on duty this late at night and that I saw you and asked you to move my trunk, which is very heavy.” The idea that the muscular Perce would have difficulty moving a trunk about in his cabin was absurd, but the excuse would serve, if need be. He knew that, in the unlikely event he and the stoker were caught together, no one would dare to challenge his story. “We will say that you graciously agreed to assist me and that I gave you some money for your trouble. No one

will doubt me. There will be no trouble. And, speaking of money...perhaps you would like to earn two thousand, or three thousand, francs?"

"I would, m'sieur. What would I have to do to earn that kind of a sum of money?"

"Nothing that you would not find pleasurable, I am sure."

"I will be glad to accompany you to your cabin, m'sieur, if you will promise to stand by me, as you have said, if we are observed."

"I promise. But we will not be observed, if we are careful. Follow me. Quickly."

The matelot picked up his shirt and shoes, and, with Perce in the lead, they padded swiftly and silently down the steps and along the deck. Once they were safely inside his cabin, Perce closed and locked the door, and without bothering to turn on a light yet, eagerly embraced the sailor, kissing him on his tobacco-flavored mouth. The sailor returned the kiss with a lack of inhibition and a passion that were most promising.

"My hands and face are very dirty, m'sieur," he apologized.

"It's of no importance. I'm not afraid of a little dirt. Let's get out of our clothes."

"M'sieur is very bold."

"M'sieur is very horny," Perce admitted, using the French gutter slang he had picked up in some of the less respectable quarters of Paris. "M'sieur is a slut! You may do whatever you want to me. I won't refuse you anything."

Once they were both naked, Perce switched on the reading lamp above the bed. In its faint illumination, he saw, for the first time, that his stoker was tattooed: he had an anchor and chain on his right bicep, a French tricolor flag on his left pectoral muscle, above his heart, and—most intriguingly—a scaly sea monster, romping about amid waves, on his abdomen, circumnavigating his navel.

Perce drew the sailor down onto the bed, on top of him.

This was one of Perce's greatest pleasures in life—sex with a

working-class man, who, once they were naked and in bed together, didn't treat Perce with undue deference, but responded to him with blind lust. Perce kissed and licked the other man's tattooed flesh, inhaled his strong body odor as though it was an intoxicating perfume, kneaded flesh and muscle with a sculptor's keen appreciation. He offered no resistance when the sailor grabbed a fistful of his hair, guided his head down to his crotch, and fucked his face. Perce sucked the thick, pulsing cock he was force-fed with gluttonous greed. He let the sailor rape his throat with his prodding glans, rejoicing in the other man's use of him. Perceval Fain was well known in certain social circles for his exceptional skill as a cocksucker, which he had honed through constant practice.

When the sailor felt himself on the verge of coming, he pulled Perce's mouth off his cock, stretched out beside him on the bed, and kissed him again—wet, open-mouthed kisses. He massaged Perce's supple flesh and muscle with grimy, calloused fingers that left black streaks of coal dust everywhere they touched.

"You are beautiful!" the stoker moaned. "Such a beautiful young gentleman!"

"*Je suis un putain!*" Perce retorted. "I'm a whore! Treat me like a whore!"

"I fuck whores!" the other man boasted.

"Fuck *me*, then!" Perce was already lifting his legs over the stoker's broad, sweaty shoulders.

There was nothing subtle or refined about this man's lovemaking. Thank God! Perce wasn't in the mood for subtlety or refinement tonight. He wanted to get fucked, like an animal, and his new acquaintance seemed to read his mind, to know exactly what Perce wanted and needed—and he gave of himself, unstintingly, to satisfy Perce's furious lust, and his own. They tried a number of different positions, until, by silent, mutual consent, they settled on a particularly acrobatic one in which to conclude their transaction: Perce, facing his fucker, squatted over his groin, and the stoker,

supporting himself on the mattress only on his hands and his heels, drove himself upward into Perce's cringing, shuddering body, so that the actual anal penetration was their only point of physical contact. Once they were locked together thus, the sailor pumped himself back and forth inside Perce, faster and faster, until both men exploded, wetly and copiously.

Perce treated himself to a lengthy post-coital session—perhaps half an hour—of kissing and cuddling with his sailor, before the latter sleepily insisted that he had to go back below, and get some sleep, before the start of his next shift.

Perce gave the man four thousand francs.

"This is too much, m'sieur."

"Nonsense. Please take it. You will buy yourself something you want, eh? And you will treat your friends to a round of drinks, if you get shore leave, in Tunis. And you will think of me when you do it. Goodnight."

Perce had what is often referred to as the common touch. The working-class men he amused himself with usually looked back on their encounters with him with gratitude and affection, and this was no exception.

Tommy Flanagan, however, was less tolerant when, in the morning, he saw the begrimed, semen-stained bedclothes and the soiled condition his master's skin was in.

"*Really*, Mr. Fain!" Tommy protested. "You might as well have gone below and stoked the boilers and rolled around in the coal dust yourself."

With a bowl of hot water, a washcloth, and a bar of scented soap, Tommy set to work, scrubbing—none too gently—his master's nude body free of the residue of the night's excesses.

"Ow!" Perce complained. "That hurts! Must you be so rough, Tommy?"

"Hold still, Mr. Fain, and take your punishment like a man. You've danced your dance, and now it's time to pay the piper."

### Chapter Three

## The End of the Line

Perce realized—with a slight sense of dismay—that he was once again bored.

It wasn't that he had not enjoyed his stay in Tunis. He had, but not as much as he had enjoyed his leisurely trip from Tunis toward Algiers. He and Tommy had made a point of getting off the train at each of several of the much smaller seaports that dotted the Northern Africa coastline, west of Tunis. They'd spent at least a day and a night in each of these sleepy seaside towns, exploring them, sunning themselves on the beaches, and swimming in the Mediterranean. Finally, they'd gone on to Algiers itself. And Algiers was enjoyable, too, in much the same superficial way that Tunis had been. The problem, Perce now realized, and the reason for his nagging sense of disappointment, was that these parts of Northern Africa were so permeated with French culture and influence. It was almost as though the French colonization efforts had reduced the native culture to a substratum, covered by the veneer of Francophile sophistication.

*I might as well have stayed in Paris,* Perce told himself. *Why, Tunis and Algiers are as French as the rue de la Paix and the place de l'Opéra! I wanted to get a taste of the real Algeria, of the Sahara, away from all of this French influence.*

He consulted his pocket atlas, then took it with him when he left his hotel and walked to the nearby railway station.

"How far south does the railroad go?" he asked the ticket clerk.

The man produced a map, which went into greater detail than Perce's atlas.



“At the present, m’sieur, the *chemin de fer* stops at this town,” he explained, indicating it on the map. “It is called Tin Ouzel. There has been talk of extending the line farther, but with all of the unrest in the area...” The clerk gave a most eloquent shrug.

“What can you tell me about this place, Tin Ouzel?”

“It is a small town, on the edge of the desert. There is a large military garrison stationed there. Many caravans stop there, because of the railroad. The caravans pick up goods brought in by train, or deliver goods to be shipped north by rail. As you can see on the map, m’sieur, a small river runs through the vicinity, which attracts nomads, in search of water. And many travelers and explorers leave from there, to cross the Sahara. As a result of these factors, m’sieur, despite its small size, Tin Ouzel might be described as a surprisingly cosmopolitan place.”

“But not too cosmopolitan, I hope. It looks fairly isolated, according to this map.”

“It is the only town of any size in the immediate area. Otherwise, there are only small villages and oases.”

“I would like to spend some time in Algeria, but in a quiet, rural place, well away from the large cities.”

“Then m’sieur, in my opinion, could scarcely do better than Tin Ouzel.”

“Is there an adequate hotel there?”

“I would recommend the Hotel du Désert. It is run by a French family.”

“Thank you. You have been most helpful.”

Perce booked a compartment on the first train headed south, the following morning. Back at the hotel, he sent a telegram to the Hotel du Désert, asking them to reserve two adjacent rooms, for himself and his servant, for an indefinite stay. Then he told Tommy to start packing, because this would be their last night in Algiers.

Perce and Tommy were experienced railway travelers, and this trip, at least, promised to be interesting because of the landscape the

train would pass through. They left Algiers before dawn, when the night air was still refreshingly cool. Most of the other passengers were Frenchmen, commercial travelers from the look of them, along with the inevitable contingent of officers and soldiers. There were comparatively few women passengers, and their number diminished the further south the train progressed. On the other hand, each time the train stopped at one of the small towns along the way, more and more Arabs got on board—a few of them dressed in European clothes, but the majority wearing their native garb.

At one point, Perce was interested to see two native women. They were accompanied by a giant of a man, almost black, with a zigzag scar across his left cheek, who wore a striped burnous over a jacket embroidered with silver thread. The women, shrouded in voluminous white dresses and spangled veils, fluttered about like ghosts as they boarded the train and passed Perce and Tommy's compartment. Heavy silver ornaments jangled on their wrists and ankles, and they wore embroidered and beaded slippers. Through the narrow gap between their headdresses and their veils, they glanced at Perce and Tommy as they passed, their sultry eyes surrounded by dark circles of kohl, and with henna-stained hands, the nails of which were painted bright red, they clasped their billowing garments more closely to them in a way that managed to be both modest yet coquettish.

Tommy grinned at Perce after the two women and their burly escort had disappeared into their own compartment.

"Thinking of changing your luck, sir?" he asked.

"Don't be crude, Tommy," Perce said. But he laughed.

"You could marry one of these native women and take her back to Boston," Tommy persisted. "Imagine how pleased Mr. Lancelot would be to see you respectably married and settled down...and how scandalized everybody else would be."

"I could convert to the Muslim religion, and take four wives, for that matter. But you'd better worry about me finding myself a new valet, here. A beautiful young Arab boy, perhaps, who knows how to

be completely subservient to his master.”

“You wouldn’t like subservience, Mr. Fain. You’d soon be bored.”

Amused by their banter, Perce sat back and looked out the window. There were no more of the orange groves, apricot and eucalyptus trees, and oleanders that had been so abundant in the area just south of Algiers. The train had already seemed to have left behind cultivated land, for the most part. It was rolling through the gaps between low hills, sterile and abandoned, without roads or houses—without, even, trees. Stunted-looking bushes sprouted from the dry earth here and there. Perce saw two ragged Arab boys, each wielding a long stick, driving a flock of scrawny goats that nibbled at what little grass there was.

After several hours, they had to change trains. As they waited on the platform to board the train that would take them on the last leg of their journey, to Tin Ouzel, Tommy amused Perce—as he often did in such situations—by pointing out the sartorial shortcomings of their fellow travelers.

“At least some of these Arab men possess a certain style and flair, Mr. Fain, with their baggy pants and their long robes and their headdresses and their bright-colored waist sashes. Oh, I do like the embroidered vest that the young dark-skinned man is wearing over there! We must buy you something like that, sir. Just imagine what a sensation it would make back home in Boston. And some of these men aren’t shy about wearing the flashy jewelry, are they? Some of that might look good on you, too.

“But, on the other hand...some of these men have no style at all. Just look at *that* man, Mr. Fain. Talk about a brown study,” Tommy quipped. “Brown suit, brown shoes, brown hat...he looks like one of those monochromatic paintings they’ve started to exhibit at the Salon in Paris you took me to. And it’s not as though that drab color doesn’t show the dust. He could use a good brushing, from head to foot. I do believe his cuffs are frayed. And those shoes! I’d like to know the last

time they saw a lick of polish. They may be beyond saving. If he has a valet, the valet ought to be shot.”

“Not everyone has the good fortune to have you to look after him, Tommy.” Perce looked at the man Tommy was criticizing. He was a man about Perce’s own age, who was also patiently waiting to board the train, with a folded newspaper tucked under his arm.

Once they were on the train and enclosed in their compartment, it wasn’t long before Tommy nodded off in his comfortable upholstered seat. Smiling to himself, Perce unrolled his plaid Scottish cashmere traveling rug and used it to tuck in his sleeping valet. Then he sat back and gazed out the window again, increasingly mesmerized by the landscape they were passing through.

Like most first-time travelers to Algeria, he had assumed that the Sahara was *only* a desert, one vast, flat expanse of sand stretching from horizon to horizon. Now he realized how wrong he had been. The train track threaded its way through rock-strewn plateaus and dry riverbeds, which, his pocket atlas informed him, were called *oueds*. And, surprisingly, the Sahara did have mountain ranges, and substantial ones, at that.

The earth rose and fell in a series of depressions, interspersed with heaps of rocks. Every conceivable shade of yellow and brown, like paints on an artist’s palette, mingled and flowed away toward the foot of the mountain ranges in the distance. Here and there, dry, parched water courses were gouged deep into the barren soil.

Perce felt a need to get up and stretch his legs. Quietly, so as not to awaken Tommy, he went down the corridor, toward the smoking car.

A few Arab men were there, smoking cigarettes and cigars, Perce noticed with wry amusement—he had half expected to see them puffing away on elaborate hookahs! And the man in the monochromatic brown ensemble was seated in an armchair, with his legs crossed, reading his newspaper—a French-language newspaper, printed in Algiers, Perce saw—as he, too, smoked.

Perce sat down, took out his Fabergé cigarette case, and had a cigarette, himself. He was not a habitual smoker—as an enthusiastic amateur athlete, he suspected it was bad for the wind—but he was a man, and men smoked, so in such circumstances, he, too, smoked, to fit in. Some of his most satisfactory sexual liaisons, after all, had begun over a couple of shared cigarettes. He thought about his recent acquaintance, the stoker, and suppressed a sly smile.

Perce was not shy about observing, and evaluating, the other men he happened to meet. Without being too obvious about it, he sat and studied the one who was immersed in his newspaper. He was of average height and build, and at the moment he had a listless way of slumping down in his seat—which, of course, might be the inevitable result of a long train ride in the heat. The clothes that had earned Tommy's disapproval had evidently been made by a French tailor, the kind who catered to the lower middle class. The suit was a nondescript brown color, and it was cut closer to the body than a good-quality English or imitation English suit would have been. The man had on an unimaginative plain black silk necktie and a soft brown traveling hat, dented in the middle and badly in need of brushing. His scuffed shoes were also brown leather, square-toed, clumsy and unfashionable, but no doubt comfortable and good for walking in.

Perce decided that he liked the man's face. It was colored by exposure to the sun, and the lean features were noteworthy for the neatly trimmed mustache and beard that embellished them. The mustache and beard, like the man's rather long hair underneath his hat, were an unusual warm brown color, streaked here and there by lighter natural highlights. Perce could not decide how to label the prevailing hue. It was neither chestnut nor walnut nor russet, but a subtle blend incorporating all of those tints. The man's eyes, however, which were fixed upon his newspaper, were unambiguous: they were a beautiful and expressive green.

*Handsome*, Perce thought, by way of summation. *Handsome*, in a

*negligent sort of way. If only Tommy could take him in hand, give him a decent haircut, and steer him toward a decent tailor, then we might really have something.*

Perce wondered what the man's nationality was. Some sure instinct told Perce that he was not a tourist. He was not traveling for pleasure. He might be a French businessman, connected, perhaps, with the import-and-export trade, or with supplying the military, who was going to Tin Ouzel on business.

The man put his newspaper down, seemed to lose himself in thought for a moment, and then stood up and went over to the window. He took a pack of inexpensive French cigarettes from his pocket—Perce recognized the logo on the pack, although he had never tried that particular cheap brand—stuck one in his mouth, and lit it.

After standing there for a moment, smoking, the man tried to slide the window open. It was stuck, and he struggled with it. Perce stood up and went over to join him.

"If m'sieur will permit me—?" Perce exerted his considerable strength and got the window open.

"Thank you, m'sieur."

A warm, delicate breeze drifted in through the open window, and Perce automatically looked out at the rapidly passing view. "The landscape is very beautiful, is it not?" he remarked. "Even though it appears to be so barren."

The other man really looked at Perce for the first time, and Perce almost thought he detected a faint disdain in the man's expression as their eyes met.

"I do not speak French very well," the man apologized in a careful, accented French that was much better than his modesty might suggest. "Just enough to get by, in France—and in French-speaking places, such as here."

"I am an American," Perce said, switching to English.

"I am English," the other man replied in the same language.

“Well, that is a coincidence,” Perce said with an ingratiating smile. “Two English-speaking travelers on the same train, here in the middle of Algeria, surrounded by all these Frenchmen and Arabs. Are you traveling to the end of the line? To Tin Ouzel?”

“Yes.”

“Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Perceval Fain.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Fain. I’ve seen your photograph, in newspapers and in magazines. Usually in connection with sporting events.”

“Yes, I do enjoy all kinds of sports. And you, Mr....?” Perce paused, more than long enough to give the other man an opportunity to introduce himself. But the other man said nothing. “Do you like sports?” Perce asked.

“I have no leisure time for such things. And no money to spend on them, either. I have to work for a living.”

Perce was taken aback. The man’s obvious implication was, *unlike you*.

Perhaps the man had not intended to be rude. He may have spoken impulsively, without thinking. Perce made another attempt to be sociable.

“I have been told that Tin Ouzel is a rather isolated spot. I am traveling there out of curiosity, to see what life is like in such an out-of-the-way Algerian community. May I ask what brings you to this part of the country?”

“What brings me to it is my work.” The man threw his cigarette out the window. “Good day, Mr. Fain,” he said as he turned his back to Perce, retrieved his newspaper, and left the smoking car.

It occurred to Perce that he had just been snubbed. And by a man who was obviously his social inferior, a man Perceval Fain could no doubt buy and sell a thousand times over, if he so chose. And, yes (Perce could not stop himself from thinking, thanks to Tommy’s earlier remarks), a man who was rather shabbily dressed, so he had some nerve, behaving the way he had. Perce could feel a hot flush of

resentment warming his face.

Well, it was not the first time something like this had happened. There had been that unpleasant incident in London, when one of Perce's friends had tried to introduce Perce to another man who happened to come upon the two of them on the street. The man, when he heard Perce's name, had actually spat on the sidewalk, turned his back, and strode away, muttering in disgust. And then there had been that even more ghastly occasion, in New York City, when another friend of Perce's had invited him to his club, which was one of the most exclusive men's clubs in the city. The waiter had delivered a note to Perce's host, who was so shocked when he read it that he didn't react quickly enough to prevent Perce from taking the note from him and reading it himself. It was unsigned, and it said, *How dare you invite that cocksucking bugger here? The filthy bastard ought to be horsewhipped, and so should you!* Now there was high-class, gentlemanly behavior for you!

But that sort of boorish behavior was exceptional. Most men were much more subtle in conveying their unease at being in Perce's company, their distaste of his reputation, or their outright disapproval of him. And Perce had learned how to deal with them. Not infrequently, upon continued acquaintance, his charm was able to change their way of thinking and bring them around. On more than one occasion, men whose first instinct had been to shun him had ended up numbering themselves among his defenders, and his friends. And some of these unlikely friendships had even developed into physical intimacies.

Not that anything like that was likely to happen this time!

*Boor!* Perce thought. *Ill-mannered, badly dressed boor!* And then, assuming he had dismissed the ill-mannered, badly dressed boor from his mind, he returned to his compartment.

They reached Tin Ouzel, at the end of the line, late in the afternoon, when the heat was at its fiercest.

Tommy took out their luggage tickets and went in search of a



porter. Perce went out onto the station platform, alone. He and the other disembarking passengers were immediately besieged by a crowd of begging children and adult men, all of them brown- or black-skinned, who offered their services as porters, drivers, or guides, milling about and exposing bare arms and legs and even, in many cases, bare chests, like so many barbarians besieging a fortress.

Perce ignored the noisy mob. Glancing about, he caught the eye of a tall, slender Algerian man of about forty, who was dressed in immaculate European clothes—a cream-colored linen suit, white shirt, shoes, and hat, carefully coordinated with a pale lime-green tie. The ensemble might almost have met with Tommy's grudging approval. The one questionable element was some overdone jewelry: the man wore small gold hoop earrings in his pierced ears, his tie pin and cuff links were set with rather large green gemstones, and he wore a total of no fewer than three finger rings, as well as a gold bracelet, on his right hand.

The Algerian, like Perce, ignored the chaotic activity swirling all around them. His face was a handsome one, with a habitually unruffled expression. His dark hair was streaked with silver-gray in places, which contrasted with his medium-brown face.

The man approached Perce, with his hat in his hand. The crowd, Perce noticed, instinctively parted to let the man through, if a little reluctantly: evidently he was well known, and respected, by these aggressive locals who made a habit of meeting the trains.

"Welcome to Tin Ouzel, m'sieur."

"Thank you."

"If m'sieur has need of a porter, a driver, a guide, or directions...anything...I would be delighted to place myself at m'sieur's disposal."

"I have my manservant with me, as you see." Tommy had returned, with a porter and their luggage in tow. Tommy and the Arab exchanged wary, guarded looks, instantly sizing one another other up. "But perhaps you will be able to assist me in some way. What is your

name?"

"I am Moussa, m'sieur. At your service."

"How far is the Hotel du Désert from here?"

"You can just see it from here, m'sieur. It is the low square building, behind those roofs and that minaret. M'sieur is staying at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Here comes the hotel's omnibus, which will take you there."

"I will walk there. I would like some exercise after the long train ride. Tommy, you go on ahead."

"Yes, Mr. Fain."

A horse-drawn omnibus had drawn up nearby. It had *Hotel du Désert* painted on its sides, and it was being loaded with passengers and luggage. Tommy supervised the transfer of their luggage onto the vehicle by the porter, and tipped him. Then, with a final, faintly suspicious glance directed at Moussa, Tommy boarded the omnibus, which moved off, slowly, toward the town.

"You may walk with me, Moussa, if you wish," Perce said. "We will talk. We will see what you might be able to do for me."

They set off in the same direction the omnibus had gone. Eager to stretch his legs after having been cooped up on the train for so long, Perce set a smart pace. Moussa had to exert himself a bit to keep up.

"M'sieur is very strong. He strides along like a Bedouin traveling in the desert on foot. You must be an Englishman. The English are great travelers and explorers."

"I am an American, Moussa. We have deserts there, too, although I have never lived on one of them—only traveled through them, and not on foot. But I like to keep active." Perce slowed up a bit so he could look around. "This town does not appear to be very large. I imagine I could explore most of it, easily enough, on foot. Tell me, Moussa, if I wished to ride out into the countryside, for pleasure, could you find me a horse for hire?"

"Of course, m'sieur. There is an excellent stable here in the town,

which I deal with often.”

“But it must be a spirited horse, the kind that a French officer or a spahi would be proud to ride. Not a docile nag.”

“I am sure I can accommodate you, m’sieur.”

“Tell me something about yourself, Moussa.”

Moussa was not shy and volunteered a good deal of information about himself. He had been in Paris, where he had worked for a gentleman who liked to surround himself with exotic things, including his servants. He had also lived in both Tunis and Algiers and could speak some English, as well as French. Tin Ouzel was a small town, but the presence of the French military made it lively, as did the continual arrival and departure of caravans. There was a marketplace, very busy during the day. There were sights worth seeing, in the town and in the outlying areas. At night, there were many diversions, which Moussa would be delighted to show m’sieur.

“My tastes might seem unusual to you, Moussa.”

“I doubt that, m’sieur. I can see that you are a man of the world. I have served as guide to many gentlemen, and I dare say they have never been disappointed by the services I have provided. I pride myself on my resourcefulness, and I am the soul of discretion, m’sieur.”

“You will need to be discreet if you wish to serve me. I believe we understand each other, Moussa.”

Matter-of-factly, Perce raised the question of Moussa’s usual fees. The Arab named a modest sum. It was no doubt subject to downward negotiation, but Perce was not interested in haggling.

“I will engage you, Moussa, on a trial basis. If you will come to the hotel after dinnertime, we will talk further and settle the matter.”

“Very good, m’sieur.”

They had reached the hotel, which occupied one side of a small, open square. It was a two-storied structure, with a veranda surrounding it on both levels. The other sides of the square were taken up by shops, a customs house, and a café.

Perce gave Moussa a few francs, by way of an advance, and dismissed him.

Inside the hotel's lobby, Tommy was waiting for him.

"Have you seen the rooms, Tommy? Are they adequate?"

"I think you'll be comfortable, sir. Our rooms overlook the square."

Perce trusted Tommy's judgment. He went to the desk to register.

"How long will m'sieur be staying with us?" the pleasant middle-aged proprietor of the hotel inquired.

"I am not sure. I may stay here for some time. I am looking for rest, and quiet." Even as the words left his mouth, Perce was astonished to hear himself utter them. *Looking for rest, and quiet? Since when? Is that what I came here for? What am I, some sort of a broken-down, worn-out old man?*

But, for the time being, he paid for two weeks, in advance. The proprietor, whose name was M. Verdeau, assured him that, should he wish to extend his stay beyond that, there would be no problem. M'sieur could have the rooms for as long as he wished. It was a privilege to have so distinguished a gentleman as m'sieur staying at their humble establishment, and so forth. If m'sieur so desired, he could go directly into the *salle à manger* and enjoy a late luncheon.

"Yes, I will do that," Perce said

The only other person in the dining room was a very smart and handsome young Arab who, the waiter told him in a discreet undertone, was an officer in the spahis and was stationed at Algiers, but who was now on leave and was staying in the area to visit his father, an important man in a village well to the south, and his other relatives. Perce looked at the other guest with great interest. He wore a blindingly white turban and a shockingly red jacket, and between the white and the red, his black eyes gleamed like a cat's, as did his white teeth when he smiled at the waiter—to whom he addressed a few words in completely idiomatic French. His face was extraordinarily expressive: intelligent, but also both sensual and cruel.

The spahi had finished his meal. The waiter returned to his table, to take away his plate, and asked him if he would require anything else.

“I will have a pastis.” The spahi looked at Perce and smiled. “Perhaps the foreign gentleman will join me in a drink?”

Perce smiled back. “I would be delighted to. Please—join me here, at this table.”

The spahi rose, languidly, and sat down again, opposite Perce. That sure instinct of Perce’s, which rarely let him down, told him that he and this man had a great deal in common.

“My name is Perceval Fain. Let’s not be formal, shall we? Please call me Perce.”

The spahi tested the name on his tongue. “Purrz,” he purred, like a cat. “What an interesting name. I am Dehnal Oud al Qurashi. Please call me Dehnal, which is how I am known to my intimates. You are new to Tin Ouzel, are you not?”

“I just arrived, on the train from the north.”

“I could not help noticing you speaking with Moussa, outside the hotel.”

“You know him?”

“Everyone in Tin Ouzel knows him.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“He is a clever man. An honest man. He will not take advantage of you. If you make use of his services, you will not be disappointed.”

“I imagine I will engage him, in some capacity or another.”

“Most travelers who come here do, eventually. In one capacity or another, as you say.”

“What is there to see in this town?” Perce asked.

“Oh, many things. The marketplace, the mosque, the Moorish baths...There are native villages, on the other side of the river, that some tourists enjoy visiting.” Dehnal’s tone of voice implied, subtly, that he did not altogether approve of foreign tourists going on an excursion to gawk at the impoverished locals. “At night, there is the

casino, and the many cafés that feature dancing girls. I am sorry, I have engagements this evening. Otherwise, if I were free, I would be delighted to show you some of these sights.”

“Perhaps we could do something together tomorrow,” Perce suggested.

“I am free tomorrow. I could place myself at your disposal—perhaps in the afternoon?”

“That would be most agreeable.”

They made small talk while Perce finished his lunch. Dehnal left the dining room with him, and they said their good-byes, shaking hands, at the foot of the staircase.

“I shall look forward to our time together, tomorrow,” Dehnal said, softly. There was a new intimacy in his tone of voice.

They were standing so close together that Perce could feel the warmth of the other man’s body, and could smell the strong, distinct odor of attar of roses perfume that emanated from him.

“As shall I,” Perce assured him.

He would have thought a Western man effeminate who used such an intense floral scent. But this man was anything but womanish. What was his real nature—civilized or barbaric? His manners were perfect, but what might he be like when he put them aside? Perce had every intention of finding out.

“Until tomorrow, then.”

The spahi left the hotel, and Perce went up to his room.

Tommy, with his usual efficiency, had already unpacked and had arranged his master’s personal possessions in the way Perce liked, to make him feel at home. The room was spacious and airy, with large shuttered windows that opened onto the veranda, and gauzy curtains that could be drawn to diffuse the strong sunlight during the day. Hung on one wall, opposite the bed, was a framed chrome lithograph of a particularly plaintive-looking Jesus of the Sacred Heart. Perce frowned, took the picture down, put it inside a drawer, and replaced it with the watercolor of the nude black Algerian man that he had

bought at M. Robineaux's shop in Paris.

"That's better," he said after stepping back to judge the effect of his redecorating.

Tommy was darting to and fro, busying himself with various chores. "Guess who is staying here at the hotel with us, Mr. Fain?" he said.

"A very handsome young spahi officer. I have already spoken with him. He has the most charming manners."

"Oh, *him*. I've seen him. No, he's not the one I meant...It's the man who was on the train with us, the shabby brown monochrome with the dark brown hair and beard."

"Really? He's also a guest here? Well...I'm sure he's a person of no consequence to me. He's probably some sort of a traveling salesman, with samples of his cheap, tawdry wares in his luggage."

"I think you should take a little siesta now, sir," Tommy said firmly. "It may not be wise to exert yourself too much in this heat. Then I'll draw you a bath—a lukewarm one, I think—before you dress for dinner."

"Oh, all right, if you insist," Perce grumbled. He was used to letting Tommy have his own way in such things, and Tommy was used to his master's token displays of resistance. Perce stripped, stretched out lazily, nude, on top of the bed, and Tommy pulled the sheet up over him, to his waist. Then he closed the gauze window curtains and slipped out of the room.

Perce thought, quite shamelessly, about the handsome spahi with the exotic-sounding, multisyllabic name: Dehnal Oud al Qurashi. He was quite sure the two of them would soon end up in bed together. He tried to picture the Algerian's powerful, masculine body without its colorful clothes.

Perce began to caress his chest with his right hand, stroking his nipples into erection. He slid his hand lower, under the edge of the sheet, hefted his cock in his hand, and began to stroke it in a desultory fashion. He began to get hard.

*No, I don't want to come, he decided. I want to save it...until I'm with Dehnal or, if not him, then somebody else. It does feel good, though.*

He was highly sensual by inclination, and his many experiences over the years had done nothing to curb his appetite.

Yes, Dehnal might make a highly satisfactory lover. Perce realized that, as well as a desert man, Dehnal was a man of the world. He had lived among French officers and had been to Paris, and he surely knew when it was appropriate for a man to give in to his desires and when to deny himself. Such men could usually be relied upon to make the most of such erotic opportunities as did present themselves. And erotic opportunity, in a sense, was Perceval Fain's stock in trade.

Reluctantly, he stopped fondling himself and drifted off to sleep.

Later, refreshed by his nap and his bath, Perce went down to dinner with a keen appetite. Tommy, not entirely to Perce's surprise, told him he preferred to take his own meals in the kitchen, with M. and Mme Verdeau, their employees, and the servants of the other guests.

"That way, I can hear all the gossip," Tommy admitted shamelessly, "and find out exactly what goes on in this town. And I've already checked out the kitchen. You won't be disappointed, sir. Mme Verdeau seems to be a good cook."

There seemed to be a dearth of female guests at this hotel. Four French officers sat at one table, engrossed in their conversation. A small, nondescript man of middle age, probably a commercial traveler, occupied another table and fixed his attention on his food. Perce sat alone at a third table. A fourth table, on the far side of the dining room, was laid for one person, who had not yet arrived.

The waiter recommended the *loup de mer*, or sea bass, which he said had been brought from Algiers, packed in ice, by the afternoon train. Perce ate his fish and drank his wine. Madame Verdeau—who, the waiter informed him, did most of the cooking, herself—was,



indeed, an excellent cook, and her husband kept a decent wine cellar, if this meal was any indication.

“Who is the other table set for?” Perce asked the waiter.

“The English gentleman, m’sieur. Ah—here he comes. Pardon me, m’sieur, I must go and take his order.”

It was indeed the shabby brown monochrome, as Tommy had dubbed him, who had walked into the dining room. He had not changed out of the clothes he had traveled in, although at least he had washed his face and hands and combed his hair.

*I will cut him, Perce told himself. I will cut him dead. I will pretend he is invisible, that I do not even see him. If he dares to speak to me—and oh, how I wish he would!—I will say something to him like, “I do not believe we have been properly introduced, sir. And you gave me the impression, earlier today, that you were not interested in pursuing an acquaintance with me.” I’ll put him in his place quickly enough!*

But, when the bearded man sat at his table and took the menu the waiter handed him, he glanced over in Perce’s direction. Their eyes met. Perce, without thinking, nodded...and the Englishman, after a split second’s hesitation, nodded back. Perce thought he detected the slightest flush warm the other man’s tanned cheeks, above his glossy beard, as he began to study his menu.

*Why did I do that? Perce wondered. Why did I acknowledge him, when I’d told myself I wouldn’t? Oh well...there’s no need for me to descend to that man’s level of behavior. There’s no need for me to be rude.*

He finished his dinner quickly, fighting the urge to look in the bearded man’s direction. And yet he remained acutely aware of the other man’s silent presence on the other side of the room.

M. Verdeau himself came over to the table to tell Perce that Moussa was waiting for him in the lobby. After complimenting M. Verdeau on the meal, Perce got up and left the dining room. He was careful to avoid looking in the Englishman’s direction.

"I trust that m'sieur is enjoying his stay so far?" Moussa asked.

"Very much so. I have decided to engage your services, Moussa. Here is a week's wages, in advance."

"M'sieur is most generous. I will do anything for m'sieur."

"I doubt that I will make any great demands upon your time."

"I will call here in person, m'sieur, at least twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. You have only to leave me a message, or a note, here at the desk. M. and Mme Verdeau know me very well. Should you ever require anything from me, they will send a boy to my house with your message or your note."

"I have been to the stables," Moussa went on. "Anytime m'sieur wishes to ride, he has only to tell me, and I will have a groom bring the horse here to him, at the hotel."

"Excellent. Let us walk outside, Moussa, into the square. I will take the air, and I am curious to get a glimpse of what this town looks like at night."

It was almost sunset. Perce strolled across the square, with Moussa following him at a suitably subservient distance of a pace or two behind.

"Where does this street lead to?" Perce asked, indicating a street that seemed to contain many doorways and windows, already lit from within by lamps.

"It is called the rue des Danseuses, the Street of the Dancers. There are many cafés there. I will accompany m'sieur to two or three of them, of the better class, and you may see the exotic dances of the Sahara."

"Not tonight, Moussa. I am somewhat fatigued from my journey. And this other street, which seems so dark by comparison—where does it lead to?"

"To the edge of the town, m'sieur, overlooking the river."

"And the desert? The town is surrounded by it, I suppose?"

"One has only to go to the end of that street to see a fine view of the desert."

"I will walk that far, then, before I go to bed," Perce told the guide. "I would like to see the sun set over the desert."

"I will accompany m'sieur, of course."

They walked the length of the street, in silence. The street was dark, Perce realized, because it was a street of shops, which were now closed for the night. The shopkeepers and their families no doubt lived in the upper floors on the buildings, however: here and there, a light came on, in an upper window, as the shadows in the street deepened.

"If m'sieur will permit me—?" Moussa asked in a soft, insinuating, rather fawning tone of voice.

"Yes? You may speak quite frankly."

"Perhaps m'sieur would like companionship...in his hotel room, overnight?"

"I might, Moussa, on some later occasion. Not tonight, though. As I said, I am tired. Tonight, I will sleep."

"Might I inquire, for future reference, about the specific nature of m'sieur's taste? Perhaps he would enjoy the company of a young boy, either dark-skinned or with skin the color of *café au lait*...a boy who has been trained to please a gentleman in every way possible, who knows how to suck the nectar from a man's penis, and whose delicate rosebud of an anus can accommodate even the largest and most forceful of penises, caressing it until the inevitable outcome?"

"You do have a most poetic way of expressing yourself, Moussa. But no. My preference lies in the exactly opposite direction. I enjoy the company of mature men, powerfully built men. The stronger they are, the better. If they are masculine and muscular, their looks—their faces—are of little consequence. As is their skin color, for that matter. Nothing excites me more than to be with such a man, provided he shares my predilections and is passionate and versatile and without shame."

"I understand perfectly, m'sieur. I know several such men, all of them most trustworthy and accommodating. Perhaps I could arrange a

*partouze* for m'sieur's amusement? A *partouze en blanc et noir*?"

"What an intriguing expression, Moussa. I know what a *partouze* is, of course. But you will have to explain to me what you mean by a *partouze en blanc et noir*."

"It is simple, m'sieur. A private gathering, most discreet, at which white men and black men, and men of all the hues that lie in between those two extremes, may meet and socialize with each other, openly, intimately, with—as the expression goes in English—'no holds barred.' It is a delightful way for gentlemen such as yourself to become better acquainted with men of different races and cultures, and they with you. I have organized such affairs many times, not only for tourists and businessmen, but for the French officers and soldiers stationed here. If I may be so immodest, my little parties have always been considered to be great successes."

"Where would such a social event take place? It might be awkward to attempt to hold it in my hotel room."

"I would have the honor of inviting you, and any other gentlemen you might choose to bring along as your guests, to my own house, here in town. My home is modest, but comfortable, and it is at your disposal. As I said—it would be most discreet."

"Arrange it, then, Moussa. Not right away, though. Perhaps in a few days. We will decide upon the exact night later. My valet will accompany me." Perce made some swift mental calculations. There was Dehnal, whom, Perce suspected, might be more than willing to participate in such a debauch, if he was approached about it in the right way. Perce had been in this town for only one afternoon and evening, but he had already met one highly sympathetic man. He might easily soon meet a second or a third, with any luck at all. "And I may invite one or two, possibly three, other men of my recent acquaintance to come, too."

"Excellent, m'sieur. I will arrange, accordingly, for there to be at least five or six men to entertain you and your friends. You will not be disappointed."

“And, if you do not disappoint me, Moussa, I will be generous. I will pay you well. So spare no expense. Let all of the arrangements—everything, and everyone—be of the first quality.”

“I understand, m’sieur. It will be as you wish.”

They had come out of the end of the street, into an open space quite devoid of buildings, where they were suddenly confronted by the sight of the desert, which was now engulfed by the sunset. Abruptly, the world had changed, the drab monochrome of the daylight hours replaced by a riot of color. The narrow, shallow river in the distance flowed sluggishly through an oasis of gigantic palm trees that lay in a vast expanse of pale yellow earth covered with scattered rocks. To the left stretched a distant mountain range, soft purple beneath the shifting rose and magenta hues of the sunset. From the Arab villages of mud-brick houses scattered among the palms came the cries of children, the barking of dogs, and the faint din of African drums and pipes.

A caravan was winding out of the gorge, a long train of laden camels, led by barefoot, dark-faced men enveloped from head to ankle in fluttering, ragged garments.

The austere beauty of the landscape contrasted with the glory of the sunset, and contrasted, too, with the sordidness of what Perce and Moussa had been discussing so intently together. Now, Perce forgot, for a moment, about the pleasures of the flesh that Moussa had promised to procure for him, and lost himself in the sensuousness of the sunset as it gradually yielded to twilight and the first stars appeared.

Back in front of the hotel, Perce dismissed Moussa and went inside.

The Verdeaus were typical hardworking French hotelkeepers: after the guests’ dinners were over, they had gone to enjoy their own long-delayed supper, and from their well-earned supper straight to their beds, leaving only a rather dissipated-looking young Arab man in charge of the front desk. Arabs of the servant class, Perce had

already learned during his stay in Tunis and Algiers, tended to be incorrigible gossips, and this one was no exception.

“What can you tell about that young spahi—?”

“Ah, Dehnal Oud al Qurashi! He is the son of Ben Hamid al Qurashi, the great caid. He is beautiful, is he not? One cannot deny it. He is strong. He speaks French perfectly. When he is on leave, when he goes to the desert to visit his father, he always stays here at the hotel for a few days, on his way there, and on his way back. All the women who see him fall in love with him. In Algiers, they languish and die for their love of him, and in the desert, when he returns to his father’s house, they long to be chosen as his bride.” The youth looked somewhat slyly at Perce. “The men admire him, too, and compete with one another to be his...friend.”

“He is not married, then?”

“Not yet, m’sieur. He enjoys his liberty too much.”

In his room, with Tommy’s help, Perce undressed and put on his pajama bottoms. It was too warm to put on his dressing gown over them as he might have done when he sat up before retiring to bed. He sat down at the little desk the hotel provided and looked at his reflection in his shaving mirror, which sat on its pedestal on the desk. In the warm yellow glow of the lamp, his face looked oddly pensive.

He was tired, and his sense of physical fatigue allowed his thoughts to wander. He didn’t resist the mood he suddenly found himself in, but let himself think, at random.

This isolated town, Tin Ouzel, at the end of the railway line—he had chosen it, on a whim, precisely for those reasons. Why? Perce had heard the slang expression “getting away from it all.” What was he trying to get away from? Or, conversely, what was he looking for?

There didn’t seem to be a great variety of diversions in this unsophisticated place, and yet, inexplicably, he was glad he had come here. For some reason, he liked it here.

He was a hedonist. He had never denied the fact. Actually, he had never denied himself anything, really, if he wanted it and it lay within

his reach. Even before he had come into his inheritance, his one aim in life had been to have a good time. And he had pursued that goal with immense energy, concentration, and imagination. But now? What did he want now?

Tommy was putting his clothes away, with his usual unobtrusive efficiency, and turning down the bed. Perce caught himself contemplating his valet. Tommy was a really beautiful young man, he decided. In the lamplight he looked like a figure in a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

“How long have you worked for me, Tommy?” Perce asked.

“Four years, ten months, and seven days, Mr. Fain.”

Perce smiled. How like Tommy to know the exact amount of time, down to the day. “Oh? How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“I keep a diary, sir. And I include a running total of the entries.”

“Really? What do you write in this diary of yours?”

“Everything. The places we go, the things we see, the people we meet.”

*Good God!* Perce couldn’t help thinking. If Tommy were ever to try his hand at fiction writing, he, too, might come up with some sort of a ghastly *roman à clef*. Perce could see the title now: *A Gentleman’s Gentleman*, or, *The Memoirs of a Valet*, by T.F.

“Remind me to increase your wages, Tommy. But, as I was saying...so we have been together for almost five years. Have I changed at all in this time? Oh, I know I’m older, of course, so don’t bother to flatter me by telling me I look just the same. I’d like your honest opinion. Have I changed inside, as a person?”

“You have the kind of looks that only improve with age, Mr. Fain,” Tommy insisted. “Like certain wines and cheeses. But, seriously...yes, you’ve changed. When we first met, you were always kind and generous to me, as we both know. But toward other people...you could be kind of defiant. Almost as though you were daring them not to like you, because of, well, the kind of man you are. You seem much more at peace with yourself now, if you don’t mind

my saying so.”

“That’s interesting. I suspect you may be right.”

“And you seem to have changed since we left Paris and came here.”

“Really? Why, whatever do you mean? We only left Paris a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, but ever since we arrived in Tunis, I’ve noticed that you seem quieter somehow. More relaxed. More introspective—yes, that’s the word: more introspective. You did ask me to be honest, Mr. Fain.”

“Yes, I did, and I’m glad that you feel you can be honest with me. You’re extremely perceptive. It’s one of the many things I like about you. Well, that’s enough of this serious talk for one night. I’m going to go to bed.”

“Will that be all, then, sir?”

“I’m very sleepy. I imagine you must be, too. It’s been a long day. But neither of us needs to get up very early in the morning. We can stay in bed late. I wouldn’t mind having your company, tonight, Tommy. Don’t bother to go to your own room. Stay here and sleep with me.”

“All right, Perce,” Tommy agreed—the switch in form of address from *Mr. Fain* or *sir* to *Perce* instantly and effortlessly raising the level of intimacy between the two men. He began to undress.

They slipped into the bed together, Perce in his pajama bottoms, Tommy nude. Perce pulled Mme Verdeau’s pristinely white and crisply laundered sheet up over their bodies, to their waists. He took Tommy in his arms and cuddled him.

“I’m glad we came here,” Perce admitted. “It may not be a terribly chic place, but I find it interesting...and different. What about you, Tommy? Do you like it here, so far?”

“I always manage to find something to like, no matter where we go, Perce.”

“I find some of these dark-skinned Algerian men very attractive. Highly arousing,” Perce specified.



“Well, I find that when you’re in bed with a man, with the lights out, it doesn’t matter much what color his skin is,” the philosophical Tommy replied. “What counts is what he’s got and what he knows how to do with it.”

Perce ran one of his hands down Tommy’s bare back and cupped a buttock in his palm. He exerted a gentle pressure, pulling Tommy more closely to him. Tommy, he discovered, had the beginnings of a respectable erection, and Perce could feel his own penis stir to life, inside his pajama bottoms, as though in empathetic response.

“Of course,” Perce whispered as his fingers continued to fondle Tommy’s hard-muscled butt, “there’s nothing wrong with pink-skinned, red-haired, Irish-American boys from Boston. They can be very attractive, and highly arousing, too.”

Tommy reached down between their bodies and groped Perce’s growing tumescence through his pajamas. “Speaking of arousal—”

“Yes, all of a sudden I’m not as sleepy as I thought I was.”

“Me either.”

Tommy deftly untied the ribbon that held Perce’s pajamas together at the waist and pushed them down his employer’s sturdy, blond-furred thighs, to his knees. Perce wriggled his lower legs and feet out of the garment and kicked it down toward the foot of the bed. Now they were both nude under the thin sheet, and they embraced, face-to-face, their mouths meeting in a slow, deep kiss.

Perce reached for the sheet and flung it aside, so that they lay naked on top of the bed. He rolled onto his back, pulling Tommy on top of him, still kissing him. Tommy broke the kiss, slid lower on Perce’s torso, and began to tease his large brown nipples, sucking on one stiffened cone of flesh while pinching the other one between his thumb and forefinger. He went back and forth across Perce’s chest, tormenting the nipples in this way, until he had Perce thrashing and moaning under him. Then Tommy quickly licked his way down Perce’s abdomen and swooped, open-mouthed, upon his cock. He sucked it hungrily, inserting a fingertip inside Perce’s ass as he

sucked.

Perce whimpered with delight as Tommy worked on him with his finger and his mouth. He was wildly aroused, and he knew that this was not going to be one of those nights in which the two of them deliberately drew out their lovemaking, prolonging it for as long as possible before granting themselves the relief of orgasm. They were both too horny, to put it bluntly. The heat of the desert seemed to have entered their bodies, firing them both to the boiling point.

Tommy pulled his mouth off Perce's cock. "Let's fuck," he moaned.

"Yes, let's. Tommy, did you put the cream—?"

"It's in the top drawer of the nightstand, on my side. I'll get it."

Tommy rummaged in the drawer of the bedside table and retrieved a small jar. The "cream" in question was technically a luxurious scented cold cream, intended for women to use to remove their makeup before they went to bed at night. Perce had discovered, by trial and error, that it was one of several products that could be used as an excellent anal lubricant, and he always made sure he had a generous supply with him when he traveled. Tommy could always be relied upon to put a jar within easy reach of any bed Perce happened to be occupying.

"I may only be able to go once tonight," Perce warned. He and Tommy often took turns fucking each other, sometimes taking a brief, recuperative rest in between. Tonight, though, Perce suspected he'd fall asleep quickly once he'd enjoyed a good, strong orgasm—the kind of orgasm that Tommy never failed to provide, no matter what specific sex act the two of them did together. "Would you like to fuck, or get fucked? You decide."

"I want to get fucked. I want to fuck myself on you. You just lie there and relax, Perce. I'll sit on it."

Tommy scooped some of the cold cream out of the jar—not too much, because he always enjoyed a certain amount of friction in his ass when Perce took him—and applied it to Perce's rigid shaft, until it

was just slippery enough to facilitate penetration.

Tommy squatted over Perce's groin, facing him, with his feet planted flat on the mattress on either side of Perce's hips. Tommy's knees were extraordinary flexible, and he had no difficulty flexing them as he lowered his buttocks and used one groping hand to hold Perce's cock steady and press its tip between them. The muscles in Tommy's thighs and calves bulged as he impaled himself, inch by inch, on the other man's prick, until Perce was buried in him to his balls.

"Oh, yes," Tommy gasped. "Oh God, yes! That feels so fucking good!"

He began to move up and down, forcing Perce's manhood to slide back and forth within the tight, fleshy clasp of his butt. His asshole stroked Perce's shaft the way Perce was used to stroking himself with his encircling thumb and fingers when he masturbated.

"Holy Mother of God," Tommy marveled. "Either my asshole's getting tighter or your dick's getting bigger! Every time you fuck me, it feels longer and thicker once I've got it shoved up my ass like this!"

"And every time I fuck that ass of yours, it feels hotter," Perce retorted. "Goddamn it, you are one hell of a good fuck!"

"Big-dicked stud bastard!"

"Hot-assed little whore!"

On such occasions as this, Perce, with Tommy's encouragement, rather enjoyed forgetting, temporarily, that he was a gentleman: he often indulged in the kind of strong language that he ordinarily refrained from using. His brother Lancelot's idea of hearty masculine invective was something along the lines of "Blast it all!" Lance would have been horrified had he heard half the things his younger sibling was capable of uttering while in the throes of passion.

Perce had often joked, to himself and to those of his friends with whom he could talk freely about such things, that Tommy had the hottest ass on four continents: North America, South America, Europe, and Asia (admittedly, his and Tommy's travels in Asia had

been limited to one trip to Istanbul, so far). Now Perce could add a fifth continent, Africa, to the list. He didn't even have to do the fucking, so to speak: Tommy flexed his knees to push himself up and down on Perce's virtually immobile cock, so that Tommy was doing all of the work for both of them, and Perce could lie back and luxuriate in his portion of the intense pleasure they were sharing. Tommy's sphincter muscle not only slid up and down on Perce's shaft, it flexed itself continually, gripping and releasing Perce like a fist.

And, as though the physical sensation of fucking Tommy wasn't stimulating enough, the steady stream of dirty talk that flowed from the young red-haired stud's lips lashed at Perce's libido as effectively as a whip applied to the flank of a galloping stallion.

"Fuck me, Perce," Tommy panted. "Fuck your dirty little whore boy! You know how much I like it. You know how hot I am for your big, hard cock. Oh, you fucker, you know that once it's in me like this, I can't get enough of it. You know how to get my ass going with that big prick of yours, don't you? Pound that motherfucker into me! Pound it! Oh, get that cock deep into my shitter and fuck the holy hell out of me!"

"Foul-mouthed little bitch," Perce gasped. "I ought to give you a good spanking. I ought to wash out that dirty mouth of yours, with soap, to teach you a lesson."

"Do it!" Tommy taunted him. "Go ahead and do it, if you think you're man enough! Spank me! And wash out my dirty cocksucking mouth for me—only wash it out with your hot come, not with soap! Goddamn—I wish you had two dicks, so you could screw me like this with one of them and fuck my mouth with the other! I wish you could come in my mouth and up my ass at the same time!"

"Oh, Christ crucified!" Perce blasphemed. "Sweet Jesus! You're doing it to me, you hot-assed son of a bitch! You're pushing me over the edge! I can't hold it in anymore! You're going to make me come!"

"Am I?" Tommy exulted. He bounced up and down on Perce even

more violently, his body wet with sweat. “Is my hot ass turning you on? Is it sucking the jism right out of your big stud cock? Can you *feel* this? I’m squeezing your cock as hard as I can. Can you *feel* it?”

“*Feel* it?” Perce retorted. “Of course I can feel it! It feels like my cock is about to be crushed! Oh God—I’m coming! Fuck! You’re going to get it! You want my come in your ass, you horny little fucker? Well, you’re going to get it! All of it! Get ready, because here it comes!”

Tommy was gritting his teeth in concentration, bearing down hard against Perce’s cock with his anal muscles. He was masturbating as he rode Perce, forcing his own cock to give up its barely pent-in semen. He could hardly speak now, because he was so out of breath, but he managed to hiss, “*Yesss! Fuck me, Percce! Come in my assss!*”

But Perce no longer needed an invitation, or permission. He wouldn’t have been able to hold back his ejaculation had his life depended upon it. Both men erupted simultaneously, in twin geysers of sperm, one trapped inside the other man’s anus, the other free to gush out and wet their bodies, and the bed.

Perce sagged back limply onto the pillows. The only part of his body that remained rigid and tense was his erection, which Tommy continued to ride for several breathless minutes, until he was sure that neither of them had any more come to give. Even then, it was only with the greatest reluctance that the valet finally, slowly eased himself off the impaling member and got off the bed.

Perce lay back and closed his eyes. His penis lost some of its inflexibility, and the fierce throbbing in it, and deep within his groin, began to ebb away. He could feel his testicles relaxing, too, sagging downward within their sac between his parted thighs.

Tommy came back and gently but thoroughly washed Perce’s genitals and crotch with a washcloth soaked in warm, soapy water, then dried him off with a towel.

“Thank you, Tommy,” Perce murmured. “You are always so good

to me.”

“You’re the one who’s good to me, Perce. Now go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“Yes, I can’t even open my eyes. They feel so heavy.”

Perce felt Tommy slide into the bed next to him, felt Tommy’s arm slide around his waist, felt Tommy’s warm, naked body press snugly against his own. Tommy, too, had given himself a quick cleanup, and smelled of scented soap. He pulled the sheet back up over both their bodies, covering their legs, but leaving their torsos exposed to the warm, still night air. He kissed Perce on his bare shoulder.

“Good night, Perce. Sleep well.”

“Good night, Tommy. You too.”

The words were barely out of Perce’s mouth before he surrendered to sleep.

Tommy listened to Perce’s heavy, steady breathing. When he was sure that his bedmate was fast asleep, he hugged the blond man more firmly against himself and uttered the words he rarely dared to say out loud, during the daylight hours: “I love you, Perce,” he whispered. “I love you with all my heart—I love you, body and soul.”

Then Tommy, too, contentedly abandoned himself to slumber.

## Chapter Four

### Written in the Sand, Written in the Stars

In the morning, before he went down to breakfast, Perce happened to walk over and look out the windows of his room, and he saw a surprising sight. The bearded Englishman was at the far side of the little square, standing facing the hotel, in front of a small wooden box mounted on a collapsible tripod. Perce recognized the contraption as a pochade kit, a compact little combination of easel and storage box that artists used when they painted *en plein air*. The Englishman, intent on his work, was painting in watercolors, touching his wet brush to the little pans of colors contained in an open tin in the pochade box and applying them to a large sheet of paper pinned to a board. He was dressed very casually, in loose trousers, a shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the middle of his hairy, thick-muscled forearms, and no tie or hat. He wore the kind of slip-on canvas shoes on his feet that a man might wear on the beach.

So he was an artist. The only question was, was he a professional artist or an amateur? Perce instantly suspected the former. An amateur artist would be much better dressed—in all probability, rather ostensibly so, to show everyone that he was painting only as a hobby.

Perce went down to breakfast and felt no hesitation, or shame, about interrogating the friendly waiter.

“The Englishman who is staying here—?”

“Ah, you mean M. McCandless? Is he a famous artist? I can see that he is a very good one. He showed M. and Mme Verdeau some of his work,” the waiter said. “I saw it, too. M’sieur and madame have commissioned him to paint some pictures of the hotel, from various

points of view, that they can put on the walls when they are finished, perhaps right here in the dining room.” The waiter tactfully lowered his voice. “Just between the two of us, m’sieur, I do not believe that M. McCandless is very well off. He travels without a manservant, for one thing, and, for another, he washed out his stockings and underthings himself and hung them up in his room overnight to dry, instead of giving them to the maid to be laundered. And, I heard m’sieur and madame agree that, instead of paying him for the pictures outright, they will subtract the sum from M. McCandless’s bill. It’s a shame, isn’t it, that a talented artist should have to work so hard to make his living, and scrimp and save?”

“Yes, isn’t it?” Perce agreed—although, privately, he wanted to smirk at the supposedly overworked and underappreciated artist’s expense.

He now knew quite a lot about the Englishman: his name, obviously, the fact that he was a professional artist, but not a particularly well-known or successful one, and the fact that he was so short of money that he had to, in effect, work in exchange for part of his room and board. So this high-and-mighty Mr. McCandless, who had snubbed Perce during their brief encounter on the train, was little more than a bum. If Tin Ouzel had beaches, McCandless would no doubt be combing them.

*The next thing you know, he’ll probably be asking the hotel guests, and the other tourists here in town, if he can do their portraits in watercolor, for a few francs apiece, Perce thought, rather vindictively. Oh, how I wish he’d come up to me and ask to do mine! I’d have a few things to say to him...I’d put him in his place quickly enough.*

But then, almost immediately, Perce felt rather ashamed of himself. He was generous by nature, and with the generosity came tolerance and forgiveness. And, despite what he might allow himself to think in the heat of anger, he had an innate respect for working-class men. They were, supposedly, his inferiors, and to all too many



of Perce's peers, that was exactly what they were. But it was surely no coincidence that Perce invariably enjoyed his frequent sexual encounters with such men. Lust, mutual attraction, shared passion and satisfaction—these were, indeed, the great equalizers.

When he had finished his breakfast, he walked out of the hotel, hesitated in front of it as though he was completely undecided about where to go, and then he oh-so-casually happened to stroll across the square. He looked about him with a typical tourist's curiosity, pretending not to see the artist at work on the far side of the square until he had almost stumbled into him.

"Good morning," Perce said—cordially. "How very pleasant to see you again." But then, he couldn't help twisting the knife just a bit. "I'm so sorry, I must apologize to you...because I have completely forgotten your name."

The artist looked up from his work, and his green eyes, when they met Perce's, seemed almost frightened. "I—I don't believe I told you what it is," he stammered.

"Oh? Didn't you?"

"My name is Gordon Preston McCandless."

"That's a bit of a mouthful, Mr. McCandless. What do your friends call you? Not Gordy, I hope? You see, I knew a boy named Gordy, in school, once. He was a horrid little beast, very rude."

"They—my family and friends, I mean—they call me Preston. It is an old family name."

"I would like to be in a position someday to call you Preston. I would like to be your friend. In any event, I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

"Mr. Fain," McCandless said—earnestly, but with a sort of scarcely controlled nervous excitement. "I am glad to hear you say that. You see, I am ashamed—"

"Of what? What could you possibly have to be ashamed of?"

"Of my conduct, yesterday, on the train. My rudeness. But you will forgive me, I am sure. You must understand that I am an ordinary

working-class man. I am not accustomed to being in the company of educated, cultivated gentlemen such as yourself. I must seem uncouth to you.”

Perce smiled. “Not uncouth. Only...direct. Which I like. I value directness in another man. And you may have an exaggerated notion of my level of education and cultivation, as you put it. I hope I’m not pretentious, or affected, or effete.”

“No, you are very kind.”

“You are hard at work now, I see,” Perce observed.

“Yes, I am making some preliminary studies, for some pictures in watercolor showing the hotel—and the other buildings around it, of course. Much of the architecture here is most interesting and picturesque.”

“May I see? I know that some artists don’t like outsiders to view their work in progress.”

“Oh, not me. Please do.”

Perce moved to stand beside McCandless and looked at the picture. It was not quite complete, but it was, he had to admit, very good. He also got a good look at McCandless’s equipment. His paints were Winsor and Newton, and his brushes were of the best quality. The paper he was using, too, was a top-grade one, manufactured in France especially for watercolor work. This artist might be forced to economize in some areas, but he obviously did not skimp or compromise when it came to the tools of his trade.

“I don’t know much about painting,” Perce lied—in fact, he knew quite a lot about it, and had even tried his hand at it himself, with humiliatingly banal results—“but that looks almost like finished work, not a study, to me.”

“Oh, I’m basically just trying to get the proportions and the colors right at this point,” McCandless said modestly. “I won’t begin a real picture until I’ve done that to my satisfaction.”

“Well, I won’t interrupt you any longer, Mr. McCandless.” Perce treated the other man to his most sunny and ingratiating smile. “I’m

sure we'll be seeing a great deal of one another, since we are both staying at the hotel. Perhaps we can talk at greater length later? Over a drink?"

"Yes...I would enjoy that." There was an odd combination of hesitation and fervor in McCandless's tone of voice.

Perce thought he recognized that tone. It was a common symptom of an equally common ailment—namely, the conflict in another man between attraction and guilt. Perce knew he had made quite an impression upon McCandless. And the artist, whatever his specific sexual history might be, was not a complete innocent. He understood the nature of his response to Perce, and he was uncomfortable because of it.

Perce almost swaggered as he walked along, idly exploring the town. *Not bad*, he congratulated himself. *Not bad, for one morning's work!* And, as far as he was concerned, whatever sins McCandless may have committed toward him—whether they were of commission or omission—were now atoned for, and forgiven.

Perce had no difficulty finding the town's marketplace, which occupied another, much larger square not far away. There were shops sheltered under arcades, and freestanding stalls. Many of the vendors simply displayed their wares on rugs spread over the ground. Even at this early hour of the morning, the area was a hubbub of activity and noise.

All of the vendors seemed to speak at least some French, although Perce overheard animated conversations in Arabic, and the occasional babel of various native dialects.

Perce decided to buy a couple of things for his room at the hotel, to help to personalize it. He examined the wares of several carpet merchants and finally chose a large rug with a so-called "elephant's foot" pattern of repeated, symmetrical oval motifs, because its bright red main field and soft texture pleased him. The merchant immediately rolled up the rug and had a small boy—who nearly staggered under its weight—deliver it to the hotel. Perce also

purchased an earthenware pot, about the size of a typical jardinière that, in Europe or the United States, might be set on a matching columnar pedestal. The pot had an extraordinarily vivid orange and blue pattern on its glazed exterior. This, too, Perce had delivered to the hotel.

He saw a perfumer's shop and, thinking of Dehnal, entered its dark, comparatively cool interior.

"The men here in the East often wear strong perfumes, do they not?" Perce asked.

"It is the custom, m'sieur," the obsequious proprietor replied.

"Let me sample some of them. Not floral scents. Those that are more pungent."

"I would suggest ambergris, or musk. And civet, or hyraceum."

"What is hyraceum?"

"It comes from a small animal called the rock hyrax, m'sieur."

Perce took his time, inhaling several of the fragrances directly from their containers or daubing them onto his wrist. He chose half a dozen, which the shopkeeper wrapped up for him. The parcel was small enough for Perce to carry with him.

The perfumer accompanied him outside the shop, bowing and thanking him for his patronage.

"Stop!" someone suddenly shouted in a harsh, strident voice, in French. "Stop that young man! That one, the golden one!"

"I believe he means you, m'sieur," the shopkeeper said.

Perce saw a man of indeterminate age stumbling toward him. He was thin to the point of emaciation, dressed in rags, including a turban, the shredded ends of which dangled far down from his head. He was powdered with dust from head to foot, which whitened his dark skin. His face was aged and weather-beaten, with many fine lines, but his eyes burned with a restless energy.

"I have seen that young man's destiny written in the sands of the desert!" the man shrieked. "I have seen that young man's destiny written in the stars, in the night sky!" No one except Perce and the

perfume seller took much notice of him.

"Why, the man is a poet," Perce said with a smile. "A veritable Verlaine of the Sahara! Who is he? What does he want?"

"He is a marabout, a holy man. I know him well. He is harmless."

"How does he make his living? By begging, I suppose?"

"The true believers give him alms."

"I will give him some money, then."

"M'sieur is generous. But he may attempt to engage you in conversation, and he has been known to speak wildly. Some people, of course, would say he is not divinely inspired, but mad."

"I will risk it." Perce addressed the ragged man courteously, the way he might speak to a fellow Bostonian. "Good morning, Father. Did you wish to speak to me?"

"Yes. You are the man. The one I have seen in my dreams. I have seen your destiny written in the sands of the desert," the marabout repeated. He addressed Perce using the familiar *tu*. "I have seen your destiny written in the stars. I have seen you, and the other man, many times."

"Indeed? What other man?"

"The wanderer. The one with whose destiny your destiny is knit. Your two paths have already converged, although you do not know it. Thus..." The marabout stooped and drew a line in the dirt with his fingertip. Then he drew a second line, intersecting the first one. He straightened himself up again and pointed down at the furrows emphatically. "You think there is a chasm, separating you from this man. A chasm as broad and deep as the gulf that separates the blessed who rejoice in paradise from the damned who are forever veiled in the shroud of eternal fire. But the chasm can be bridged. It will be bridged. I have seen you two, standing side by side, between the pillars, in front of the doors, in front of the tomb."

"What tomb? Whose tomb?"

The holy man, who had spoken quite coherently, if excitedly, up to now, suddenly began to stammer as he stared helplessly at Perce.

“He lies behind the doors, beyond them! The tomb of, the tomb in which...ah, ah!” he cried. To Perce’s horror, he fell down on his hands and knees and began to claw at the ground like an animal. He threw his turbaned head back and let out a howl, as though he were convulsed by pain.

“This man is ill,” Perce exclaimed. “He needs medical attention.”

“I have often seen him thus,” the perfumer said. “It will pass. He suffers from the epilepsy.”

“Nevertheless, fetch him some water—quickly,” Perce demanded.

When the shopkeeper brought water, in a jug, Perce wet his pocket handkerchief and rubbed the wet cloth gently over the marabout’s hot, dry forehead and lips. The man was already calmer: he sat down cross-legged on the ground, and looked up at Perce, with a less intense expression on his face.

“He will be all right, m’sieur,” the shopkeeper said. “You need not concern yourself. I will let him sit in the back room of my shop, where it is dark and quiet, until he is himself again—so long as he does not cry out and disturb my customers.”

“Here.” Perce pressed a coin into the marabout’s hand. “You must buy yourself something to eat and drink. And you must stay out of this hot sun. Sit down in the shade, somewhere, and rest.”

The marabout continued to look up at him.

“You are the golden man I saw in my dreams,” he said—not loudly and shrilly, as he had spoken before, but in a soft, slow, deliberate tone of voice, as though he was musing to himself. “You, and the other man, the restless wanderer. I have seen...I have seen extraordinary things! Things for which I cannot find words.”

Perce smiled. “Good day, Father. Rest. Perhaps you will dream again.”

He bade the perfumer good day as well and walked away quickly, with his parcel under his arm.

*Well, that was an interesting encounter! he thought. I wanted to experience the true Algerian culture, and I certainly got a taste of it*

*there! But it was not so surprising, perhaps. Everyone here in the East has a touch of mysticism about him, to a greater or a lesser extent, no doubt.*

If Perce was a superstitious man, he might think that the tomb the holy man had referred to was the Fain family crypt, back in Boston, where Charles Fain had been interred. And hadn't Perce and Lance stood in front of it, side by side, dressed in black, watching their father's coffin being deposited in its frigid marble depths?

On the other hand, while Perce and Lance undeniably had their little differences, these could hardly be described as a chasm dividing the two brothers.

But there was enough of the Irish-American Catholic left in Perceval Fain for the marabout's reference to the damned, in their eternal flames, to have unnerved him just a little.

He decided that, as long as he was giving in to mysticism, himself, he might as well make his fantasy a pleasant one. The spahi, Dehnal...he could be "the other man," the one with whose destiny Perce's destiny was knit. As for the "chasm" that supposedly lay between the two of them—that could be the racial and cultural differences between them, although it seemed to Perce that they had already gone a long way toward narrowing any such gap.

Yes, Dehnal must be this mysterious other man. It was very pleasant to think so.

Perce spent the rest of the morning wandering about the town, on foot. He decided not to go to the hotel for his lunch, but to look for some sort of restaurant or other, if only for the sake of varying his routine.

In another small square, he came upon a *café maure*, or Moorish café, a place where coffee and other beverages were served, along with simple foodstuffs. This particular establishment looked a little more upscale than most of its type. There was seating both inside and out, the latter provided by a few tables and chairs set on the sidewalk.

Perce saw three French soldiers—a captain, a lieutenant, and a

common soldier, or *tirailleur*, as they were often called in Algeria—seated at one of the outside tables, smoking, and drinking aperitifs. They looked very much at their ease and were obviously killing time. That decided it. Perce would try his luck, in more ways than one, here. The menu might not be the only item of interest.

Perce had long ago discovered that, when it came to soldiers, the direct approach was best. He strolled casually up to the table, took out his cigarette case, put a cigarette in his mouth, and then, with his most ingratiating smile, silently offered the open case to the soldiers.

The two officers took cigarettes and murmured, “*Merci, m’sieur.*” The *tirailleur* shook his head and smiled apologetically, but produced the matches for Perce and his two superiors.

“Gentlemen,” Perce said lazily after exhaling his first lungful of smoke. “May I take the liberty of ordering you a couple of bottles of wine? I have just arrived in Tin Ouzel, and I know no one here. It is so very tedious to drink alone.”

“Please join us,” the captain urged. Perce sat down and caught the waiter’s attention.

He was instantly accepted as a fourth member of the group. Introductions were made: the captain was Alain Costinguet, the lieutenant was Paul Fouchet, and the *tirailleur* was Étienne de Bondy. They ordered lunch, and as they ate, the conversation, fueled by the wine, became animated. The Frenchmen were intrigued to meet an American. They wanted to hear Perce’s thoughts on the Spanish-American War, on the recent expedition to Lake Chad led by Foureau and Lamy, and on the current political and military situation in Algeria.

Captain Costinguet was a quintessential Frenchman: small, dark, dapper, lively. His eyes had a slightly impudent look, incongruous in a military man, and twinkled cheerfully when he spoke. His face was tanned by the sun and partially concealed by a black Vandyke beard and mustache. His features were blunt and looked boyish, although his age must be about forty.



Fouchet and de Bondy had duties to attend to and excused themselves. They rose, as did Costinguet and Perce, and Costinguet returned their salute.

"This is the time of the day when I usually take a little promenade," Costinguet told Perce after the lieutenant and the *tirailleur* had left the café. "Will you walk with me, M. Fain?"

"I would be delighted to."

"May I ask where you are staying?" Costinguet asked as they strolled down the street.

"I am staying at the Hotel du Désert."

"Ah, the Verdeaus' place. An excellent choice."

"Where do you French officers and soldiers live? Are you billeted in private residences?"

"That is usually not necessary, here in this town. There is a large barracks, you see, a few blocks from here, in that direction. Of course, like many of the officers, I have chosen not to live in the officers' quarters there. In a town like this, it is quite inexpensive to rent an entire house, and hire servants, if one wishes. I rent a suite of rooms in a private house. When my orderly, who is a strapping young lad from Normandy, is otherwise engaged, my landlord's youngest son sees to my needs. He is Algerian, a charming young man, very obliging. Very eager to please."

"It's so important to have a manservant one can rely upon," Perce agreed. "My valet is a jewel. I don't know how I would manage without him. Life would be intolerable."

"Is he an American, like yourself?"

"Oh, yes. He is an Irish-American, like me—Boston born and bred, as our saying goes. He is quite a personable young man, very handsome. He not only takes care of my every need, he seems to be able to anticipate them, as well. And he is very disciplined—he would make a good soldier. Which is more than I can say of myself. I am afraid I am somewhat...irregular in my habits and much too fond of pleasure. I like to indulge myself in many things that some men would

disapprove of.”

“What sorts of things might those be?”

“Oh, Captain Costinguet, it’s surely a little early in our acquaintance for me to confide in you about such things. I may say something that might shock you.”

“But, M. Fain, you forget that I am a military man and have spent my life living among rough soldiers. Men who are often somewhat free in giving vent to their natural appetites. And even to their unnatural ones, at times. I am not easily shocked.”

“That reassures me. I hope that we will become good friends.”

“And confidants, in time.”

“That, too.”

“You are delightful, M. Fain. You are very droll. May I take the liberty of calling you Perceval?”

“You may call me Perce, which is my short familiar name. That is how all my friends address me.”

“And you must call me Alain.”

“It will be my pleasure, Alain.”

Perce ended up, of course, accepting the captain’s invitation to accompany him to his suite of rooms. The house was a short distance from where they were: they arrived there in a few minutes.

“Since I was not expecting company this afternoon,” Costinguet said as he ushered Perce upstairs, “neither my orderly nor Hamoud—that is the young Algerian’s name—is here. I will tend to your needs myself.”

“I hope I will not be a bothersome guest.”

“You could not possibly be.”

Alain showed him into what was obviously a combination of a study and a sitting room. Shutters and gauzy curtains on the windows let in a little of the fierce sunlight. The sofa and armchairs were overstuffed, European, and very comfortable. Much of the rest of the décor was local, or exotic: an Oriental rug on the floor, cushions, ottomans, Moroccan tables and lamps.

Under the pretense of guiding Perce into the room, Alain put his hand on Perce's back and then slid it upward to give the back of his neck a little caress. When Perce, far from flinching or pulling away, smiled encouragingly at him, the Frenchman ruffled his dark blond hair.

"You are exquisite," he said. "You are like a young Apollo, Perce."

"The French have a reputation for being gallant, and you seem determined to do your part to uphold it," Perce replied with a seductive little laugh.

"I hope I am not being too bold."

"Boldness, Captain Costinguet, is surely a desirable quality in a soldier, and as far as I am concerned, you may feel free to be bolder still."

"It is rather warm in here," Alain apologized. "Perhaps we would be more comfortable if we undressed."

"Yes, why don't we?"

"I have a dressing gown you may borrow, if you like. Personally, I often enjoy being nude in the privacy of these apartments."

"Then please do exactly what you would do if I were not here, Alain. And do not bother with the dressing gown."

They both stripped.

"You are beautiful, Perce. Like a statue of the young Hercules."

"And you are virile, Alain. Rather like a statue of a satyr, or a Priapus, I see."

"I am afraid I am becoming a bit erect."

"If I'm responsible, I apologize...and I'm flattered."

"Would you like to smoke some hashish? I have some that is of excellent quality."

"I've only smoked it a few times before, most recently in Istanbul. It was made illegal there, technically, about ten years ago, but of course the law is ignored."

"There is no such law here. It is sold openly. This kind comes

from Morocco.”

The hashish was a reddish-brown paste, which Alain kept in a little jar.

“I like to mix it with a little tobacco,” he explained, as he did so, “and smoke it in this pipe.” The pipe was a long, straight clay one, with a bowl at its end.

They passed the pipe back and forth. The hashish made Perce’s throat constrict and go dry at first, but that slightly unpleasant sensation was soon replaced by a feeling of light-headedness and euphoria. He had few inhibitions whenever he found himself naked in the company of another attractive, also naked, man, and the drug eliminated those few ones completely.

He and Alain made love on the floor, making good use of the soft carpet and the cushions.

Their preliminary kissing and caressing, as pleasurable though it undeniably was, only whetted their appetite for more intense stimulation. They lay on their sides, sucking each other. Alain, like Perce, did not confine himself to using his mouth on his new acquaintance’s cock, but tongued his balls and his perineum muscle as well. Soon they were pressing their bodies tightly together, licking each other’s asses. The position was a somewhat awkward one, however, and put a strain on the neck muscles. They found it easier, and certainly more efficient, to take turns, one man sitting on the other’s face. In this seated position, too, they could combine the rimming with nipple and cock play, using their hands on each other’s bodies.

At one point, however, when Perce was ready to switch, Alain held him firmly down and continued to eat Perce’s ass. Like a polite guest, Perce happily let his host have his way with him. The expert and prolonged tonguing of his hole soon had him shuddering with helpless pleasure, and he was afraid that he might ejaculate prematurely.

“Forgive me,” Alain gasped when he finally pulled his face from

between Perce's buttocks. "But there are few things that excite me more than the taste of another man's ass...and yours is truly delectable, like a truffle."

"Oh, don't apologize." The hashish had definitely gone to Perce's head, and he was feeling quite shameless. "I'm afraid, though, that you have gotten my asshole rather hot, Alain. I'm going to have to ask you to do me the favor of fucking me."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

Perce rolled over onto his stomach on the carpet and pulled a cushion under his head. "Put it in me!" he commanded.

"I have some lubricant in my bedroom—"

"Don't bother. I can still feel your saliva in there, nice and wet. That's all I need. I want to really feel you. I want you to stretch me open and fuck the hell out of me!"

Alain quickly stretched out on top of Perce's broad back and accomplished the penetration.

"Oh, you're tight!" he panted. "You're tight, like a little boy!"

"Are you in the habit of fucking little boys?"

"Little boys in their early twenties, the soldiers under my command," Alain boasted. "When I'm done with them, after I've broken them in and trained them, they are no longer silly little boys—they are men. Men who know how to satisfy other men!"

"I could use some training, Captain," Perce moaned happily as he repeatedly constricted his anal muscles to nip and stroke Alain's rutting prick deep inside him. "Teach me what you teach them!"

Perce benefited from Alain's tutelage, in one way and another, for more than an hour. He had not entirely neglected his studies while he was at Harvard, and, when he and the captain finally lay together on the floor, spent, he made Alain laugh by quoting Ovid, first in the original Latin—"Proveniant medii sic mihi saepe dies"—then as translated in English by Christopher Marlowe—"Jove, send me more such afternoons as this!"—and finally in a slightly halting French rendition of his own.

“You disappoint me, Perce,” Alain teased. “I thought you were no more than a beautiful face and body, and an insatiable sexual appetite. I’m not accustomed to my partners having brains, as well. It is rather intimidating.”

In the lazy afterglow of hashish-enhanced sex, the two men remained in each other’s arms and conversed. Alain had a wealth of knowledge about the town and such pleasures as a resourceful man could find there. Perce told Alain about Moussa’s offer to procure sexual partners for him, and possibly more than one at once.

“Oh, you should take him up on his offer,” Alain replied. “I am sure you would enjoy the experience, and you will not be disappointed. Moussa loves money, and will do anything for it, but he is not excessively venal. He shares our tastes, and enjoys his work. Do you like dark-skinned men?”

“I like men,” Perce confessed. “I have few prejudices—and the exoticism of some of the men I have seen here in Algeria appeals to me.”

Alain laughed. “Do not forget, Perce, that you may seem every bit as exotic to them.”

Perce was sorry to cut his encounter with Alain short, but the captain had an appointment. Reluctantly, they got dressed, and Alain took him downstairs and kissed him good-bye at the door.

Perce was more than a little befuddled, not only by the drug he had ingested, but by the afterglow of sexual pleasure as he went back out into the brightly sunlit street.

He had walked only a few paces before he heard a voice behind him: “Purrz!”

Perce turned, and Dehnal grasped him by the elbow.

“What an unexpected meeting, and what a delightful one,” the spahi purred. “But what are you doing coming from Captain Costinguet’s house?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. He is my commanding officer.”

“*Mon Dieu*. I didn’t know. Is that going to be awkward?”

“Not at all. The captain is also my friend, and he is sympathetic, although naturally we must be discreet. So you have been with him. You need not deny it. I am jealous. Now you will be with me.” Dehnal spoke with a peculiar blend of humor and intensity. “Then I will no longer be jealous.”

Perce was still experiencing the aftereffects of the hashish: he felt an odd combination of relaxation and recklessness. The thought of being intimate with Dehnal, so soon after his wanton behavior with Alain, excited him.

“I want to be with you,” he blurted out. “Very much. But I really should bathe and change my clothes first. I feel rather...hot, and wet through with perspiration, at the moment. Let’s go to the hotel. We can go to my room, where no one will disturb us.”

“I have an alternative suggestion. If you wish to bathe, we can bathe together. Let us go to the Moorish baths. We can enjoy ourselves in privacy there.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The bathhouse was a surprisingly elegant establishment to find in such a small, isolated town. The customers, at this hour of the day, included not only Arabs, but Frenchmen, many of them soldiers.

“M’sieur and I will share a room,” Dehnal told the attendant who greeted them, handing him a coin. “My usual one, if it is available—the blue room.”

The attendant bowed and led them down a long, narrow hallway, pierced, at irregular intervals, with archways draped in fabrics of different colors and patterns. Near the end of the corridor, he drew back a heavy cotton curtain, block-printed with elaborate, boldly colored geometric designs, and ushered Perce and Dehnal into the spacious but intimate cubicle that lay beyond the hanging. The walls and floor were lined with dark blue tiles, with checkerboard accents in contrasting black and white. A sort of low platform in the center of the space, also tiled on its sides and its broad, flat surface, contained a

single mattress, of blue-and-white striped cotton, stuffed with some firm substance that felt supportive when one sat on it, as Perce and Dehnal were silently encouraged to do. A stack of thick Turkish towels rested nearby.

The attendant knelt before them and removed their shoes and socks. Then, rising, he assisted first Perce, then Dehnal, to undress, taking the two men's clothes and carefully hanging them from hooks set into the wall.

Dehnal took a towel from the pile, wrapped it around his waist, and handed Perce another. "We will take the steam," he told the attendant. "And then you may send the masseurs to us."

This establishment, Perce discovered, was very much a traditional hammam, with a series of small steam rooms, each of them hotter than the last, and each equipped with hot and cold water on tap, and buckets so that the patrons could mix the hot and cold water in whatever proportions they chose. The steam rooms had small domed roofs overhead, set with tiny panes of glass, through which shafts of the sunlight filtered through and penetrated the dense clouds of steam.

They luxuriated in the feeling of sweating freely. They didn't talk much, but smiled at each other as they often wiped the perspiration from their faces and their chests.

They rinsed themselves with a bucket of tepid water, then returned to their cubicle. Two smiling, well-muscled men, nude except for loincloths, were waiting for them.

They were massaged, vigorously, with scented oils as they lay side by side on the blue-and-white striped mattress.

"These men will do anything we ask of them," Dehnal said. "For a small fee, of course. One has only to ask them. Shall we avail ourselves of their services...or may I have the honor of tending to your needs myself?"

"Give them this money, and send them away." Perce quickly retrieved some coins from a pocket of his discarded clothes. "I'm sure they're very competent, but I want you all to myself."



Dehnal took the money and, with a few words, divided it between the two masseurs, who bowed and left. Dehnal drew the curtain of the cubicle closed, then turned toward Perce and picked up a sort of brass decanter with a tall, narrow neck and a stopper. Perce had not noticed it before.

“What is in that bottle, Dehnal?” Perce asked.

“It contains olive oil—virgin olive oil, made from the first pressing of the fruits,” Dehnal explained with a smile. “It is excellent to condition and tone the skin, as the ancient Greeks and Romans knew.”

“Yes, I believe their athletes made good use of it,” Perce replied.

“Let us make equally good use of it,” Dehnal suggested, “although, if you will forgive me for making a rather vulgar joke, it is likely to be the only virginal thing here in this room.”

Perce grinned. “Virginity, my friend, may be a virtue in an olive oil...but, in men, it is more likely to be an impediment, a limitation, and a bore.”

Dehnal poured a little of the oil onto his fingers, then offered them to Perce’s lips. “Taste it,” he suggested.

Perce licked Dehnal’s fingers. The olive oil, dark green in color and thick and viscous in texture, was delicious, very strong on the tongue. He sucked Dehnal’s fingers inside his mouth and slurped on them, licking them clean. Dehnal shuddered with pleasure. Then, with his free hand, he pulled his towel off. Perce shed his towel, as well, so that they were both naked.

Perce took the decanter, poured some oil onto his palm, and used it to massage Dehnal’s thick, dark cock. “I do like the taste,” he said as he lowered his head to Dehnal’s groin and took his oily cock into his mouth.

The oil did, indeed, add an extra piquancy to fellatio, and it wasn’t long before Perce decided to experiment further with it.

Perce wet his palm with more of the oil and rubbed it back and forth between Dehnal’s buttocks, oiling his ass. Dehnal groaned with

pleasure as Perce's finger penetrated his anus, slicking it up with the olive oil.

"Sit on my face," Perce urged, remembering how avidly Alain Costinguet had devoured him earlier in the afternoon. "Let me suck that oil out of your ass!"

Dehnal squatted over him, and Perce stimulated his anal aperture with his tongue until the spahi was as eager to take Perce's cock up his ass as Perce had been to take Alain's. With some more olive oil as a lubricant, Dehnal sat on Perce's lap, pushed Perce's manhood deep inside him, and rode it, bouncing slowly up and down. Perce wasn't surprised when Dehnal succumbed to his need to ejaculate. What was above and beyond the call of duty was the performance of Perce's own penis. He had climaxed twice in rapid succession while he was with Alain, but now he not only had no difficulty sustaining his erection, he enjoyed a third violent orgasm. Much of the credit, of course, had to go to Dehnal, who was a truly inspiring partner.

Dehnal and Perce took the steam again, and then, feeling languid and cleansed, they relaxed in their cubicle, embracing nude on the mattress.

"I don't want to get up and put my clothes back on," Perce confessed. "Not ever. I'd just like to lie here, naked, in your arms, for the rest of the afternoon...and for the foreseeable future."

Dehnal laughed. "We can lie here and rest for a little while. But the world is still waiting for us, outside, and we must get up and get dressed and go out and face it, eventually."

"There's a great deal of the fatalist in you, Dehnal."

"As there is in all Arabs. But let us speak of more pleasant things. Have you a lover back in the great city of Boston?"

"No. Well, to be honest, I have many lovers, in many cities, in many parts of the world. None with a greater claim on me than any of the others, if that's what you mean."

"And even here, in this little town, in Tin Ouzel, you now have Captain Costinguet—and me."

“Yes.” Perce gave Dehnal a hug. “I have you, and you have me.”

“There is an Englishman, an artist, staying at the hotel—”

“Yes, M. McCandless. Have you met him?”

“No. He seems to keep to himself. He does not socialize with the other guests. I have seen him coming and going, of course, usually carrying his painting box and his tripod. And I have seen him in various places here in town, with his equipment set up, painting his pictures. I have also seen him—but perhaps I should not tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“I have seen him looking at you, when you did not realize you were being observed by him...and he looked at you with the eyes of a jealous lover.”

“Who, M. McCandless? Oh, Dehnal, that’s absurd. You are imagining things, or you are making fun of me. Why, M. McCandless and I have spoken only a few words to each other. I am not even sure that he shares our tastes, or is very sympathetic toward men like us.”

“Still, I hope that when I look at you, Perce, my desire for you is not written quite so nakedly on my face. Not that I am ashamed of it. But sometimes it is not wise to be entirely open about how one feels.”

“I’m sure you are wrong about M. McCandless.”

“Perhaps. The English are a race known for their eccentricities, are they not? Perhaps he is merely eccentric, like the rest of them.”

“I will introduce you to him, as soon as the opportunity presents itself, and then you will be able to judge for yourself.”

Dehnal seemed lost in thought for a moment, and a gloomy cloud seemed to pass over his handsome face, transforming its habitually imperturbable expression into something more somber.

“What is wrong, Dehnal?”

“Forgive me. I have no right to speak of such things. But some instinct tells me that this man, the artist...he will pit his will against yours, in some sort of contest. A contest to see which of you will be the master. Yes, that man may not even realize it yet, but he desires, above all other things, to have mastery over you.”

“Really, Dehnal,” Perce protested. “You are very serious all of a sudden. Too serious, surely.”

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. There is no need to. But that man will not be my master. I have no master. Nor do I desire one. I would never tolerate one.”

“I am glad to hear you say that, Perce. Because I certainly do not wish to be your master. I would rather be your slave.”

“You must not speak to me like that. It makes me feel uneasy for some reason.”

“I would gladly be your slave,” Dehnal repeated, as though he had not heard.

“In this country, I thought, it is the women who are treated like slaves, by their men.”

“Our dark-skinned women, yes. But you are not a woman—you are a man, like me, and you are not dark-skinned. You are fair. You are like the silver moon riding high in the night sky. When I look at you, I seem to be bathed in its pale light. And the moon sheds its radiance equally on master and slave alike. Do you not know that?”

“You are very poetic, Dehnal. You are a romantic.”

“I turned toward Mecca when I prayed at dawn, today, in the mosque—but I turned to you in my mind. I thought of you when I prayed, alone in my room, last night. Will you grant my prayer? It is a simple one, Perce. It will cost you little. Let me love you for these few days, until my leave is over and I must return to my regiment. Let me be your slave. Then, after I am gone, the gloomy artist with the jealous eyes may win your love, if he can.”

“You are very sweet, Dehnal. I like you very much. I am glad we met. I want to spend more time in your company, as much time as possible, until you have to leave. But M. McCandless is not now, and will never be, your rival. The idea that there could ever be anything between M. McCandless and myself...it’s just too amusingly absurd. As for you being my slave...no, you are my equal. You are my dear

friend. Now let us stop being so serious. We sound like actors, reciting our lines onstage, in some tragedy by Racine or Corneille. Dine with me this evening, and show me some of the diversions of the town, as you promised me you would.”

“I will.”

“We will have a good time, Dehnal. You will see that, if I must be like the man in the moon, if you insist upon worshipping me, that I will be a benevolent deity. I am always ready to grant my devotees’ prayers,” Perce said with a little laugh. “Now, give me a kiss.”

## **Chapter Five**

### **Chasms and Bridges**

Perce was emotionally resilient by nature. By the time he and Dehnal said their good-byes and separated, Perce had shaken off the slight, nagging sense of unease that had begun to oppress him during their conversation. He was already looking forward to spending the evening with his new and surprisingly intense friend.

Back at the hotel, he went to his room and found Tommy there, brushing his clothes.

"I see the things I bought at the bazaar were delivered," Perce remarked.

"Yes, sir. I took the liberty of unrolling the rug and putting it down on the floor, since I assumed you want to use it here."

"Yes. It looks fine there. As for the pot, maybe tomorrow you can find some flowers to put in it. No, better yet, see if you can find a living plant to display in it. And that reminds me. If you need anything for your own room, to make yourself more comfortable, we'll ask M. and Mme Verdeau for it, or we'll buy it somewhere in town."

"Are you planning to stay here longer than the two weeks, Mr. Fain?"

"I think we might. I like it here for some reason. I will be dining with Lieutenant al Qurashi this evening, and then he and I will be going out on the town together. So lay out my evening clothes later on."

"Very good, Mr. Fain. Might Lieutenant al Qurashi be the 'some reason' you like this town so much?"

“He just might be. He is certainly among Algeria’s attractions. Since he and I may stay out rather late, once I have changed for dinner, you may have the evening off.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m sure you will have no trouble making a friend or two here yourself, Tommy,” Perce said airily. “It’s still early. I think I shall go for a little walk, see some more of the town.”

“You had better take a hat with you, sir. You don’t want to get too much sun.”

Perce strolled about at random. He couldn’t help feeling a bit smug. He had been in Tin Ouzel for only a little over twenty-four hours, and already he had acquired two admirers, Dehnal and Alain Costinguet. Three, if he could believe what Dehnal had told him about the surly Englishman, Gordon Preston McCandless.

It was almost as though the mere thought of McCandless conjured him up, by magic.

Perce turned a corner and almost ran into the artist, who was packing up his equipment. Preston was red-faced, perspiring heavily, and looked decidedly worn out.

“Good afternoon, Mr. McCandless. Have you had a productive day?”

“Very, if I do say so myself. That’s why I’m going to knock off now, even though there are still a few hours of daylight left. I’ve been working nonstop all afternoon, and it’s very hot.”

“Yes, this late afternoon sun is quite intense. Why don’t we go over to that café, which is on the shady side of the street, and sit down and have a nice cold drink?”

“I would like to, Mr. Fain, but...as you see, I am very hot and dusty and sweaty. I am afraid I am badly in need of a bath at the moment.”

“So what? That’s only to be expected. It’s of no importance.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind—”

“I insist, as a matter of fact. I shall be offended if you refuse,”

Perce teased.

“I have no wish to offend you.”

“Come on, then.”

They sat down at a table on the sidewalk, in the shade, and they both ordered lemonade.

“That’s better,” Perce sighed after he had taken his first sip. He smiled at Preston. “Now, what shall we talk about? I know—we shall talk about you. You must tell me a little about yourself. What part of England do you come from?”

“From Lincolnshire. I grew up in a small town, in the country, there.”

“I have never been to Lincolnshire. Is it very beautiful?”

“Yes. But let’s not talk about me, Mr. Fain. I am not particularly interesting.”

“You are too modest.”

“Let us talk about you,” Preston insisted with an odd sort of firmness and finality. “I’m sure you have traveled extensively...Is this your first visit to Algeria?”

“This is my first visit to anywhere in Africa. Now I am eager to see more of the continent...Egypt, certainly, to start with.”

“You are enjoying yourself here, then?”

“Very much so. More than I had anticipated, in fact. There are so many interesting things to see, and the people are charming.”

“I imagine, Mr. Fain, that you manage to enjoy yourself no matter where you find yourself.”

There was a peculiar wistfulness, tinged with bitterness, in Preston’s voice.

“Surely life is meant to be enjoyed,” Perce replied, perhaps a little defensively.

“Has there never been any great sorrow in your life?” Preston asked.

Perce was taken aback by the directness of the question. “I lost my mother when I was very young,” he said. “And I recently lost my



father. Other than that...I suppose I have been extremely fortunate.”

Preston was looking at him intently. *He really does have beautiful green eyes*, Perce thought.

“And are you grateful for this great good fortune you have enjoyed?” the artist asked.

Another blunt question. “I hope I am not ungrateful,” Perce said. He felt a bit flustered.

They finished their drinks, and when the waiter brought the bill, Perce reached for it. “My treat,” he said.

“No, we will halve it,” Preston insisted.

Perce, for some reason, was reluctant to argue with the other man, even over something so trivial. “Very well,” he said.

They began to walk back toward the hotel.

“Let me carry your box and tripod for you,” Perce offered.

“I wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Nonsense. You have that big portfolio, with your paintings, to carry. I insist.”

Preston silently let him have his way.

Perce felt inexplicably, absurdly triumphant. Then he remembered what Dehnal had said, about him and Preston contending to determine which of them should gain mastery over the other. Suddenly, Perce wasn’t sure whether he had won or lost this particular round.

“Thank you, Mr. Fain,” Preston said when they were in the lobby of the hotel.

“Don’t mention it. It was my pleasure.” But Perce made a point of not relinquishing Preston’s pochade kit and tripod until they had gone upstairs together and parted company in front of Perce’s door.

Preston took the things from Perce and went down the hallway and around the corner, toward his own room, with a muttered “Good afternoon, Mr. Fain.”

*He seemed almost eager to get away from me*, Perce thought. And, again, he wasn’t sure whether he was offended, or amused, by the other man’s behavior toward him.

Tommy's efficiency and resourcefulness could be almost intimidating at times. When Perce went into his room, ready to bathe and change into his evening clothes, he saw that the room had been transformed during his brief absence by the addition of a stunning display in one of the windows. The orange-and-blue glazed earthenware pot, set on top of a tall wooden stool, had been planted with masses of deep purple bougainvillea, white jasmine, and scarlet and orange geraniums, all of which trailed out to the sides and down toward the floor. The scent of the jasmine filled the air, sweet yet subtle.

"Oh, Tommy!" Perce exclaimed. "How lovely!"

"Yes, it's easy to find decent-looking flowers and plants for sale in this town, oddly enough, even though we're surrounded by the desert," Tommy reported. "I know you like strong colors, sir, and I thought the smell of the jasmine would be pleasant, when you're lying in bed at night, drifting off to sleep. Shall I run your bath for you now, sir?"

"Yes, please."

When it was time for dinner, Perce went downstairs and found Dehnal already in the lobby, waiting for him.

"Either I am late or you are early," Perce remarked.

"I am early. Because I was eager," Dehnal confessed. "Impatient to see you again."

"Let's not dine here," Perce suggested. "Take me somewhere where I can experience the local cuisine...couscous, and so forth."

"I know a little restaurant that you will surely enjoy."

"Oh, here is M. McCandless. I will introduce you to him."

The Englishman, who had come down the stairs and crossed the lobby, had to pass them on his way to the dining room.

"M. McCandless, this is my friend, Lieutenant al Qurashi. Lieutenant al Qurashi, this is M. McCandless, a gentleman from England, who is also staying here."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," Dehnal purred.

“How do you do?” Preston responded—quite graciously, for him—as he and Dehnal shook hands.

“M. McCandless is an artist, Dehnal,” Perce explained—unnecessarily, of course, but he did not want McCandless to suspect that he and Dehnal had been discussing him, earlier.

“Yes, I have seen him on the streets, in more than one part of the town, painting,” Dehnal remarked, going along with the deception. “It must be rewarding to possess such a talent.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Preston said, looking and sounding rather awkward.

“We are going out, to a restaurant, to have dinner, and then to the casino,” Perce said. “Perhaps you would like to accompany us?”

“I have no suitable evening clothes,” Preston demurred.

“We are about the same size. I could lend you some of mine. My valet will get you outfitted in no time at all.”

“I couldn’t possibly put you to the trouble, M. Fain.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

“This is a small town,” Dehnal interjected. “The nightlife here is not so grand. One need not wear formal wear to the casino. You will see natives there, tribesmen from the desert, even, gambling in their native attire.”

“The truth is, gentlemen...I do not gamble. I cannot afford to.”

Perce was about to say, *Oh, I would be delighted to provide you with a small stake. If you lose it, it’s of no importance. You need not pay me back, because you will be playing for me. All that matters is that we enjoy ourselves.* That is what he would have said to a friend, or, indeed, to a casual acquaintance who confessed to being impecunious. But some instinct had already warned him that he must think carefully before he spoke when he was with this man, McCandless. The artist took a sort of sullen pride in his poverty, wearing it like an insignia, and Perce did not want to risk offending him.

“We need not go to the casino, of course. Lieutenant al Qurashi

tells me there are other amusements here in Tin Ouzel.”

“You mustn’t change your plans on my account, M. Fain. Perhaps some other night. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I will say good night.”

“Good night,” Dehnal said, pleasantly enough, and Perce echoed him. McCandless nodded to them and went into the dining room.

“I am sorry,” Dehnal said as he and Perce left the hotel together.

“Why?”

“I cannot help thinking that he would have liked to accompany you, Perce, but he did not care to be seen in my company.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am Algerian. Because of my race.”

“Nonsense.”

“I have encountered such prejudices many times. I have learned to live with them. As we all—we men of my color, I mean—as we all must.”

“I have no such prejudices.”

“I know you do not. You are unusual in that respect. And I love you for it.”

Perce had to smile. “Love, Dehnal?”

“It is not too strong a word. You do not know what it is to be despised simply because of what you are.”

“Oh, but perhaps I do. Men can be despised, Dehnal, for what they are...even when it does not show on the outside.”

“I understand. I understand perfectly. It is strange, is it not, that you and I, two men of such very different backgrounds, should have...that one thing in common?”

“I don’t find it so strange. I do find it reassuring. I’m glad we are similar. You mustn’t be offended by anything M. McCandless said. He has a strange, blunt way of speaking. He is not the kind of cultivated man who conceals his true thoughts behind fine words and tells people only what he thinks they want to hear. I’m not sure his candor is not somewhat admirable, in a way.”

“He is a strange man.”

“He dislikes me. He is unable to conceal it, as I said.”

“Why? I mean, I see nothing in you that is worthy of dislike.”

“It’s kind of you to say so, Dehnal. No, that man—McCandless—he resents me, because he has to work for a living, and I do not.”

“How very absurd. I work for my living, after all. I take my wages from the French. If I were to say to you, ‘I resent you, Perce, because I work as a soldier, and you have no need to work at all,’—why, that would be like me saying, to those birds who are fluttering about over there, ‘I resent you, birds, because you find your food by pecking about, here and there, while I must pay for my food out of the salary I earn. I will shoot you, birds, thus—*piff, piff!*—shoot you dead, because I resent you so.’ Absurd, as I said.”

“You think I am as free as the birds, as the expression goes?”

“You seem to be so to me. What constrains you?”

Perce had to laugh. “Very little, I must admit.”

“Then you are a most fortunate man.”

“Many people would say so, Dehnal. I’m almost beginning to have my doubts. It seems to me that there may be something to be said in favor of...constraints. About being accountable to someone, or to something. About having responsibilities. About doing some sort of useful work.”

“Enlist in the military, take orders from an officer, and I assure you, you will soon tire of constraints and accountability.”

Perce laughed. “Let us go to the restaurant you told me about. I want my couscous!”

They had a delightful evening. Perce ate not only couscous, but *koucha*, lamb and potatoes in a tomato sauce, and a most unusual, to him, dessert: *sahlab*, which was milk thickened with orchid root, served with a sweet cake on top of it. Dehnal was an amusing companion, whose conversation was animated. He told Perce about his family, about how he had grown up, about the local customs and traditions. He told anecdotes, some of them highly homoerotic in

nature, about his experiences in the French army.

At the casino, Perce, who was not really much of a gambler, lost a small sum, and Dehnal won a small one.

“That makes us even,” Perce joked. “Let’s quit while we’re ahead, as we say where I come from.”

They wandered along the rue des Danseuses, where most of the cafés that offered dancing as entertainment—along, no doubt, with other enticements—were located.

On some of the balconies overhead, painted and bejeweled girls were leaning, and smoking cigarettes, observing the mostly male passersby. In front of each of the lighted doorways from which the shrill noise of music came, small, intent knots of men were gathered, watching the performance that was going on inside, trying to decide whether or not it was worth seeing from closer up, inside.

“Let us go in here and have a drink,” Dehnal suggested, stopping in front of one such doorway. “It is one of the better places.”

They entered the dancing house. There were tables and chairs, and rows of benches, arranged around the sides of a raised platform, which was decorated on its edges with lamps and small bunches of flowers in coarse earthenware pots.

A woman was dancing on the platform. She was voluptuous, with scarlet lips and darkened eyes and eyebrows. Draperies of diaphanous silk, orange and pink and yellow, swirled around her legs, secured by a jeweled girdle slung low about her hips. Her upper body was bare, except for her jeweled brassiere and the necklaces and bracelets that adorned her neck and arms. Her plump body shook convulsively, in time to the music. Most of the patrons of the café stared at her, mesmerized, with barely concealed lust written on their facial expressions.

“Most of these dancing girls can be had for very little money,” Dehnal explained bluntly. “All one needs to do is speak to the proprietor of the café, and he will arrange a rendezvous.”

“I doubt that I will be availing myself of his services,” Perce said

dryly. "If that woman had a brother, however, who was equally agile...then I might be tempted."

Dehnal laughed. "That, too, could easily be arranged. And it would not cost you anything. I know many young men here in Tin Ouzel. Any one of them would not be at all adverse to the prospect of a *ménage à trois* with me and a beautiful blond American man."

"That reminds me of something I wanted to discuss with you." Perce told Dehnal about how Moussa had offered to arrange a *partouze en blanc et noir* for him.

"Ah, that Moussa." Dehnal laughed. "He is truly shameless. He will do anything for money. Many of the French officers, and even some of the common soldiers, make their contacts through him. But he is resourceful, as he boasted to you, and he is discreet. If he arranges such an affair for you, you will not be disappointed. It will be an orgy that will make what goes on at the baths seem almost restrained by comparison."

"Then I will tell him to arrange it, as soon as possible," Perce declared. "Will you come with me?"

Dehnal smiled. "Which will I be, the *blanc* or the *noir*? Or the something in between?"

"You will accompany me as my guest. Once we get there, and the affair is well under way, such distinctions will be unimportant...which is surely the whole object of the exercise."

"Then I will be delighted to participate." Dehnal glanced about the crowded, smoky room. "Ah, we are in luck tonight, Perce. A good friend of mine is here. The young man, over there, who is just being served his drink by the waiter. Does he please you?"

"Very much. He is almost as handsome as you...not that any man could really be your rival."

"Flatterer! Shall I invite him to join us? When he sees you, Perce, he will be willing to join us not only for a drink, but in any other activities you suggest."

"Bring him over here, then, by all means."

Dehnal went over to his friend, who was a young man perhaps in his mid-twenties, wearing stylish European clothes, with the exception of an embroidered and beaded vest. He had black hair, a black mustache and goatee—neatly trimmed in a European style—and black eyes. His skin was an extraordinary, warm honey color. Dehnal greeted him. They embraced, in the casual way many Arab men did in public, and then Dehnal spoke a few words to the other man in a low voice. The honey-colored man looked at Perce and smiled. Perce smiled back, invitingly, and nodded.

Dehnal led his friend to their table and made the introductions. His friend's name was Mahad al Tamimi Didier.

"You have a very sonorous name, M. al Tamimi Didier," Perce commented after they had called the waiter over to order a round of drinks. "Although Didier sounds French."

"It is," Mahad replied.

"Mahad's father is a French officer, and his mother is a Kabyle tribeswoman," Dehnal explained. "I know them both quite well. Rather unfairly, in my opinion, he has inherited both his father's masculinity and his mother's beauty."

"I have been given a European education, too," Mahad said, "so I am now only half savage."

"How very interesting it must be to be even part savage," Perce joked. "I'm afraid I am a product of civilization, and very boring as a result."

"I am sure you are being too modest, Perce. I suspect you can be very exciting—very exciting, indeed. And, speaking of exciting things, Dehnal tells me that you would enjoy a *ménage à trois*," Mahad said. "So would I."

"It would be an honor. You are a very beautiful man."

"Thank you. I can't think of a more delightful way to spend an evening than in bed with a couple of other men—especially when the other men are as handsome and desirable as you and Dehnal."

"Which half of you tends to dominate when you are in bed with a



couple of other men?" Perce asked. "The civilized man or the savage?"

"The savage—of course! Otherwise, why bother?"

They finished their drinks while watching another dancer perform a stomach dance, and then they left the café. Perce, who had instinctively assumed the role of host, suggested that they go to his room at the hotel, where he knew they would enjoy privacy—and comfort.

In the lobby, he asked the desk clerk to have the waiter bring water, ice, glasses, and a bottle of pastis up to his room.

"What a charming room, and what beautiful flowers," Dehnal commented when they were inside Perce's room.

"Please make yourselves at home. Excuse me, I will take just a moment to see if my valet is in his room."

Perce went next door, to Tommy's room. No light penetrated the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. He turned the knob. The door was not locked, and he pushed it ajar, enough to look into the room.

There was no lamp on in the room, but enough light came through the windows from outside to let Perce see what was taking place on the bed. A mature but rather delicate-looking black Algerian man was stretched out on his back on the mattress, with his legs draped over its edge, his feet dangling above the floor. He was nude, and his lithe body was remarkable for the erect penis he was holding and stroking in his right hand. The male organ wasn't unusually thick, but it was exceptionally long, tapering to an almost pointed glans, fully visible above the puckered folds of the retracted foreskin. A drop of clear fluid was already glistening in the gaping piss slit, the result of the man's energetic manipulation of his lengthy tool.

A second man, also naked, was on his hands and knees on the bed, positioned so that his groin was above the black man's face. The slim Algerian was sucking this man's fat pink cock. The kneeling man's muscular, if slightly pudgy, body was also pink-skinned, although

flushed darker at the moment because of his intense and obvious sexual excitement. He had a shock of dark blond hair and a rather wispy little mustache. His face was pressed against a pillow, and he was gasping for breath. He looked strangely familiar. It took Perce a moment to recognize him: he was Jean-Baptiste, the younger of the two sons of M. and Mme Verdeau. The couple had a daughter, as well, Perce remembered.

The third naked man on the bed was, not surprisingly, Tommy, who was kneeling behind Jean-Baptiste and fucking him, pumping back and forth with his hips to drive his cock in and out of the young Frenchman's ass in a steady, unhurried rhythm that Perce was all too familiar with. Jean-Baptiste's buttocks had just enough of a cushion of body fat under the smooth flesh that they jiggled, quite provocatively, every time Tommy's thrusting hips and thighs impacted against them.

Perce was shameless enough to stand there in the doorway and watch the three-way action on the bed for at least a minute before he finally knocked lightly on the inside of the open door.

Tommy lifted his head and saw him. "Oh, Mr. Fain," he gasped, without missing a stroke. "I didn't see you there. Do you need anything, sir?"

"No, go right on with what you're doing."

"I didn't think you'd come back so soon, sir."

"I've had a most enjoyable evening, Tommy, and I intend to continue it, in my room. I've brought Lieutenant al Qurashi and another gentleman back here with me."

"Will you be requiring anything, Mr. Fain?"

"I have a feeling that anything I want or need is already waiting for me in my room. You may have the rest of the night off, Tommy. I will see to my guests' needs myself."

"Thank you, sir."

"Jean-Baptiste, do your parents know what kind of naughty tricks you are up to while they're fast asleep in their bed?"

“You won’t say anything to them, will you, M. Fain?” Jean-Baptiste panted.

“I am the soul of discretion, Jean-Baptiste. And your other friend, Tommy?”

“This is Ouksem, the flower and plant vendor. He is a very skillful gardener.”

“Oh, is he responsible for those beautiful plants you found for my room? I see he’s preoccupied at the moment, so I won’t introduce myself right now. But you must give him my compliments.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good night, Tommy. Enjoy yourself.”

“Good night, sir. I’m sure you’ll have a good time, too.”

Perce went back to his own room, idly wondering whether, if two *ménages à trois* happened to be taking place simultaneously in two adjacent hotel rooms, they added up to a *ménage à six*. Well, this was no time to concern himself with the niceties of higher mathematics.

He found Dehnal and Mahad seated on his bed, nude, already kissing and fondling one another.

“I had forgotten that I gave my valet the evening off,” Perce said as he quickly shed his own clothes. “I see that the waiter brought the refreshments,” he added when he saw a tray on the table beside the bed. “Are you two comfortable? Do you have everything you need?” Even in the heat of passion, Perce was not the kind of man who neglected his duties as a host.

“We do now,” Dehnal said with a smile as Perce approached the bed, naked.

Perce kissed Mahad, then Dehnal, on the mouth, taking his time with each man. “I really must apologize,” he said, with a little laugh, as he put some ice into a glass, filled it with water from the carafe, and raised it to his lips.

“Whatever for?” Dehnal asked.

“For being selfish, which is what I plan to be in a moment.” Perce drank. “I intend to suck you both, right now, which is why I am

making sure my mouth is well lubricated.”

“Oh, but that sort of selfishness is readily forgiven,” Mahad said. He was already holding Perce’s penis and testicles in his hand, as though weighing them, using two fingertips to stroke the shaft of Perce’s cock into erection. “I am sure that I, too, will be very selfish, in one way or another, before this night is over.”

“Well, speak for yourselves, my friends,” Dehnal retorted with a laugh. “I intend to be a model of selflessness and generosity...I shall be happy to give myself to both of you, in any way you desire!”

Perce drank the rest of his ice water and set the glass back down on the tray. “Let me get to work.”

And, with true American industriousness and concentration, he did, indeed, get down to work. He encouraged his guests to stand beside the bed, facing each other, while he knelt on the floor between them.

The position in which Perce now found himself was a cocksucker’s delight: kneeling abjectly before two potent young studs who obviously desired and enjoyed the service that his wet, clasping, gliding lips and tickling tongue could provide. Mahad, whom he went down on first, grasped his blond head and pushed the rosy pink knob of his prick against and between his lips. Perce took the proffered penis in, and, closing his warm, wet lips in the groove behind the glans, he closed his eyes, the better to concentrate, and began to suck the French-Kabyle stud’s cockhead.

Dehnal gave his own cock a few languid handstrokes while he watched Perce service his friend. Perce’s avid mouth slid back and forth, his encircling lips rubbing slickly around Mahad’s swollen shaft.

“Ah, *mon Dieu!*” Mahad gasped. “He sucks cock better than a Frenchman, even! Do all Americans fellate this well?”

“I don’t know,” Dehnal admitted. “Perce is the only American I have ever been with. He almost makes me want to emigrate to the Western Hemisphere, if the other men, there, are as skilled as he is!”

National honor was at stake. Perce sucked as he had rarely sucked before, alternating between the two men.

Before long, the three men were lying on the bed, with their bodies forming an equilateral triangle: Perce was sucking Dehnal, who was sucking Mahad, who was sucking Perce. At times, as their bodies jerked in response to their oral exertions, the equilateral triangle became more of a scalene one, with sides of differing lengths. In order to vary the geometry, Perce eventually turned around, so that he was sucking Mahad and being sucked by Dehnal.

After that, they gave themselves to every combination, every permutation, that was anatomically possible. Perce compared the tastes of the two men's asses, trying to decide which he preferred: the fresh, slightly salty flavor of Dehnal's butt, with which he was already familiar, or the muskier tang of Mahad's puckered hole. It was an impossible choice to make, so he gorged himself on both in turn.

They took a break, to drink some of the pastis. The alcohol seemed to refuel their libidos, and soon they were taking turns fucking one another, once again trying out all of the possible combinations. Perce was confident that anything Jean-Baptiste Verdeau could do, he could do better, and he set out to prove it.

## Chapter Six

### Going Native

“Mr. Fain, you know that artist fellow, Mr. McCandless?” Tommy exclaimed.

“What about him?” Perce asked.

“He’s gone native.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw him in the street this afternoon. He was walking along, carrying his painting things. He had a ragged, dirty white cloth wrapped around his head, like a turban. He was wearing a shirt without a collar, he had his trouser legs rolled up, and he was barefoot.”

“He probably had the headdress on to protect himself from the sun. Don’t forget, Tommy, he works outside, under that hot sun, for hours on end. And many of the locals here seem to dispense with footwear.”

“But he’s an *Englishman*!” Tommy protested, as though that set a standard of dress and behavior that no Englishman in his right mind would ever think of deviating from.

“Not all Englishmen are hoity-toity aristocrats and snobs, Tommy. Some of them can be quite down-to-earth. And, in this hot, dry climate, with all the sand and dust everywhere, I’m often tempted to throw away my shoes and socks, too, and just walk about barefoot, myself.”

“Oh, Mr. Fain!” Tommy gasped. “You *wouldn’t*! Not in *public*!”

“This, coming from a man who’s seen me, and other men, doing certain things while stark naked,” Perce teased. “And who’s been

known to join in himself, as I recall.”

“That’s different,” his scandalized valet insisted. “That’s a man’s private personal business, behind closed doors, with his friends. A man and his friends can be mother naked, in such circumstances, amusing themselves, and still conduct themselves like gentlemen. There’s no excuse for them not to. And I do know that from personal experience, as you say.”

“Tommy, I’m afraid you’re a terrible snob.”

“I am that, sir, and damn proud of it, too. Rolled-up trousers and bare feet, indeed,” Tommy muttered, shaking his head. “What next? Strip down naked, paint ourselves blue like savages, stick feathers in our hair, and parade around in public like *that*, I suppose!” He sighed. “But, seriously, Mr. Fain—what clothes shall I lay out for you, for later? Will you be going out with Lieutenant al Qurashi this evening?”

“Not tonight, Tommy. He has another engagement. And I have been rather monopolizing his time of late. It’s been selfish of me. Lieutenant al Qurashi is an officer in the French army, after all. I can hardly expect him to spend every moment of his free time with me while he is still on leave...as much as I enjoy his company.” Perce performed some quick mental arithmetic. “How long have we been here in Tin Ouzel, Tommy?”

“This is the tenth day, sir, counting the day we arrived.”

“And I have spent the last eight nights with Lieutenant al Qurashi. I *have* been keeping him busy.”

“You have been keeping several of Lieutenant al Qurashi’s friends busy, too,” Tommy said slyly.

Perce refused to rise to the bait. “It has been very hospitable of Dehnal to include me when he goes out on the town with his friends. I find these Algerian men to be very cultivated and charming.”

“That’s interesting, Mr. Fain. The ones I’ve made the acquaintance of so far, I’d describe them as not so cultivated...rather down-to-earth, in fact, and aggressive. I guess we can agree on the ‘charming’ part, though. It all depends on how you define charm.

Personally, I tend to define it by the inch.”

“Shame on you, Tommy.” Perce laughed. “In any event, I don’t know how I will amuse myself this evening, since I will be left to my own devices. But I will find some diversion or other. After dinner, you may take the evening off.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Perce was not above dangling a barbed hook of his own. “Maybe you will be able to make a date with one or two of your *aggressive* Algerians and tame them, the way a lion tamer tames his lions.”

“I’ll do my best to promote international relations, sir, and to bring civilized behavior to the desert.”

“God help us. Given half a chance, Tommy, you’d probably have the Arab tribesmen abandoning their burnouses in favor of the latest Paris and London men’s fashions.”

“You say that, Mr. Fain, as though it would be a bad thing.”

There was a knock on the door. It was, by coincidence, one of Tommy’s conquests—Jean-Baptiste Verdeau.

“There is a young French soldier here who brought this note for you, M. Fain. He said, if you are in, he will wait, to see if there is any reply.”

Perce opened the note, which was written in a large, bold handwriting:

*I greatly enjoyed our conversation, the other day, and entertaining you in my rooms. You must forgive me for waiting so long to write to you, but my duties have interfered and forced me to postpone the pleasure of seeing you again. If, M. Fain, you are free this evening, it would give me great pleasure to have you dine with me. I could come to your hotel. And then, after dinner, I could show you some of the amusements that Tin Ouzel has to offer at night.*

It was signed: A. Costinguet.

Tommy and Jean-Baptiste were talking together, in whispers. On



the assumption that the two young men were arranging a rendezvous, perhaps for that very evening, Perce tactfully waited until they had finished their furtive conversation.

“Tell the soldier to wait for a moment, Jean-Baptiste, and I will bring him the reply myself.”

Perce took a sheet of the hotel’s letter paper, and quickly wrote:

*Nothing would please me more than to accept your kind invitation. If you will come to the hotel this evening at eight, we can dine here, or at any other establishment that you might prefer. Between now and then, I shall have the pleasure of anticipating a most enjoyable evening spent in your company.*

Perce underlined the words *most enjoyable*, signed the note, and went downstairs in search of the soldier.

He turned out to be the captain’s orderly, the strapping lad from Normandy. Perce gave him the note, along with a few francs, urging him to treat himself to a drink for his trouble.

“What is your name?” Perce asked.

“Guy Polinard, M. Fain, at your service.”

“And do you enjoy being Captain Costinguet’s orderly?”

The Norman actually blushed. “Oh, yes. Very much. The captain is like a father to me.”

*I’ll bet!* Perce was cynical enough to think. *Well, that’s one way of putting it.*

“Captain Costinguet is a bachelor, is he not?”

“Oh no, m’sieur. He has a wife and five children. They live near Rouen. The captain misses them terribly, of course.”

“*Mon Dieu!* Five? I’m sure he does, ah, miss them. Well, you had better run along and deliver this note. Give the captain my best regards.”

\* \* \* \*

The situation with the artist was, in fact, even worse than Tommy had imagined. Even as Tommy and Perce were discussing him, he was “going native” with a vengeance.

Gordon Preston McCandless was finally taking a break after a long day spent painting outdoors in various parts of the town. He not only still had his trousers rolled up well above his ankles, and was not only still barefoot. He was, by Tommy’s standards, definitely slumming. He sat cross-legged on the floor, on a dusty, faded, well-worn rug, with his discarded canvas shoes next to him, in a corner of a modest *café maure* on the outskirts of Tin Ouzel. This café was located on the road that led from the town, out into the desert, and opposite was an Arab cemetery—an irregular arrangement of stones set upright in the hard, sunbaked earth, with neither wall nor fence to separate the dead from the living. Outside the café was a sort of ramshackle arbor with a thatched roof made of palm fronds. Under this squatted four Arabs playing dominoes. But inside the café itself, there was no one, except for Preston and the bare-legged attendant who served the coffee, which he brewed on a hearth in which there smoldered a fire of brushwood. Now and then an Arab passed the doorway and glanced in, curiously, at the foreigner who was patronizing this humble establishment and who did not look altogether out of place in it.

Preston sipped his strong black coffee and smoked cigarette after cigarette, taking the tobacco out of a little silver box that lay beside him and rolling it neatly in the thin slips of paper of which he now always carried a large supply. He had purchased the box, the loose tobacco, and the rolling papers at a stall in the town’s marketplace after calculating that this was more economical than buying packs of manufactured cigarettes, which had to be imported from France. From time to time, he made little pencil sketches, from memory, on the pages of a sketchbook that he had taken from his pocket. Doing such sketches was good discipline, and it always seemed to help him to

concentrate whenever he had something on his mind that he was trying to work through.

Preston's reverie deepened. For a while, he even forgot to sip his coffee or roll a new cigarette. He neglected his sketchbook, too. His eyes were fixed on the floor. His hands dropped down to his feet and held them loosely. He hugged himself a little, rocking back and forth, as he pondered.

*Perceval Fain, he thought. Perceval Fain is nothing but a spoiled brat. And he is promiscuous...He collects lovers, the way some men collect butterflies. No, that's not a very good analogy, is it? Fain doesn't even bother to preserve his specimens for display. He just tosses one lover away, when he's done with him, and moves on to the next.*

At length, Preston glanced up and pointed to the brass coffeepot. "Bring me another coffee," he said to the attendant.

He continued to drink, and smoke, and sketch, and brood.

*I must be insane, after what I've already been through, to want to have anything to do with a whore like Perceval Fain!*

*He is so handsome...He's like an Adonis, like a Greek god...and when he smiles at me—!*

*Damn him! Damn him to hell!*

It was nearly sunset when Preston stood up, put on his shoes, paid for his coffee, and went out onto the dusty road. In the distance, among the tall, tufted palm trees, he saw thin tendrils of smoke rising from the African houses, birds fluttering about a minaret, and some camels filing along the road that led to the south. Beside the camels, hooded men walked stoically. Preston watched them with great interest.

He was, by now, an experienced traveler, and as a result he could not think of these dark men as most Europeans and Americans did—as primitives, and inherently inferior. To him they seemed as subtle as women, imbued with a strange femininity despite their ferocity and strength. He enjoyed mingling with them, painting them, and—yes—

becoming intimate with them.

Perceval Fain, surely, had nothing in common with such men. And, for that matter, he surely had nothing in common with Preston.

*He doesn't really know I exist, Preston thought sullenly. I am nothing to him. I am nothing...to anybody. If only he would notice me, really notice me, and—!*

He had finally come to a conclusion—an unwelcome, even frightening, one.

He was in love with Perceval Fain. No, that was absurd. How could he be in love with a man he hardly knew? He was infatuated, that was all. He was obsessed.

*God help me, he thought. I had thought my heart was already broken, long ago. But that beautiful blond man is going to break my heart all over again. But no, I won't let him. I won't!*

\* \* \* \*

While Preston was tormenting himself in this way, Perce and Alain were enjoying their evening together.

After dinner, Alain took Perce as his guest to the officers' club in the barracks compound and introduced Perce to a number of his fellow French officers. The atmosphere was relaxed, with a typical air of masculine camaraderie that Perce found most pleasurable. They played cards and billiards.

Afterward, of course, Alain took Perce to his rooms in the private house, where they once again undressed, smoked hashish in the nude, and made love—in Alain's bedroom, this time, if only for the sake of variety. This time, too, Perce was the one who did the fucking. Alain maneuvered their bodies into a number of positions, some of them more acrobatic than erotic, but he seemed unable to decide which one he liked the best. He and Perce finally settled on lying on their sides, with Perce humping him from behind. This position at least allowed Perce to put his right arm easily around Alain's waist and give the

Frenchman's thick, throbbing prick a vigorous stroking.

After their orgasms, they lay lazily on the rumpled bedclothes, caressing one another and sipping some restorative brandies.

"Now I'm sorry I waited so long to get in touch with you." Alain sighed. "But you and Dehnal Oud al Qurashi have been seeing a great deal of each other, haven't you?"

"Yes," Perce admitted. "I hope that's not a problem. You don't seem to be the jealous or possessive sort, Alain."

"I am not. Oh, I am perhaps a little envious. How could I not be? But I am a realist. I am older than you are, Perce, and, as you know, I am married. Guy told me about the conversation you had with him. You and Dehnal are very well suited for each other. He is certainly the most handsome man under my command here, and the most charming. I am glad that you two have been enjoying each other, in bed and out. That is why I am sorry to have to tell you, Perce, that I will soon have to take Dehnal away from you."

"I know his leave will be up soon. And then, I had thought, he would be reporting back to Algiers. I was rather looking forward to seeing him again there."

"Our orders have changed. We are to go on an expedition, to a remote outpost, well south of here. There has been some trouble with the native tribes in that area, and the garrison needs reinforcements. I shall be in command, and Dehnal will be my second-in-command. We will be there for several months, in all probability."

"Then I will not see either of you again, for the foreseeable future."

"I'm afraid that is so."

"When do you leave?"

"In three days. We will march east, across the desert, then turn south."

"And once you get there...you will all be in some danger, won't you?"

"Oh, not much," Alain said dismissively. "You need not worry

about us.”

“But I will. Oh, this is terrible...I know you must do your duty, and all that, but still! Well, I must not be selfish. I must think of you two, and your men, and what lies ahead of you. I suppose Dehnal already knows about this?”

“By now, he should. I only received these orders this afternoon. That is why I was so eager to see you tonight. I sent Guy to find Dehnal and show him the order earlier this evening.”

“We will have to make the best of it, Alain, and we will have to make the most of what little time we have left together.” Perce thought for a moment. “I know. I will organize a little dinner party, for you and Alain. You must bring Guy, as well. Would you be free, say, tomorrow night?”

“Yes. And I will order Dehnal and Guy to attend,” Alain said with a smile. “Their other duties, like my own, can be put aside for one night.”

“I have another idea. Do you remember how I told you that Moussa keeps pestering me to let him arrange a *partouze en blanc et noir* for me?”

“An orgy, in other words,” Alain said with a laugh. “Yes. And remember, I advised you to take Moussa up on his offer. Knowing Moussa, it will be a memorable evening for you. The highlight of your stay here in Tin Ouzel, no doubt.”

“I will tell Moussa to arrange it, for tomorrow night,” Perce told his friend, impulsively. “And you and Dehnal will be my guests of honor. It will be your going-away celebration. If we must say *au revoir* to one another, at least we will all enjoy ourselves first.”

Alain took Perce into his arms and kissed him. “I will look forward to it, Perce. But this night is still young. You and I can enjoy ourselves together, again, right now.”

\* \* \* \*

While Perce and Alain made love, Preston was sitting in one of the more disreputable cafes located in the rue des Danseuses. As a token concession to respectability, he was actually wearing shoes. He was drinking *birra*, as the Arabs called the inexpensive and very strong locally brewed beer, and he had already drunk just enough of it to attain the level of intoxication he desired—one at which his inhibitions were lowered, but he was not sufficiently impaired to do anything truly foolish or risky.

He had already fended off the advances of several female whores, who had dismissed him as a surly cheapskate, not worth wasting their time on.

He finally saw what he was looking for. A very young French soldier was leaning against the wall, which was decorated with garish posters imported from France advertising various products, and he was smoking a cigarette. He, too, was ignoring the women in the café, including the plump, blowsy one who was dancing on the little stage at the moment. But his eyes darted about restlessly, sometimes settling on one or another of the male customers, and every time a new customer came in from the street, he glanced in that direction, to check out the newcomer.

Like Preston, the soldier was just drunk enough to be relaxed and unself-conscious. He stood in a slouch and made no secret of his potential interest in the other men in the crowded, smoky room. The soldier was short, nicely built without being particularly solidly muscled, and he had dark blond hair and a wispy pencil mustache, which looked a bit incongruous on his boyish, deeply tanned face. He bore a superficial resemblance to Perceval Fain. A superficial resemblance—but that would serve. This boy would do well enough to exorcize the demon that had taken possession of Preston...to exorcise it at least for one night.

Preston got up and went over to the soldier. "Let me buy you a drink," he offered.

The young blond Frenchman looked at him, sizing him up, as he

exhaled smoke. "All right," he agreed.

They sat at Preston's table and drank. They made small talk. The soldier, amused by Preston's accented and occasionally halting French, was intrigued to learn that he was an Englishman. Preston made a few off-color comments and jokes, which made his new acquaintance laugh. The boy had already stopped looking at the other men in the café: he was giving Preston his undivided attention, smiling at him, which was all the encouragement Preston needed.

"This *bière* is not so very good," Preston remarked. "I have a bottle of decent whiskey in my room, in the Hotel du Désert. Why don't we go there and have a drink?"

"I have to be back in my barracks by midnight," the soldier warned.

Preston consulted his pocket watch. "It is only a little past nine o'clock now."

"Then let's not waste any time."

They left the café and walked to the hotel.

"What is your name?" Preston asked.

"Marcel."

"Indulge me in a little whim," Preston urged. "It is a harmless one. Let me call you Perceval...No, let me call you Perce."

The soldier shrugged. "You can call me Émile Loubet, if you wish." Émile Loubet was the president of France. "*Je m'en fiche*—I don't give a damn."

Preston didn't volunteer his own name, and Marcel didn't bother to ask him what it was. This wasn't going to be that sort of an encounter.

In Preston's untidy room in the hotel, they drank whiskey and smoked. Marcel, no doubt bearing in mind his midnight curfew, was the one who made the first overt move: he threw away his cigarette, took Preston in his arms, and planted his lips on the artist's bearded lips in an impassioned kiss. They stripped and rolled onto the unmade bed.



Preston used his tongue all over the young blond soldier's body, making him giggle and squirm. He sucked Marcel's nipples, licked his armpits, tickled the little pit of his navel with his stiffened tongue tip, and then attacked the soldier's cock and balls. He was sucking Marcel's dick, drawing its fat head deep into his throat and trying his best not to gag on it, when the soldier twisted his body around and took Preston's erection into his own mouth. They sucked each other, frantically, while exploring each other's assholes with gently probing fingers.

Sensing that they were both dangerously close to coming, Preston interrupted the sixty-nine. He kissed Marcel on the mouth again, caressing him, but avoided touching the soldier's cock as he gave them both a chance to calm down a bit. The delay, Preston knew, would only increase the force of their ejaculations when they did come.

When he was confident that his partner would not climax prematurely, Preston rolled onto his belly, then pulled his knees in under him, and pushed his rear end high up into the air. He aimed it, invitingly, in Marcel's direction.

"Oh, God, Perce, you are so beautiful...so fucking beautiful!" Preston moaned. In his drunken excitement, he had reverted to speaking in English. "I want you in me. Please love me, Perce. Please fuck me. Please fuck my arse!"

"You are very strange," Marcel said with a laugh. "I can't understand a word you are saying to me when you speak like that, *en anglais*." But he gave Preston a friendly little slap on his upturned ass.

"*Foutre-moi!*" Preston demanded. He fumbled for the right French words, or at least ones that would make his lewd intentions clear. "*Foutre-moi, tout de suite, foutre-moi dans mon cul chaud!*"

Marcel understood. He wet his fingertips with his saliva and rubbed the spit onto the pucker of Preston's sphincter rim. Then he moved into the appropriate position, standing on the mattress behind Preston with his knees slightly bent, and quickly inserted himself fully

and decisively into the “hot ass” Preston had just mentioned. Holding on to Preston’s hips, Marcel began an energetic pumping action. Preston’s whole body tensed in mingled pain and pleasure for a moment, but then he began to thrust his butt back against the young French stud’s groin, to impale himself upon every inch of the soldier’s cock.

“Fuck me, Perce!” Preston pleaded—in English, again. “Oh God—please fuck me!”

“I don’t understand,” Marcel panted. “What did you say?”

“Never mind, *mon ami*. Just *foutre-moi*. *Foutre-moi bien*. *Plus fort! Foutre-moi plus fort!*”

## **Chapter Seven**

### **En Blanc Et Noir**

Perce's evening of erotic excess began respectably enough, with a dinner party.

For some reason, he felt reluctant to host this dinner at the hotel's dining room. He conferred with Alain Costinguet, who recommended a restaurant, also run by Frenchmen, that was located a short walk from the hotel. It was also not far from Moussa's house, where the evening's other activities would take place.

Alain had not steered him wrong: they had a private room in the restaurant, and the food, wine, and service were all excellent. There were eight of them at the table: Perce, Tommy, Dehnal, Mahad, Alain and his orderly, Guy, Jean-Baptise Verdeau, and Moussa. Acting upon a rather wicked, malicious whim, Perce had asked M. and Mme Verdeau to give their son the night off from work so Perce could "borrow" him. Perce told them that he wanted Jean-Baptiste to show him and Tommy around the town. It never occurred to the Verdeaus that Perce, who had already engaged Moussa's services as a guide, hardly needed a second one. They were too excited by the prospect of their son spending the evening in M. Fain's distinguished company. Not even Perce's casual warning, that it might be quite late before they returned to the hotel, caused them any concern.

"Moussa," Perce asked, "exactly how many men have you—" He almost said *procured*, but he caught himself and substituted the more tactful, "invited?"

"A total of ten, M'sieur Fain, since you informed me that you and your guests would number seven in all. I believe that proportion will

ensure that none of you will feel neglected. Two of the men are my own servants, who, if I may be so immodest as to say so, are exceptionally well trained and skilled when it comes to attending to gentlemen's needs. And of course, as your host, I would feel obligated to provide any services of a personal nature myself, should they be required—or desired.”

“Excellent, Moussa,” Perce said languidly. “I knew I could place my complete confidence in a man of your experience and taste.”

“M’sieur is too kind. You will not be disappointed.”

Jean-Baptiste, obviously somewhat in awe at socializing with men of such sophistication as Perce, Alain, Dehnal, and Mahad, sat rather tongue-tied throughout the meal. Tommy, who sat next to him, made a point of including him in the conversation and urged him to make the most of the food and drink.

“You’d better eat up and drink up while you have the chance,” Tommy advised the young Frenchman. “You’re going to need your strength, later on, if you intend to keep up with M. Fain...or with me, for that matter.”

Alain laughed. “Don’t tease the poor *garçon*, M. Flanagan,” he advised. “I’m sure he will rise to the challenge and do very well, given the chance.”

By the time they left the restaurant, the atmosphere surrounding their group had become subtly charged with erotic anticipation.

Moussa led them down a number of small streets, until they reached a whitewashed house in front of which, on a hump of earth, three towering palm trees grew from one trunk. Moussa opened the door and ushered his guests inside. They found themselves in a small interior courtyard, with a tiled floor, pillars, and, high up, a gallery of carved wood, accessed by a staircase, upon which a number of rooms opened. In the courtyard, seated upon cushions, were four muscular black men, with bare arms and legs and long hair pulled back from their faces and held in place by combs, before a brazier, from which rose a sharply pungent perfume. Complete silence prevailed. The four

men stared at the brazier, filling their nostrils with the incense fumes that rose from it in airy spirals.

Perce was cynical enough to think that Moussa must be a very successful guide and procurer, indeed, to be able to maintain such a house. By Tin Ouzel's standards, this was a mansion.

"Welcome to my house, gentlemen," Moussa said. He clapped his hands, and two more black men, completely nude except for skimpy silk loincloths, entered the courtyard and bowed to him.

Perce looked at them with interest. They were both young, perhaps no more than twenty-two or -three, and they were superb physical specimens, with the kind of toned muscularity that could be the result only of hard labor, or of regular exercise.

"These are my personal servants," Moussa explained, "the ones I told you about. Their names are Numan, on the left, and Qadi. They are completely at your disposal. I have already instructed them that they are to obey you gentlemen tonight as they would obey me."

Moussa's handclap had evidently been heard by other, unseen servants, in a nearby room, and understood by them as a prearranged signal. Perce now heard music, soft yet insinuating, imposing itself on the previous silence. There were at least four musicians: Perce's ear detected, superimposed on the subdued patter of a drum, some sort of a guitarlike instrument being strummed and plucked, and sinuous melodies being played by a flute and an oboelike pipe with a penetrating, reedy timbre.

"If you will come this way..." Moussa led the group across the courtyard, through an archway, and down a short corridor, into a large room. Its entrance was draped with heavy embroidered curtains, which, as the men approached, were suddenly drawn back to either side, like the stage curtain in a theater. Entering the room first, ahead of Moussa, who encouraged him to do so, Perce now saw who had pulled aside the curtains and secured them to either side of the entranceway with silk cords threaded through wall brackets. These were two more men of the type Perce preferred, mature, in their mid-

twenties perhaps, with lighter *café au lait* skin and extraordinarily beautiful faces. They, too, were nude, except for loincloths, and had lithe, well-toned bodies, not as Herculean as the others Perce had already seen, but appealing.

Perce admired the room as the others filed in after him. The floor in here was also tiled and was strewn with rugs of subdued and delicate hues: soft greens and faded rose colors, gray-blues and mustard yellows. Around the walls, which were painted an intense shade of bright blue, ran broad divans, also blue, covered with prayer rugs, and large cushions, elaborately worked in dull gold and silver thread. In the four angles of the room stood four smoking tables of dark, glossy lacquered wood, holding hammered ashtrays of bronze, and Chinese porcelain vases, white with blue dragons wriggling around them, filled with full-blown crimson roses, white gardenias, and sprigs of orange blossom. Leather footstools, covered with Tunisian thread work, sat about. A long, low padded bench had flung carelessly over it at least a dozen colorful garments, the kind of loose, flowing robes well-to-do Algerian men might wear when they were taking their leisure indoors in their own homes.

From the arches of the shuttered window spaces hung old Moorish lamps of copper, fitted with small panes of dull jeweled glass. In a round copper brazier set near one of the window seats, twigs and resinous grains of incense were drowsily burning and giving out thin columns of scented smoke. Several low tables, placed here and there, held an assortment of refreshments and stimulants: bowls of dates, fruits, figs, nuts, and pastries, along with flasks of wine, bottles of champagne and absinthe, and a supply of opium and hashish, with pipes to smoke them in.

The music was more audible here. It evidently came from an adjacent room.

"I hope this is suitable," Moussa said to Perce. "I think you and your guests will be comfortable here."

"Everything looks superb, Moussa. You have done well."

“The night is rather warm,” Moussa remarked. “Perhaps you would all like to undress? As you see, there is an assortment of robes here, for those who are more modest to put on, if they wish.”

“I’m afraid, Moussa, that these beautiful robes will rather go to waste, at least for the time being,” Perce said with a laugh. “Your house has been invaded by men who are not particularly modest. By all means, let us all get comfortable, shall we?”

With the help of the two *café au lait* Algerians, and Numan and Qadi, who had also come into the room, everyone, including Moussa, quickly stripped naked. Moussa, Perce noticed, had a fine physique in his own right, and a penis extraordinary for its thickness—and for the gold Prince Albert ring that pierced its glans. Jean-Baptiste, who had evidently never heard of such a thing as a genital piercing, let alone seen one, stared at it.

“Sit, gentlemen,” Moussa urged. “Eat and drink. Smoke, if you wish. And while you relax, enjoy the first part of the evening’s entertainment.”

He clapped his hands again.

Bronze-colored and as solemn as an idol, one of the four men who had been seated in the courtyard, around the brazier, now entered the room. He was nude. He bowed to the other naked men in the room, most of whom were now seated on the divans, ottomans, and even on the carpeted floor, and pulled the comb from his hair and deposited it on a table.

He shook free his long hair, and, moving into the center of the room, he gazed about him languidly and clapped his hands. As though in obedience to this signal, the three other men from the courtyard filed into the room. They, too, were now naked. Two of them carried tall, narrow drums, like tom-toms. They sat down on the floor and began to beat the drums, loudly and monotonously, with the flats of their hands. The third man held a pair of brass finger cymbals in each of his hands. He, too, seated himself, cross-legged, on the floor beside his companions, and beat the little cymbals against each other to

create a repeated chiming noise.

The bronze idol began to dance. He moved his entire body in a long and serpentine undulation, above which his hair flew to and fro. He stamped on the tiled floor with his bare feet. Like a statue carved from polished ebony and miraculously endowed with life, he leaped and shook. His hard-muscled buttocks swayed and rolled. His flat stomach undusted and twisted in a wild umbilical dance. His penis, which was tumescent, bounced up and down, and back and forth, in lewd counterpoint to the movements of his limbs.

Never in his life, Perce thought, had he witnessed such a lascivious performance—until it was made more lascivious still, when one of the supple *café au lait* attendants suddenly joined in the dance, transforming it from a solo to a *pas de deux*. He stripped off his loincloth and tossed it aside. The more muscular black man embraced him from behind, and they danced together, a dance that began with slow, suggestive movements, which gradually grew quicker, until at last the more powerfully built darker man was jerking his body to and fro, rubbing his erect penis against the other man's buttocks, in blatant imitation of coital thrusts, while both men stamped their feet and thrashed the air with their upraised, swaying arms. Faster and faster grew the music, and the dancers whirled about with increasing speed. Suddenly, the music stopped, on a crashing chord, and the two men caught one another up in a tight, sweaty face-to-face embrace. This finale was greeted with tremendous applause from the onlookers.

“Bravo, bravo! But now let us all dance!” Alain cried as he leaped to his feet. He went to embrace the *café au lait* dancer, who smiled at him and allowed the Frenchman to guide him back and forth across the floor in a tolerable imitation of a waltz.

The unseen musicians in the adjacent room set up a slower, more sensual dance rhythm, and, at a gesture from Moussa, their three counterparts abandoned their tom-toms and finger cymbals and stood up. Nude male couples began to pair up and revolve about the floor. Mahad, Dehnal, Guy, and Jean-Baptiste each took a black stallion as



his partner and shuffled or glided around, depending upon their individual degrees of agility. Tommy approached the other *café au lait* servant, divested him of his loincloth, and, taking him in his arms, began to teach him by example how to perform an Irish jig. One dance followed another, and the motions became fast and furious as the music accelerated along with them.

Perce, who was sitting near Moussa and enjoying a glass of absinthe, watched, content to sit this one out, so to speak. Or so he thought, until Qadi rather shyly approached him and held out his hand. Perce smiled at the servant, took his hand, and let Qadi help him to his feet. They, too, danced, embracing each other tightly and swaying to the rhythm of the music.

Qadi submitted to the close pressure of Perce's encircling arms with a passivity that was somewhat surprising in such a powerfully built man. His head lay on Perce's shoulder, and Perce could feel the throbbing of the black man's pulse against his own neck. Qadi's fingernails dug into the palms of Perce's hands, and his body pressed ever closer to his in response to the compelling rhythm. A fierce shudder passed through his limbs. The blood coursed to his cheeks as he whispered into Perce's ear words that poured like molten lava from his thick lips: "*Si m'sieur me permettez—?*"

Without waiting for Perce's response, Qadi, still holding on to both of Perce's hands, slid down to his knees on the floor in front of Perce and began to suck his cock. Perce groaned as the wet pressure and heat of Qadi's mouth engulfed and stroked his turgid manhood. Moussa had, indeed, trained Qadi well.

Perce saw Alain smiling at him over the shoulder of his dance partner. Some of the other couples, already taking their lead from Perce and Qadi, and sitting or lying down on the divans, were making love. From the next room, the music continued, the flute and oboe tracing delicate, weaving melodic patterns above the steady, hypnotic pulse provided by the drummer and the string player.

Moussa rose and moved about the room, replenishing the resin

incense in the copper brazier so that dense clouds of scented smoke began to rise from it, toward the ceiling. He then picked up a tray containing several small jars and bottles and began to circulate with it, like a dutiful waiter offering party guests hors d'oeuvres or canapés.

"These are various lubricants, gentlemen," Moussa said, "for those of you who wish to indulge in the pleasures of anal penetration."

"I'll take one," Perce heard Tommy reply, unhesitatingly. "You're just in time!"

Moussa eventually set the tray down and, coming to stand near Perce, looked down approvingly at the service Qadi was providing him.

"If I may interrupt you for a moment, M. Fain," Moussa said apologetically. "To begin the evening's main entertainment, I have found and kept in reserve something rather extraordinary, intended especially for you. Would you like to see it now?"

"By all means," Perce gasped.

Moussa clapped his hands. At once, a curtain was lifted aside in one of the archways, and two men emerged into the main space.

They were tall, lean, muscular, and they were virtually nude, with very dark skins. Each of them, however, wore a peculiar headdress: a cloth of a deep indigo blue color, wound tightly around the head. Surprisingly, part of this head wrapping formed a long veil, made up, Perce saw, of long, narrow individual pieces of the same indigo cloth sewn together. The lower portions of both men's faces were thus effectively concealed. Only their dark, gleaming eyes were exposed.

"These men are, indeed, extraordinary, Moussa," Perce said. He was so intrigued by them that he gently disengaged himself from Qadi and took a step closer to the pair of newcomers. "But why are they wearing those headdresses, when they are wearing nothing else?"

"They are Tuaregs, Perce," Dehnal said.

"Yes," Moussa confirmed. "They speak a little French. But do not be offended if they do not speak at all. They tend to be rather taciturn

when meeting strangers for the first time—especially under these circumstances. But do not be concerned. You need not be shy with them. They share your tastes, and they know that is why they have been invited here this evening.”

“That surprises me,” Dehnal remarked.

“Oh? Why?” Perce asked.

“The Tuaregs are nomadic tribesman. They have dominated the Sahara for centuries, and they have resisted the French colonization efforts—to put it mildly. They have the reputation of being fierce warriors. It’s extraordinary to see them taking part in a *partouze*.”

“It’s not uncommon for warriors to be attracted to the masculinity of other men, Dehnal. You and Alain should know that.”

“True.”

“What else can you tell me about them, Dehnal? I’m very curious.”

“They are very superstitious. They have their own language, called Tamahak, and their own way of writing, in a script unique to them. They are notorious for keeping slaves, despite the French’s efforts to abolish the slave trade here. They are a matriarchal society, interestingly enough. The chieftainship of their clans passes to the son of the chief’s wife, regardless of whether or not the chief is in fact his father. Unlike Arab women, Tuareg women can divorce their husbands on their own initiative. And, as you see, among the Tuaregs, it is the men, not the women, who wear the veil. The veil is called a *litham*. No one really knows how this custom began. The veil may simply be a protection against the desert sun and sand, although some people speculate that it has a superstitious significance—that it guards the wearer against evil spirits.”

“What are their names, Moussa?” Perce asked.

“They are brothers,” Moussa said. “Not twins, although they do resemble one another closely. That is Izemrasen, on your left, whose name means ‘the mighty’ or ‘the strong,’ and his brother is Izil, meaning ‘the sublime’ or ‘the magnificent one.’”

“How very apt,” Perce commented. “They are truly a fine pair of men.” He smiled at the Tuaregs and thought he detected a response in their smoldering eyes.

Moussa drew closer to Perce and made a slight bow. “If m’sieur will permit me to make a suggestion?”

“Of course, Moussa. And you need not be so formal. What do you have in mind?”

“If these men see me—a dark-skinned man like me, an Algerian—taking certain liberties with you, m’sieur, then they will realize that there is no need for them to hold themselves back. They will know that you are willing to indulge them.”

“I’m more than willing, Moussa. Come on, let’s set them a good example to follow!”

Perce stretched out comfortably on the nearest divan and pulled Moussa down on top of him. They kissed, and then Moussa quickly slid down Perce’s torso and began to lap at each of his nipples in turn. He tongued Perce’s navel, briefly, but to good effect, making Perce squirm, and then he moved still lower, between Perce’s legs, and began to treat Perce to an expert and enthusiastic fellating. If, as Perce now suspected, Qadi had learned how to suck cock from Moussa, he had certainly had an excellent tutor.

Perce maintained eye contact with the two Tuaregs while Moussa serviced him. Their hard-muscled bodies and intense stares excited him. These were mature men, at least his own age, he realized—not callow younger men. And they were looking at him now with an almost predatory gleam in those hawklike black eyes of theirs. Perce’s cock pulsed more strongly within the firm clasp of Moussa’s mouth.

Until now, Perce had not thought of Moussa as a potential sex partner. Now, he realized that he may have made an oversight. Moussa was in good physical shape, and he was very sensuous, very skilled. No doubt he often serviced his clients in just this way, himself, instead of contracting the work out to subordinates.

Perce gestured invitingly at Izil and Izemrasen. The two Tuaregs,

who had been observing the cocksucking with great interest, now approached and knelt down, one on either side of Perce. With graceful, obviously well-practiced gestures, they flung the excess drapery of their veils back over their shoulders so that their faces were still obscured, but their naked bodies were fully exposed and accessible from the neck down.

Perce reached out, grasped Izemrasen's uncircumcised penis, and stroked it with his fingers, coaxing the head out of its brown sheath. He guided the knob to his lips and did to the potent Tuareg what Moussa was still doing to him.

Izil watched his brother being sucked for a moment, and then he joined Moussa between Perce's legs. Perce felt Izil's veil brush against his testicles before the Tuareg adjusted it further, tucking it out of the way, so that he could press his mouth to Perce's flesh. He and Moussa took turns going down on Perce, until Moussa graciously abandoned the field and let Izil have Perce's lower body all to himself. Izil guided Perce's legs up over his shoulders, lowered his head under Perce's genitals, and began to lick Perce's ass, drilling his tongue in and out of it with extraordinary rapidity. Perce realized that the well-built Tuareg's tongue was actually vibrating as he uttered a strange sort of soft, ululating sound under his breath.

Perce sucked cock and had his ass sucked. A third dark-skinned man—Perce recognized him as Numan, the other one of Moussa's two muscular personal servants—joined them on the divan, turning their trio into a quartet.

Perce gluttoned himself on black flesh, on black cock. He serviced all three men orally and was serviced by them. He was beginning to feel the effects of the absinthe he had drunk, and a pleasant haze of sensuality enveloped him.

He soon was more than ready to take things to the next level—namely, anal penetration. As though he had read Perce's mind, Moussa, ever the perfect host, suddenly reappeared, just long enough to place a shallow brass bowl down beside them, within easy reach of

one of Perce's hands.

"I think you will find this most efficacious as a lubricant," Moussa murmured before he moved off again, out of Perce's range of vision.

Perce dipped a finger into the bowl. It contained a sort of clear, viscous fluid, which had been warmed, and had the faintest hint of a musky scent. Perce had no idea what it was, but he was more than willing to put it immediately to the test.

He applied the lubricant to Izemrasen's erection, got on his hands and knees, and with eloquent gestures invited the Tuareg to penetrate him. At the same time, he silently urged Izil to fuck his face and gestured for Moussa's servant to slide under him so he could suck Perce's cock.

It was not for nothing, Perce immediately learned, that Izemrasen had been named "the strong." He filled Perce's rectum with his bulky manhood, and he worked it in and out of Perce with an unflagging potency. Nor had his brother been given a misnomer: Izil's cock was indeed a *magnificent* specimen, and sucking it was a *sublime* experience. Perce didn't know if Numan, the name of Moussa's servant, meant anything particular in Arabic, or in any other tongue, but, judging by the man's oral performance at the moment, he ought to have been dubbed "the voracious" or "the insatiable."

Perce was not so caught up in what he was doing, and what was being done to him, that he was unaware of the other activities going on all around him.

He saw that two of the black men were fucking Jean-Baptiste's mouth and ass, simultaneously. The Frenchman's plump body and pink skin seemed to excite them into a frenzy.

Nearby, Tommy was also the center of the attention of no fewer than three men: he was sandwiched between Alain and Dehnal, fucking Dehnal while being fucked by Alain, and he was sucking the finger-cymbal-player's cock.

One of the exquisite *café-au-lait*-skinned studs was sprawled belly-down on an ottoman, while a sweating, heavy-breathing Guy

plowed his ass.

Whatever else might be taking place in the room was outside of Perce's immediate line of vision. But he could hear, above the steady throb and hum of the music, the sounds of sex: flesh slapping against flesh, mouths slurping on cocks, moans, gasps, and whispered and grunted obscenities, uttered in both French and Arabic.

Moussa was indeed a host *par excellence*. After everyone in the room had climaxed, at least once, and there was a temporary lull in the proceedings, as the participants in the orgy struggled to regain their breath, Moussa had iced sherbets served, as a restorative. The sherbets were offered in no fewer than three different flavors: lemon, orange, and pistachio.

"I can't decide which one I want," Perce confessed happily.

Dehnal, who happened to be sitting beside him at the moment, laughed. "Why choose just one? Why deny yourself, tonight of all nights? Have one of each."

"I'll get fat," Perce protested.

"No, you won't," Dehnal assured him. "We will work it off in a moment. I know I'm about ready to go again. How about you?"

Perce was already spooning some of the refreshingly cold, tartly flavored lemon sherbet into his mouth. "Ummm!" he mumbled, which Dehnal—correctly—interpreted as an affirmative.

The sherbet not only cleansed the palate: it almost seemed to have an aphrodisiac effect. Perce had no sooner finished sampling the sweets than he did, indeed, feel ready to go again. During the next hour or so, he managed to have sexual contact, of one sort or another, with every other man on the premises. The lewd, indefatigable example he set inspired the others, who outdid themselves in erotic invention, joining their naked bodies in every conceivable combination. After his third ejaculation, Perce finally pleaded exhaustion, insisting that he would be unable to attain an erection again, let alone sustain it for any length of time. Two of the younger white men—Guy and Jean-Baptiste—playfully conspired with the

seemingly indefatigable Tuareg brothers, Izil and Izemrasen, to prove him wrong. Their lips and tongues, their fingers and their cocks worked on Perce's body until he was not only hard again, but well on his way to a fourth orgasm. Some of the other men interrupted their own feverish activities to watch the quintet, cheering it on and applauding when the performance reached its inevitable, explosive climax.

After that, Perce remained contentedly on the sidelines, drinking some champagne to refresh himself, and watching the other men play with one another, as the orgy gradually wound down. Eventually, the carpeted floor and the divans were strewn with limp, sweaty, hard-breathing bodies.

The guests gradually roused themselves. One by one, they made use of a nearby bathroom, to wash up, and began to get dressed. Perce drew Moussa aside.

"Here is the sum we agreed upon," Perce said as he slipped Moussa an envelope stuffed with franc notes, "and, of course, a little extra, to compensate you for all the trouble you have gone to tonight. You have done well. I am pleased."

Moussa bowed. "M'sieur is most generous."

"M'sieur is exhausted," Perce admitted with a rueful laugh. "M'sieur is getting too old to indulge in such excesses, enjoyable though they may be."

"Ah no, M. Fain. You are like a fine Arabian stallion, tireless in your potency."

"The stallion feels more like a gelding at the moment." Perce beckoned to Numan and Qadi, who were standing nearby. He handed Qadi a small bag filled with gold coins. "My friends and I have enjoyed ourselves greatly tonight. Thank you. Please divide this among yourselves and your friends."

Perce was cynical enough to make sure to give this tip money directly to the men, rather than to Moussa to give to them. He assumed that Moussa would pay the men well for their services, out



of the money Perce had just given him, but he also hoped that tipping the men directly would inhibit Moussa from demanding a cut of this extra cash for himself. The men were effusive in their thanks, bowing to Perce and kissing his hand.

Perce and his party bade Moussa goodnight. The group left the house and walked, or rather stumbled and staggered, slowly back toward the hotel, through dark, silent streets.

The square in front of the hotel seemed to be deserted, as well.

"We seem to be the only people in Tin Ouzel who are not yet in bed, asleep," Alain commented.

"No, someone is sitting on the veranda of the hotel, smoking," Guy pointed out.

"It's M. McCandless, the artist," Jean-Baptiste said.

"Indeed?" Perce's interest was piqued.

On the veranda, near the hotel's entrance, were pairs of wicker chairs, each with a small table set between them. Preston was lounging in one of these chairs. He wore the kind of clothes he usually wore when he was painting: loose trousers, the shirt without a collar that had so scandalized Tommy, with its sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and his slip-on canvas shoes. The red dot of his cigarette glowed in the night. He gazed matter-of-factly at the group of sex-weary men as they crossed the square and came toward him.

Perce, looking in Preston's direction, realized that Alain, Dehnal, Mahad, and Guy were all thanking him for the evening and taking their leave of him. He replied, automatically but warmly, to their courtesies. Alain and Guy left, going off in one direction, to Alain's house. Mahad went in another, to his own home.

Dehnal stepped closer to Perce.

"I will let you get some rest," he whispered in Perce's ear. "I will sleep in my own room tonight. And I will not kiss you good night in front of the jealous Englishman."

Perce laughed softly. "Don't be absurd. Good night, Dehnal. Sleep well."

Jean-Baptiste, looking asleep on his feet, smiled at both Perce and Tommy. "Thank you for inviting me, M. Fain. It was a delightful evening."

"You're very welcome, Jean-Baptiste. Now go to bed, and get some sleep. I'm afraid I've kept you up quite late."

Jean-Baptiste followed Dehnal into the hotel.

Perce lingered. "I won't need you any more tonight, Tommy. I think I'll have a word with Mr. McCandless before I turn in. You go right to bed, and get some sleep."

"All right, Mr. Fain. Good night."

Perce waited until Tommy, too, had gone inside the hotel. Then he joined Preston on the veranda.

"Good evening, Mr. McCandless."

"Good evening, Mr. Fain."

"May I join you?"

"Please do."

Perce took the other chair. "It's very late. I'm surprised to see you still up and about."

"Yes, I'm tired, but for some reason I couldn't sleep, so I came back downstairs. I've just been sitting here, looking out into the night. The night air here has a strange dense quality to it. You almost feel as though you could reach out and hold it in your hand."

"Yes," Perce agreed. "It's as though the darkness of the nights somehow compensates for the heat and the glare of the sunlight during the days."

Preston had finished his cigarette and tossed it away. He reached for his box of tobacco and his cigarette papers, on the table between them.

Perce pulled out his cigarette case. "Have one of mine."

"Thank you. I shouldn't smoke so much," Preston admitted as they both took cigarettes and lit them. "Oh, but these are excellent," he said after he had exhaled his first lungful of smoke.

"Yes, aren't they? I had them made up specially for me, at a

tobacconist's shop in Paris."

"It must be wonderful, to be able to indulge yourself in such things," Preston remarked—and, for once, he sounded neither bitter nor sarcastic.

Fatigue, Perce noticed, had definitely made the artist more relaxed and less wary than usual. He looked quite comfortable, slumped in his seat—and, for once, he looked and sounded comfortable in Perce's presence.

And Perce, now that his lust had been slaked—at least for the time being!—found himself scrutinizing Preston rather more objectively than usual. The artist, he decided, was a handsome man, in his somewhat rough-hewn way. There was a quiet virility about him, when he wasn't a prey to the nervous tension Perce had noticed on previous occasions, that Perce found very attractive...attractive, yes, but not necessarily in an overtly sexual way—which for Perce was a bit of a novelty.

"And you?" Preston asked after they had smoked in silence for a few moments. "What has kept you—and your friends—out so late?"

"We had a little party. A farewell party, because Captain Costinguet, Lieutenant al Qurashi, and their regiment will be leaving here in a few days."

"I couldn't help noticing...but no, it is none of my business."

"No, please go ahead and say what you were going to say."

"I couldn't help wondering why your valet and the Verdeaus' son—Jean-Baptiste, isn't that his name?—were accompanying you. And that young French soldier—he's just an enlisted man, isn't he, not an officer?"

"They were all my guests. The soldier is Captain Costinguet's orderly, so naturally I invited him along, as well."

"Really? But what could a man of your class possibly have in common with men like that?"

Perce smiled. "More than you might think." He was careful to keep any hint of suggestiveness out of his tone of voice. "I hope I'm

not a snob. And how can we ever find out what we may or may not have in common with other people, unless we associate with them?"

Preston looked thoughtful. "That's true. I had not thought of it in quite that way."

"Furthermore, Mr. McCandless, if you had the misfortune to have spent as much time as I have been forced to spend in the company of 'men of my class,' as you put it, you would soon realize that many of them are empty-headed, superficial, and boring." Perce laughed. "But perhaps you have already concluded that I am eminently empty-headed, superficial, and boring myself, so I have no right to judge others."

"No. I have already come to certain conclusions about you, Mr. Fain, but not that."

"Oh? May I ask exactly what conclusions you have reached?"

"I have decided you are not at all the man you appear to be on the surface."

"Oh? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"In your case, Mr. Fain, it is a good thing. For example, you are obviously much more intelligent than I thought you were at first." Preston flushed. "I meant that as a compliment, but I'm afraid it didn't sound like one. Please forgive me."

"Nonsense. There is nothing to forgive. I find your conversation stimulating."

Preston hesitated. "If you're sure I don't offend you by speaking frankly—?"

"I'm not all that quick to take offense."

"Then may I ask you a question that might seem impertinent?"

"Please do."

"I assume you are free to do whatever you choose to do. Why—when you could travel anywhere—did you come to this dull little town on the edge of the desert in the first place, and why have you stayed here for so long?"

"I don't know," Perce admitted. "I've asked myself that very same

question, and although an answer of sorts has begun to form in my mind, it's difficult to put into words. It has something to do with the way I've lived up until now—thoughtlessly, hedonistically, running from one amusement to the next. It's as though I couldn't live without continual distraction, and I finally seemed to stop and ask myself, 'What, exactly, do you need to be distracted from? Are you avoiding being alone in your own company, because you're afraid if you ever really got to know yourself, you might not like yourself very much?' That's the sort of thing that has been going through my mind ever since I came to Tin Ouzel. There are few distractions here. This is a good place in which to indulge in introspection." Perce looked at Preston. "And you, Mr. McCandless? You have your work, of course, to keep you busy. But there must be many other places in Algeria, indeed, other towns near here, where you could find suitable subjects for painting. Why do you linger here?"

"I don't know, either—or perhaps, like you, I've given the question some thought, but I can't quite put it into words. Painting is a lonely occupation. You have a great deal of time to think while you work. If you don't enjoy your own company, as you put it...perhaps, like you, I needed to step back for a time and indulge in some soul-searching." Preston gave a dry little chuckle. "The difference between us is that I have learned how to brood and be miserable and lose myself in gloomy meditations while continuing to work. I seem to paint better when I am thinking about something else."

Before Perce could reply, he found himself barely suppressing a yawn.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm very sleepy. I'd like go on talking with you, but—"

"You had better go to bed."

"Yes." Perce stood up. "But I have enjoyed our talk." He offered Preston his hand. "Good night."

The other man grasped Perce's hand in his own and gave it a more than token squeeze. As Perce had predicted, he had a strong grip.

“Good night,” he replied.

Perce hesitated. “Aren’t you coming inside?”

“Not just yet. I think I’ll sit out here for a little while longer—and see if I can put up with myself, without picking a quarrel with myself,” Preston joked. “Good night, Mr. Fain.”

“Good night, Mr. McCandless.”

Upstairs, in his room, Perce saw that Tommy had lit the lamp for him and turned down the bed. He undressed slowly, realizing for the first time just how pleasantly weary his sexual exertions had made him. Nude, he blew out the lamp and slipped into the bed, and as he did so, he wondered how long Gordon Preston McCandless would remain seated outside the hotel, gazing out into the night, and what the artist was thinking about right now. But then, virtually as soon as his head sank into the soft pillow, Perce abandoned all conscious thought in favor of the restorative oblivion of sleep.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Marching Toward the Sun**

It was the night before the regiment's departure.

Perce and Dehnal had spent the afternoon together—most of it making love—in Perce's room. Then Dehnal checked out of the hotel: he would spend his last night in Tin Ouzel in the barracks, because of the early start the troops planned to make in the morning.

"I will come to the barracks to see you off, in the morning," Perce promised.

"But we will be leaving at the first light of dawn," Dehnal reminded him.

"That doesn't matter."

"Join us in the officers' mess for breakfast, then, an hour before dawn," Dehnal suggested with a smile. "If you are sure you can rouse yourself from your bed so early."

"I will be there. You will see."

"Then I will not say good-bye to you now, Perce. It is bad enough that I will have to say good-bye to you at all."

"I feel the same way."

"Until tomorrow, then."

They kissed. Dehnal tore himself away.

Perce, unusually for him, set his little travel alarm clock and placed it on the table beside his bed before retiring for the night. He did not want to miss the opportunity to bid his friends farewell as they embarked on their desert expedition. He put a small hinged box on the table, too, so he would not forget to take it with him in the morning.

The alarm chimed and woke him well before dawn. He dressed

quickly—it seemed odd to be doing so without Tommy’s assistance, but he had insisted that his valet sleep in his own bed, and stay in it until his usual hour of rising—put the little box in his trouser pocket, went downstairs, and slipped out of the hotel.

The town was silent. All the stars had faded in the deep bluish-gray sky, but as yet there was no hint of the sunrise. Perce went to the barracks, which alone among the buildings in its vicinity showed signs of activity.

Dehnal was waiting for him, outside the entrance to the officers’ mess hall, as they had arranged.

“Ah, you have come!” he exclaimed. “How good of you to have come!”

“Did you doubt me?” Perce asked with a smile.

“You are no soldier,” Dehnal teased him. “You are not an early riser, usually, I am sure. I feel honored by this great sacrifice you have made.”

They joined Alain and some other officers at a table and had breakfast. The mood in the room struck Perce as oddly cheerful.

“These men—your fellow officers—almost seem eager to leave,” Perce commented.

“We will have some hard traveling ahead of us, but in a strange way, it is almost preferable to inactivity,” Alain replied. “And remember—we will be doing what we have been trained for. We are here to serve France.”

They finished their breakfast and went outside. Between the palms, far away along the deep indigo horizon line of the Sahara, there slowly rose a curve of burnished red gold. It was the sun, coming up to once again claim dominion over this arid world.

Perce stood aside and observed the last-minute preparations.

The officers would travel on horseback, the enlisted men on foot. Their heavy equipment and other supplies were loaded onto camels.

Perce got his first look at a camel at close quarters. The pungent odor of the beast, the suspicious way it eyed him, and its habit of



opening its mouth wide to spit—none of this encouraged Perce to pursue the contact.

“Disgusting,” Perce muttered, backing away.

Dehnal, who was tightening the saddle strap on his horse, laughed.

Alain, after making sure his men were ready to depart, came over to Perce and Dehnal. He gave Perce a chaste embrace, holding him by both his shoulders and kissing him on both cheeks, in a very French way.

“I will give you a moment alone with each other, to say your good-byes,” Alain said, in a low voice, so none of the soldiers could hear. “Then you can catch up with us, Dehnal.”

Guy Polinard approached, leading Alain’s horse. He smiled shyly at Perce.

“*Au revoir*, M. Fain,” the Norman said.

“*Au revoir*, Guy,” Perce replied. Guy joined the rest of the enlisted men.

Alain mounted the horse, then signaled to his men to move out. He let them pass him in a file, then pulled his horse up close to where Perce was standing. He leaned over in his saddle and held out his hand.

“*Au revoir, mon bel ami*,” he said, his eyes twinkling, as Perce grasped his hand. “Thank you for your hospitality the other night. It was a delightful evening, one I will not forget. I have enjoyed making your acquaintance. The time we have spent together has been all too brief. I will cherish your friendship, always, and I hope we will meet again.”

Perce squeezed the Frenchman’s hand and reluctantly let it go. “I hope so, too. *Au revoir*.”

Alain saluted Perce, then rode away, following his men. He soon caught up with them and assumed the lead of the column. It headed east, Perce saw, toward the rising sun.

Dehnal turned to Perce, with a somber expression on his dark, handsome face.

“We must part,” he said simply.

“Yes.”

“I have brought you a present.” Dehnal drew an object wrapped in a silk handkerchief from underneath his tunic.

“What an odd coincidence. I have brought one for you, too.” Perce produced the little box.

Inside the handkerchief was a dagger, with an exquisitely enameled and jeweled handle and matching sheath.

“I know the men do not actually wear such things, in your country, the way we do,” Dehnal said, a little awkwardly. “But perhaps you can make use of it—as a letter opener?”

“It is beautiful, Dehnal. Thank you. I will treasure it. Here. You must hurry, or you will fall behind the others and have to ride fast.”

Perce handed Dehnal the box. Dehnal opened it and took out the heavy man’s ring it contained.

“What a remarkable ring. It is a coin. It looks very old.”

“The coin is old. The mounting is new. The ring belonged to my father. I have worn it, from time to time, since his death. The coin is a silver denarius with a portrait of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. It is from Italy, from the Mediterranean shores, at least, if not exactly from North Africa, which is why I thought of giving it to you.”

Dehnal slid the ring onto his finger. “Look, it fits perfectly. I will wear it always. Thank you.”

“You must go.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. But you must go.”

They embraced and kissed. Dehnal tore himself away from Perce, and swung himself expertly up into his saddle, with one easy motion.

“May Allah have you in his keeping, Perce.”

“And you, as well.”

“Farewell, dear friend.”

“Farewell!”

Dehnal saluted Perce, touched his horse with his heel, and galloped away toward the increasing light.

The rising sun was gathering strength, but the air was still refreshingly cool—almost cold—and the desert had not yet taken on its daily aspect of fiery desolation.

Perce watched the distant file of horses, camels, and men on foot until they were no more than specks on the surface of the desert. Then they became absorbed by it and were lost in the dreamlike blue haze of the dawn.

Perce retraced his steps, ostensibly heading back toward the hotel, but taking his time and occasionally choosing a side street, at random, to wander down. He was alone. He had parted from not one lover, but two. He had given himself to these men, and they had given themselves to him. There was comradeship, and, yes, a kind of love, between him and them. The undeniable fact that Perce's feelings for Dehnal were warmer than they were for Alain did not change that, and was no insult to Alain. Both men were soldiers, but somehow Dehnal was softer, more emotional, beneath his confident masculine exterior, than was the Frenchman. Perce had responded to that quality in Dehnal. Perce and Alain were friends who had enjoyed one another's company and one another's bodies wholeheartedly, without reservation. Something deeper had connected Perce and Dehnal from the start, and would continue to connect them, even though they were physically separated. Separated—perhaps forever. But Perce did not want to think about that possibility.

The soldiers were marching toward the sun, across the vast, barren desert. But he, Perceval Fain, where was he going? What destination lay ahead of him? What was he seeking? Perce had no answers to these questions, and he began to feel depressed.

He had told Dehnal he loved him, and he had been sincere. It was the same sort of love Perce felt for Tommy: the affection a man might feel for his brother, although inextricably bound up in sexual desire. Perce hoped to meet Dehnal again. But, even if he did, exactly what

kind of a future was he envisioning for them?

He could hardly expect Dehnal to give up his career, his country, and his culture, and follow Perce to Boston, to be his lover—a kept man. Nor could Perce see himself as a soldier’s lover—his “husband,” in all but name!—following him, dutifully, from post to post, or staying at home and waiting for him to return from his latest tour of duty, keeping house for his soldier all the time. Perce’s lips twitched in self-derision at the thought.

What, then? What sort of a future life, what sort of an ongoing relationship with another man, was he in fact longing for?

Perce sighed. “I need my coffee,” he told himself.

He found a café that was open at this early hour, and he sat and drank coffee, admiring the dagger Dehnal had given him and observing how the town gradually came to life as the sun rose higher and the air grew warmer.

He walked through the marketplace, which was just beginning to attract its first morning customers. For some reason, Perce thought of the marabout, and his enigmatic dream visions. Perce looked about him, half hoping that the holy man would appear so he could speak to him, but there was no sign of him.

Perce decided he might as well go back to the hotel.

He turned the corner and encountered none other than Gordon Preston McCandless, who was, as usual, somewhat disheveled, sweaty, and dusty, and who was carrying a large, flat rectangular package wrapped in brown paper under his arm. For some inexplicable reason, the mere sight of the artist lifted Perce’s spirits.

“Good morning, Mr. McCandless.”

“Good morning, Mr. Fain.”

“May I ask where you are going?”

“To the post office, as a matter of fact. I have to send this package off to Algiers. One of the art dealers I do business with is there, you see. He sells my pictures—to tourists, mostly, who want to take home inexpensive little souvenirs of their trip to Algeria to show their

friends,” Preston explained with that frankness of his that Perce still occasionally found somewhat disconcerting.

“I will accompany you, if I may.”

“Please do.”

“I’m sorry the package is already wrapped up and sealed,” Perce said. “I would like to see some of your paintings.”

“Oh, I have lots of other ones that I haven’t sold or sent off to dealers yet. And, of course, every day I do new ones.”

“You must let me see them sometime soon.”

“I will be glad to. Mr. Fain?”

“Yes, Mr. McCandless?”

“Pardon me, but I have often seen you riding. You hire the horse, I assume?”

“Yes, that Algerian guide—Moussa, whom you have no doubt seen me with—he arranges it.”

“Could he get me a horse from the same stable?”

“I’m sure he could. So you ride, Mr. McCandless?”

“Not for pleasure. When I travel, I often want to go out into the countryside—sometimes into fairly remote places—to paint. I often end up on a donkey, or a mule, but I can stay on the back of a horse, as well, without falling off. I was thinking about making an excursion, perhaps tomorrow morning, to an oasis that lies some distance east of here. It’s called Sidi Daoud el Kebir. There is an old marabout’s tomb, you see, with a mosque and a zaouia attached to it, that is supposed to be quite beautiful. Naturally, I would like to paint it.”

“I know what a marabout is. A holy man, am I correct? Oddly enough, I have actually met one, right here in town. I’m afraid I don’t know what a zaouia is.”

“It’s a sort of sanctuary, like a monastery, connected to a holy man’s tomb. A sort of school, or seminary, for his followers, where they gather to debate, to learn, and to teach.”

“That sounds very interesting.”

“I was thinking, Mr. Fain...” Preston sounded very hesitant.

“Yes?”

“That you might like to accompany me. Since you often go for a ride out into the desert anyway. The tomb is probably well worth seeing. And there may be other sights along the way.”

“I would be delighted to come along.”

“Of course, I plan to spend at least an hour or two there, painting the exterior of the buildings from different angles. You might find that tedious.”

“Nonsense. It will give us a chance to talk again, perhaps. I enjoyed the conversation we had the other night, on the veranda of the hotel. You can tell me about your travels.”

“I would like that very much. To talk to you again, I mean. I, too...I enjoyed the other night very much.”

“It’s settled, then. I will speak to Moussa.”

“Since we will be there during lunchtime, I had planned to have Mme Verdeau pack a lunch for me to take along. I will ask her to pack enough for two.”

“Oh, let me take care of that. We will have ourselves a real picnic. It will all be a pleasant change in my usual routine, from the sound of it. I’m already starting to look forward to it.”

“We can leave first thing in the morning, then, after breakfast, and return sometime in the afternoon.”

“Splendid.”

Perce waited, inside the post office, while Preston conducted his business. He could not help noticing—with a slight sense of embarrassment—that Preston paid the shipping cost of his parcel in exact change, pulling some crumpled franc notes and coins out of his pocket and counting the coins carefully in the palm of his hand before handing them over. The artist must, indeed, be impecunious. Perce, who was casual, and even careless, about money, was somewhat at a loss: he was unsure how to deal with a man who obviously had to worry about his finances.

“It’s almost lunchtime, Mr. McCandless,” he pointed out. He

wanted to say, *Let me treat you to lunch*, but he knew better. Instead, he said, “Before you start in on your afternoon’s work, why don’t we have a bite to eat at one of these inexpensive little cafés, where the townspeople eat? I would enjoy having some company. And we can talk some more about our trip to the oasis tomorrow.”

“Well...I *was* about to go somewhere to sit down and have a coffee, and perhaps a sandwich, when I ran into you.”

“Excellent! Let’s walk this way.” Perce steered Preston toward the café he had been to earlier that morning. They sat down.

Preston noticed the silk-wrapped dagger when Perce set it down on the table. “Did you buy something at the bazaar?”

“No, it was a gift.” Perce showed Preston the dagger.

The artist examined it closely, with genuine interest. “This is very fine workmanship, and the design is so subtle. It’s like the pattern of an Oriental carpet: you have to look at it closely, and more than once, before you really see everything.”

“Dehnal—Lieutenant al Qurashi—gave it to me. He left with his regiment, you know, this morning. They are crossing the desert, to an outpost quite some distance from here. I am so sorry to have seen him go.”

Preston’s face, where it was not protected by his beard, was tanned and, indeed, slightly burnt by the sun. Nevertheless, he almost seemed to blush.

“You and Lieutenant al Qurashi seem to have become very close friends in a short time,” he said, in a tone that was not quite as casual as he intended it to be, as he handed the dagger back.

Perce met Preston’s gaze without flinching and smiled, perhaps a bit defiantly.

“It’s not always the length of an acquaintance that is important,” he said. “It’s possible to develop very intense feelings for someone in a very short time. Haven’t you ever experienced something like that?”

“Yes. Yes, I have.” Preston seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. “Parting from someone you are close to...that is always

painful.” He looked at Perce with an oddly challenging expression on his face. “But you will have no difficulty finding new friends here, I am sure. Or somewhere else, for that matter.”

“Well, it isn’t as though one can simply interchange them at will, substituting the new ones for the old.”

“Oh?” Preston’s tone was almost belligerent. “Isn’t that exactly what you are accustomed to doing?”

“Mr. McCandless, if I did not already know you well enough to realize that you have a rather blunt way of speaking...if I were not aware of that, I might almost think that you meant to insult me.” Perce softened the statement by punctuating it, immediately, with his most ingratiating smile.

“Forgive me. I would not want to do anything to offend you.” Preston now sounded agitated. “I would rather die first,” he added, with a vehemence that startled Perce. “I...Let me speak frankly. Something about you seems to bring out the worst in me, through no fault of your own. You are everything I am not: handsome, rich, gregarious, carefree. People like you, they do not like me. I envy you. And envy is a vile emotion. I am ashamed of myself for feeling it.”

Perce felt a need to lighten the mood. “You are wrong about one thing. You are a handsome man yourself. And you are wrong about a second thing. You say people do not like you. But I like you.”

Preston flushed darker under his ruddy sunburn. “You should not say such things.”

“Why not?”

“We are both men. Men do not...notice each other’s looks and compliment one another on them.”

“Why not?” Perce repeated.

“It might be misconstrued.”

“Nonsense. Are you telling me that you, an artist, are not in the habit of observing other people and making aesthetic judgments about their appearance?”

Preston seemed calmer, and almost smiled. “I can see that I am



not likely to win many arguments with you.”

Some instinct warned Perce that it was time to change the subject. “We will not enter into any more debates just now. Tell me more about this place we are going to tomorrow. It is called Sidi Da...?”

“Sidi Daoud el Kebir. The mausoleum is supposed to be quite old, and the mosque, which has been built around it, and which is of somewhat more recent construction, is said to contain some outstanding examples of Islamic ceramic tile work. As you no doubt know, Mr. Fain, Islamic art avoids the depiction of the human figure and concentrates on decorative patterns and colors—this dagger, in fact, is a good example...”

Once you got Preston to start talking, Perce discovered, the artist could be quite eloquent and entertaining—provided, of course, he did not have to talk about himself. Perce listened to Preston with more than mere politeness, and even managed to ask a few intelligent questions. By the time the two men parted, Preston was almost relaxed. Perce, on the other hand, felt vaguely perplexed.

When Perce returned to the hotel, Tommy, ever alert to his master’s moods, noticed his preoccupation.

“Is anything wrong, sir?” he asked.

“What did you say? Oh...no, Tommy, everything is fine. Of course, I was sorry to say good-bye to Lieutenant al Qurashi and Captain Costinguet, and Guy, this morning. I will miss them. No, it is that man, Mr. McCandless, the painter. He infuriates me.”

“Did you and he quarrel about something?”

“No, on the contrary. I just spent an hour or so in his company, and he was actually pleasant, by his standards...We are even going to go riding together, early tomorrow morning. And yet, somehow, I feel that I do not know him one bit better than I did before. The man has a way of putting a wall up between himself and you. I simply cannot understand him.”

Tommy hesitated. “Well, there are a couple of obvious possible explanations. He may be the kind of man who only likes women, and

he is uncomfortable being around men such as you and me.”

“No, somehow I don’t think that is it.”

“Well, then, sir, the other logical explanation is...he wants you, and he is angry and frustrated because he knows he can’t have you.”

“Mr. McCandless? Attracted to me? Nonsense. Don’t make me laugh, Tommy.”

But Perce was not laughing. He was smiling to himself, almost imperceptibly, as though he was beguiled by some private thought. Tommy had seen that look on his master’s handsome face before. It always reminded him of back home in Boston, where Lancelot Fain kept several placid, fluffy Persian cats in the family mansion. Lancelot’s brother, at the moment, quite resembled one of those deceptively lazy-looking cats. A cat sitting in a window, looking out at the birds perched in a tree—tantalizingly out of the hungry feline’s reach.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **The Two Pillars**

“Mr. McCandless and I will be gone for most of the day,” Perce reminded Tommy when he got out of bed the next morning. “You’ll have the day off, for all practical purposes, so you should find something to amuse yourself, if you can.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, sir. I have already agreed to meet two French soldiers, later on this morning, at the Moorish baths. And Moussa told me he knows an Algerian gentleman, quite a wealthy one, from the sound of it, who has seen me and is interested in making my acquaintance. Moussa plans to introduce me to the gentleman over lunch. It may be quite an enjoyable afternoon. And a profitable one for Moussa, knowing him.”

“You scamp. I don’t know if I’m a bad influence on you or you’re a bad influence on me. In either event, we both ought to be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves. But enjoy yourself today. I certainly plan to enjoy my outing with Mr. McCandless.”

“Shall I put out your regular riding clothes, Mr. Fain?”

“Yes. No, wait. Just the jodhpurs and the boots. I won’t take along my jacket, or gloves, or hat. I doubt that Mr. McCandless has a real riding outfit. He will probably be rather casually dressed. I’ll just wear that khaki shirt and this old cap. I will take my white silk scarf along, though, in case I want to shield my head and face from the sun. I don’t want to look too smart so as not to embarrass Mr. McCandless.”

“A gentleman can never look *too* smart, Mr. Fain, in my opinion. And why are you so concerned about Mr. McCandless’s

sensitivities?”

“I’m just trying to be polite toward him, Tommy, that’s all.”

“Ah. ‘Polite.’ So that’s what we’re calling it now, are we?”

“Don’t be impertinent, Tommy. There’s nothing going on between Mr. McCandless and myself, nor is there any likelihood of there ever being anything. I’m just going out for a little excursion into the desert with him, that’s all. To amuse myself, and for the sake of the exercise. Mr. McCandless can’t help the fact that he’s not a rich man. I happen to find him...rather down-to-earth, and unpretentious, in a way that I find refreshing.”

*Ah yes, Tommy thought as he knelt down and helped Perce put on his immaculately polished boots. Down-to-earth. Unpretentious. Refreshing. So those are three more new names for the same old thing, I see!*

Tommy wondered how long it would be before he found himself trying to scrub out the stains left by watercolor paints from his master’s clothes.

\* \* \* \*

Preston was already at a table in the dining room, having his breakfast, when Perce came downstairs and joined him. Perce was glad he had decided to dress down a bit. Preston’s boots and trousers and shirt all looked comfortable for riding, and they were obviously old and well worn. He wore an actual turban, wound loosely around his head: the long strip of cloth had apparently once been blue, but it was faded to an irregular sort of pale violet-gray color. Perce still suspected he looked rather too carefully turned out next to his breakfast companion, but he knew that a ride through the dirt and dust of the outlying countryside would change that soon enough.

“That turban looks extremely practical,” he said as he sat down, and the waiter came over to take his order. “I wonder if I could wrap this scarf around my head like that, later on, if I get too hot. I’ll have

the same things M. McCandless is having,” he told the waiter.

“Sunstroke is always a danger in these climates,” Preston said.

He had with him his pochade kit, a folder containing blank sheets of watercolor paper, and no fewer than three canteens.

“I’ve filled my own canteen, as well,” Perce pointed out. “I see we’re not likely to run out of water.”

“I know how important water can be in the desert,” Preston said. “Even on a brief trip, such as the one we’re making. But only two of these are for drinking. The third one is for painting. We can get water to drink at the oasis, of course, but it might have to be strained through a handkerchief before it would be clear enough to be suitable for watercolor work.”

“So you’d drink water that you wouldn’t consider fit to paint with?”

“I’m afraid so. And I often have, in the past, sometimes with unpleasant results so far as my digestion is concerned. I do tend to put my work first, ahead of everything else.”

“Well, for lunch, we shall be drinking an excellent wine, not oasis water.”

As though on cue, the waiter brought not only Perce’s breakfast, but a wicker hamper with the things he had asked Mme Verdeau to prepare. Perce glanced inside it, at the contents.

“Oh, excellent,” he reported. “We shall have ourselves a fine lunch.”

“Moussa is outside, with two grooms and the horses,” the waiter informed him.

“Better yet. Tell them we will be only a few minutes.”

Perce ate greedily.

“I’m eager to get started,” he confessed.

They finished their breakfast and went outside. A smiling Moussa greeted them. Perce’s horse was a spirited gray Arabian stallion, which he had ridden before. Preston’s was a strong-looking chestnut that looked more docile, but probably did not lack temperament.

Moussa had chosen well, and Perce told him so.

“Let’s distribute the horses’ loads equally, if we can,” Perce suggested to Preston. “Give me one of those canteens, and maybe I can tie that folder down behind me, on top of the hamper.”

They secured their equipment, mounted, and rode out of the town. There was a road of sorts: wherever the ground consisted of more soil than sand, there was a reasonably well-marked trail, showing evidence of regular traffic. It led to the part of the river that was shallow enough for horsemen to cross without getting their boots wet.

“I imagine this river dries up almost completely at times,” Preston commented.

“Yes. I never realized how important water is, until I came to this country, where there is so little of it. It may be a little late for me to bring this up, Mr. McCandless, but how can we be sure we’re going in the right direction? All I see up ahead of us is desert.”

“I’ve been given very good directions. Basically, we stay on this trail, such as it is. We will pass through a number of small villages. They are located in oases, scattered at intervals all along this trail. It’s a matter of looking out for the next clump of palm trees, and the next smoke rising from people’s cooking fires, in the distance, and riding toward it. Like connecting the dots. I promise you we will not get lost.”

Perce, uncharacteristically for him, felt slightly tongue-tied. He was afraid of saying or doing something that might offend Preston. He decided on a casual conversational gambit.

“You ride very well,” Perce said. It was not just a pleasantry: his companion looked quite comfortable in the saddle.

“I usually get where I want to go, and come back, without serious mishaps. I’ll admit I’m no polo player,” Preston replied—with just the hint of a sly smile.

“Really, Preston—I may call you Preston, may I not?”

“Please do.”

“And you must start calling me Perce. But, really, Preston—when

you say things like that, you make me sound like a member of what is commonly called 'the idle rich.'"

"Well, you *are* rich, aren't you? And aren't you idle?"

"Oh dear. I'm afraid I have no answer to that. No effective way of refuting it."

"I'm sorry, Perce. But, after all, I have read magazine articles, complete with photographs, about your polo playing."

"And about my other activities, as well? Sporting and otherwise?"

"Ah..." Preston hesitated.

"No doubt you've heard gossip about me, as well."

"I try not to listen to gossip. And, of course, I have few friends with whom to gossip."

"Because you have been traveling so often lately?"

"Because of that...and because of other things. I suppose I'm a bit of a loner. A grouchy, embittered, irascible hermit." Preston smiled. "Not, I'm sure, your ideal of a traveling companion."

So Preston had a sense of humor, after all, Perce was glad to realize.

"I flatter myself that I'm tolerant of other people's shortcomings, and that I'm always open to new people and new experiences," Perce responded, mock-pompously. "That's why I came here to Algeria, after all."

They passed several villages. Each seemed to consist of a few low, windowless dried-earth houses, with whitewashed walls. The various animals—dogs, goats, mules, hens, the occasional camel—seemed to outnumber the human inhabitants. The sight of two white men on horseback invariably attracted the attention of half-naked children, who ran to watch as they rode past. Perce wondered if this was the same route that Alain, Dehnal, and their men had taken and whether the children had run to see the soldiers pass.

"Do you ever paint in oils, Preston?" Perce asked.

"Of course. But not very often when I travel, like this. For serious oil painting in large dimensions, as opposed to *plein air* work, one

really needs a studio. Watercolor is a much more convenient medium to work with in these circumstances.”

“Doesn’t the water dry very quickly on the paper in this hot, dry air?”

“Yes, but that can be an advantage, not a liability. You may have less time in which to work, while the paint is still wet, but, on the other hand, the fast drying time forces you to be quick and decisive about what you want to do. I find I can’t fuss with a picture too much, which I believe is usually a good thing. I find myself painting in a more spontaneous manner.”

Art was a safe, neutral topic for conversation. Perce told Preston about the paintings he had seen in Paris, either exhibited at the Salon or offered for sale in the city’s many commercial galleries. He also told Preston about his father’s extensive collection, which Perce had begun to add to. Preston was interested in his opinions, and their conversation was lively.

It took them about two hours to reach their destination, which was another, slightly larger village, one which had its own modest marketplace.

“This is the place,” Preston said. “Sidi Daoud el Kebir. The village takes its name from the zaouia.” He pointed to the next oasis, in the distance. “There. That low structure, of brick and stone, with the arches and the squat minaret. As you can see, it’s somewhat isolated. There are no other buildings around it.”

“Yes, except for those few clumps of trees, it’s surrounded by the desert,” Perce agreed. “It does look very picturesque. It looks old, and a bit dilapidated.”

“I suspect that the interior is better maintained than the outside, which is at the mercy of the elements.”

They bypassed the village, rode through the sand to the tomb compound, and dismounted, tying their horses to the branches of some shrubs. They approached the long, low outer wall, which was pierced by a small open doorway, and entered. They found



themselves in an open space before an archway, which led into the first of the enclosed courtyards surrounding the mosque. Under the archways, Arabs were sitting silently, as if immersed in profound reveries. They did not stir, but some of them stared at the two strangers—suspiciously, Perce thought. Beyond them, on the pavement, more Arabs were gathered, kneeling, bowing their heads to the ground, and muttering indistinct words of prayer in deep, almost guttural voices.

In the second and smaller court, before the portal of the mosque, small groups of men were clustered together, studying the Koran.

On the tiled floor were pairs upon pairs of shoes, sandals, and slippers, neatly arranged in rows.

A white-robed man approached them, gestured toward their feet, and spoke quietly, in Arabic. Preston, to Perce's surprise, answered the man in the same language.

"We must take off our boots and socks," Preston explained. "Then we can enter the mosque and see the tomb."

"You speak Arabic?"

"I have picked up a smattering of it, mostly while I was in Egypt, where I spent some time recently—painting the ancient ruins there, of course."

They shed their boots. Preston, Perce saw, had a hole in one of his socks. When he removed them, Perce further noticed that Preston's feet were large and well proportioned. Glancing at Preston's toes, Perce entertained decidedly secular thoughts about what he could do to them with his fingers and his mouth. He reminded himself, sternly, that they were in a sacred place and that he needed to get his mind off sex.

Not that he had any intention of having sex with Gordon Preston McCandless, even in the unlikely event that the artist would be interested in him in that way. But, if that was the case, then why was Perce getting so excited at the mere thought of possibly, eventually, seeing Preston remove more than just his footwear?

The attendant added their boots to the rows, then indicated a nearby doorway. Perce and Preston walked toward and through it, barefoot.

Within there was cool darkness. Vistas of arches stretched away to the front, to the right and left. These arches, like the domed ceiling overhead, displayed the intricate Islamic tile work that Preston had mentioned. On the floor, which was covered with an enormous expanse of carpet, men knelt and prayed. Perce followed Preston into the center of the space.

He saw, in the semidarkness, two wooden doors set between pillars. They were painted in fantastic abstract patterns of green and yellow and red, and were fastened with clamps and bolts of hammered copper that looked old and were green with verdigris. A motley assortment of many antique lamps hung from the high ceiling above these doors, suspended on chains of varied lengths: there were spheres of purple and yellow glass, and brass and bronze and copper lamps of many sizes and shapes, some with tiny panes of multicolored or transparent glass, others with solid bodies, and burning wicks protruding from their tops. Two tattered and faded banners of pale peach-pink and creamy white silk, fringed with tarnished gold thread and embroidered with elaborate patterns of flowers and scrolls, were tied to the pillars with thick, braided silk cords, which themselves were faded with age.

Another white-robed attendant had approached them, and, standing at Preston's elbow, he bowed and addressed a few words to him in Arabic. Preston replied, then turned to Perce.

"We are in luck," he reported. "The doors are usually opened only on a few days each year, on certain Muslim holy days. Since we are quite obviously persons of importance—I think this man assumes we are explorers, or archaeologists—he will open them for us so we can see inside."

The attendant was already drawing back the clamps and bolts. The doors opened inward. They creaked slightly on their hinges as the

man gently pushed first the left one, then the right, partway back to create a narrow aperture. He picked up a small oil lamp from the floor and, gesturing to the two visitors with his free hand, held out the lamp so that it feebly illuminated the space that lay beyond the threshold.

Perce peered in. It was not a large space, and it was dominated by a sepulcher of dark green marble, set in the exact center of the elaborately tiled floor and surrounded by a low railing, also of carved and pierced stonework. A single, massive, unlit lamp hung from a chain above the sepulcher. Everything, perhaps not surprisingly, was coated by a thick layer of dust—in stark contrast to the rest of the interior of the mosque, which was immaculately maintained.

Preston, who was standing close beside him so that he, too, could look through the narrow gap between the doors, was eagerly drawing in his sketchbook.

“It is extraordinary,” he whispered.

“It’s rather creepy, if you ask me,” Perce whispered back.

Preston engaged the attendant in further conversation—stalling for time, Perce suspected, so that he could finish his pencil sketch.

From the shadowy interior of the mosque, all around them, came forth a ceaseless sound of prayer to join the confused murmurs of prayers penetrating from the courtyards without. Perce wondered who the man had been who was buried in that green marble sepulcher, and what he had done during his life to deserve the honor of being entombed here, in the middle of the desert, and in such a strange combination of austerity and splendor.

And then Perce suddenly remembered something: “*I have seen you two, standing side by side, between the pillars, in front of the doors, in front of the tomb.*” He had read those enigmatic words, or heard them, somewhere, recently, had he not?

Of course. The marabout. Not the one long dead, whose remains were encased in that green marble sepulcher, but his living counterpart: the half-crazed holy man who had accosted Perce in the marketplace. What else had he said? What else had he claimed to see

in his dreams?

*"The one with whose destiny your destiny is knit. Your two paths have already converged, although you do not know it. You think there is a chasm separating you from this man. A chasm as broad and deep as the gulf that separates the blessed, who rejoice in paradise, from the damned, who are forever veiled in the shroud of eternal fire. But the chasm can be bridged. It will be bridged."*

Coincidence, Perce told himself. Superstitious nonsense. Mystical mumbo jumbo.

And yet...wasn't it just possible that some people were granted the gift, the terrible gift, no doubt, of second sight? His distant Irish ancestors had certainly believed so.

*It will be bridged*, he thought. Some impulse made him correct himself: *It has been bridged. Already. To some extent, surely?*

Preston put away his sketchbook and pencil and spoke to the attendant, who set down his lamp and carefully closed and secured the doors. The man bowed again and walked noiselessly away.

Preston glanced, sideways, at Perce, curiously. "Is something the matter?" he asked, again in a whisper.

"No," Perce whispered back. "Why do you ask?"

"You look so solemn all of a sudden."

"This is a solemn place. I wonder if we should kneel as a gesture of respect?"

"I suppose it couldn't do any harm."

They knelt. Preston lowered his head, as though in prayer, although Perce doubted that his companion was actually praying. For his part, Perce took a final, furtive look around at the architecture and embellishments of this cool, dark, faintly sinister interior space.

"Shall we go back outside?" he finally whispered. He suddenly felt slightly uncomfortable in this solemn, otherworldly atmosphere of ceaseless prayer.

They rose and retraced their steps. Perce offered the attendant who guarded the rows of footwear a coin, which the man smilingly

refused.

“Oh dear. I hope I didn’t offend him,” Perce said.

“Don’t worry about it. I suspect he considers it an honor, or an act of devotion, to serve here.”

They picked up their footwear.

“Let’s not put our boots and socks back on until we have to leave,” Perce said on an impulse. “Let’s run about outside barefoot, the way the native men do.”

Preston smiled. “All right.”

“I think I’ll roll up my trousers, too—and to hell with what Mr. Tommy Flanagan may have to say about it.”

“Tommy Flanagan? Is that your valet’s name?”

“Yes. He’s more like my lord and master, and my jailer. He bosses me around terribly.”

“Then why do you put up with him?”

“Because I love him,” Perce said, simply. “He’s like a younger brother to me.”

“You have an older brother, don’t you?”

“Yes, Lancelot. He’s a bit of a stuffed shirt.”

“Is he married?”

“He recently married a charming girl, to whom he was engaged for a long time. Lance postponed the wedding, because of our father’s death. Lance thought there had to be an appropriate period of mourning, you see. He’s very proper and always does what is expected of him. I, on the other hand—I suppose I’m improper, and I do as I please. But I mourn my father, too, in my own way. I just don’t make a display of it.” Perce sighed. “It can’t have been easy for my father, having me for a son. I’m sorry—now, of course, when it’s too late—that he and I were not closer. I could’ve done more to try to bridge that gap between us.”

By now they were walking in the bright sunlight outside the compound, and Perce gleefully kicked up the hot sand with the balls of his feet.

“You look like a little boy, Perce, when you do that.”

“I feel like a little boy on holiday. There’s something invigorating and liberating about this country. It makes me want to run wild.”

“Do you need an excuse to do that?”

“No.” Perce laughed. “I run wild every chance I get.”

They went to where the horses were tethered.

“Where do you want to set up, to paint, first?” Perce asked.

“Perhaps over there, under those palms. We can tie up the horses again, there, in the shade.”

“And we can have our lunch, before you get too engrossed in your work. I’m hungry.”

“Very well.”

The vantage point met with Preston’s approval, so he began to set up his painting kit while Perce broke out the hamper. They sat in the shade and ate and drank. They spoke of inconsequential things—what they had just seen inside the mosque, the view in front of them now, the desolate look of the desert all around them, the heat. Then Preston, with not only his trouser legs rolled up, but his shirtsleeves, as well, got to work, while Perce sat on the sand and enjoyed another glass of wine.

“I’m afraid you will be bored, just watching me work, in this heat,” Preston warned as he filled a little tin cup with water from one of the canteens.

“Who, me? Not at all. You don’t mind talking while you work, do you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then we can talk to amuse ourselves. And to begin to get to know one another a little better. What shall we talk about? You decide.”

“I’m glad you say that, Perce, because...I must confess that I had an ulterior motive in asking you to come out here with me today.”

“Yes? What was it?”

“I wanted to have the chance to talk to you again, alone, with no

one to interrupt or overhear us.”

“We seem to be quite alone out here in the open. The Arabs are all inside the compound.”

Preston didn’t look at Perce as he spoke—admittedly, because he was concentrating on the sheet of paper in front of him and the brushstrokes he made on it. He spoke with a certain telltale intensity.

“You are what they call a man of the world, a sophisticated man. A man who is more experienced than I am, when it comes to...certain things that many men might be uncomfortable discussing. Would you be offended if we spoke quite openly and honestly about sexual matters?”

“Not at all. Please say whatever you want to say to me. And ask me whatever you’d like to ask me.”

“Is what I’ve heard true—that you only like men and have no use for women?”

Perce smiled. “That’s not entirely accurate. I have nothing against women. I like them. I just don’t want to sleep with them. But, yes, all joking aside—I have physical relations with other men. Every chance I get.”

“Do you think it’s a sickness, like some medical men say?”

“Don’t be absurd. It’s an inclination.”

“Have you always felt this way? Had these urges, I mean?”

“Always. Even when I was a little boy, I had what you would call ‘crushes’ on the male servants at home. And on other boys, at school. Then, later, when I began to have sexual feelings, they were always inspired by, and directed toward, mature, virile men. When I masturbated—really, Preston, you don’t have to look at me like that, or blush! We’re both men. We can talk about such things. When I masturbated, it was always older men I thought about. When I say ‘older,’ some of them must have been all of twenty. I knew what I wanted. It wasn’t long before I threw myself at one of these men and begged him to initiate me. By the time I left home to go to college, I was already an accomplished lover of other men. You know the rest.

I've never denied what I am. I've never seen any logical reason why I should. Society condemns it, but society isn't always right. My choice was to be honest with myself and with others or to live a lie. And not everyone is so quick to judge and to condemn. There are writers, especially in Germany, who argue that homosexuality is perfectly normal for some men. It is merely an alternative means of sexual expression. But you're letting me do all the talking. What about you?"

Preston was once again keeping his eyes fixed on his work.

"I'll tell you my story, Perce. It's not a complicated one. I come from an ordinary family. My father was, and is, a shopkeeper. We were not well off. I did all sorts of work, when I was growing up, as soon as I was old enough, to help my family make ends meet. I liked working with my hands—carpentry, bricklaying, that sort of thing. But I always liked to draw and paint, too. At first it was a pastime. It wasn't until later that I began to think I could earn money doing it. I began by painting scenery for theaters—that sort of thing.

"When I first began to get serious about being an artist, I went to London to study, of course, and I began to run around with a bohemian crowd. I thought an artist was supposed to have unconventional experiences. I experimented with other men. I liked it, I can't deny that. But I felt guilty, ashamed. Later on, I had an affair with an older man, an art dealer. I'll be honest—I liked him, but I also knew that he could promote my career. I wasn't above prostituting myself to him, in that sense, to a certain degree—although, of course, I didn't think of it in that way at the time.

"Finally, I decided that I was being foolish, that all this was just a phase I was going through, that I needed to discipline myself and settle down. I got married. We had two children, a boy and a girl."

"How odd. I had not thought of you as being married, but now that you have told me you are, it seems to explain a great deal. You must have married young. How old are your children now?"

"My son is six, and my daughter is four."

"You must love them very much and miss them terribly. I'm



sorry, Preston, that was a stupid thing for me to say. Of course you love and miss them. That goes without saying. Forgive me.”

“I only wish you could know what it’s like to have children, Perce. It can tear you apart, sometimes, but there’s nothing in life to compare to it. But to go on with my story. I was starting to have a modest success as an artist. I could make my living at it. I thought I was happy. I thought nothing would ever change, although of course I had fantasies about eventually becoming rich and famous, and respected.

“Then I met a man. He was a bachelor. He wasn’t wealthy, but he was reasonably well-to-do, which gave him a certain degree of independence. I fell in love with him. I betrayed my wife, the way other married men betray their wives with mistresses: lying, sneaking around, running off to be with my lover every chance I got. Some sort of sex madness seemed to have descended upon me. I was addicted to him, to what we did together in bed, the way some men become addicted to drink or to drugs.

“Finally I became so insane, so besotted, that I ran away with my lover. I wanted to live with him. I didn’t care about my wife and children. I abandoned them. Of course, we were found out, and there was a scandal. Not a big one, because, fortunately for my family, I wasn’t famous. My name meant nothing to most people outside the small London art world. My wife sued for divorce. I was forbidden to have any contact with my children until they reach their majority, because of my ‘moral turpitude and depraved way of life,’ as the court decree put it.

“My lover and I were afraid to stay in England—not only because of the scandal, but because we were afraid we might be prosecuted. We went abroad. I painted. He lived on his income. We were happy together, for a little while. Then we began to fall out with one another, and finally I got what I deserved. He met another man, and he betrayed me, as I had betrayed my wife. They went off together, and I was alone.

“Let me be honest, with myself, and with you. Why shouldn’t he want to leave me and find his pleasure elsewhere? I wasn’t much fun to be with, outside of bed, by then. All I could think about, or talk about, was what I had done, how remorseful I felt. I hated myself. And yes, I began to resent my lover, too, to blame him for what we had done, for the choice I had made. Would you spend five minutes with a man like that, Perce, if you could avoid it?”

“I continued to work hard so I could send money home to support my family. This was all handled by lawyers, of course, because my wife wanted nothing to do with me. Then, recently, her lawyer contacted me, to inform me that my wife—my former wife, I should say—had remarried. The lawyer said that there is no further need for me to support her, or the children. Their stepfather will take care of all their needs. Can you imagine how I felt when I read that? It was as though I had been erased. Eliminated completely from my children’s lives. Well, I still have some pride left, some sense of responsibility. I had my own lawyer in England set up a trust fund for my children. I send money to be deposited into it, everything I can spare. When my son and daughter reach their majority, that money, and the interest it accumulates, will be theirs.” Preston paused and dabbed his brush in a watercolor pan to pick up the pigment.

“Preston, I don’t know what to say.”

“What is there to say? I threw my life away for a man I thought I loved, and who I thought loved me, but who turned out to be worthless. Not that I have any right to blame him. I’m no better than he. If anything, I’m worse. At least he did not have a wife and children to drag down into disgrace with him.”

“Preston, you must somehow find the strength to put all this behind you and move on. You are still a young man. You have your health, and your work. You have your whole life ahead of you in which to accomplish something. I know you must think these are empty words—”

“They *are* empty. I am empty. You say I have my whole life

ahead of me? What a depressing thought. I have nothing. I am nothing. I am an automaton. I go to bed at night and sleep. I get up in the morning. In between, I paint. Why? Because I don't know what else to do. I travel about, I send my pictures to anyone who will buy them, they pay me, and I send money to the bank in England. I feel nothing."

"That isn't true. You feel a great deal. Too much, perhaps."

"I would like to numb myself. If I could afford it, I would drink absinthe, or smoke opium or hashish, every day. But I'm afraid it would interfere with my work. And I must work. I *will* see to it that my boy and girl lack for nothing—stepfather or no stepfather."

"If I can help you in any way—"

"What can you do for me? That's the irony of it. What do you have to offer? Money. But even your money can't buy everything. It can't change the past. It can't put me back in the little house my wife and I used to live in, with the children. Your money can't undo my disgrace. Even if you were to write a check for a million pounds and give it to me, to put in my children's trust fund, I couldn't take it. I would despise myself for taking it. It would destroy whatever reason I do have to go on living. And I would despise you, too, for thinking you had the power to fix people's lives with a stroke of a pen on a check."

"You're very angry."

"I'm angry with myself, not with you. And believe me, Perce, I'm grateful to you, just for being here, just for listening to me. I don't believe I've ever spoken to anyone about all this the way I've just spoken to you. Even with my lover—I learned to be guarded in what I said to him, in letting him know my true feelings. I was afraid I would drive him away if I was too open about certain things—which, of course, is exactly what happened anyway."

He paused again, used his forearm to wipe his perspiring forehead, and then vigorously rinsed his brush out in the little tin cup.

"I'm exhausted. And this painting is finished. It's not bad, if I do

say so myself. Probably because, the whole time I was talking to you, I was painting without thinking about what I was doing, painting by pure instinct.”

“Come and sit down beside me here, and try to relax. Rest for a while, and then we can move to another spot, and you can begin another picture, if you want.”

“I’ll have another glass of that wine, if there’s any left,” Preston said as he slumped down on the sand next to Perce, who silently filled the glass and handed it to him.

They sat and said nothing, while Preston drank his wine, for several minutes.

Perce was the one who broke the silence. “May I ask you a question?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“You have not been celibate since you broke up with your lover, have you?”

“No, but how did you know that?”

“I guessed. The sex drive is very strong. And you were no longer accountable to anyone, were you, except yourself? There was nothing to hold you back.”

“True.”

“Let me venture a further guess. These liaisons have not been very satisfactory, have they, on the whole? Emotionally, I mean.”

“These liaisons, as you call them, have been sordid, impersonal contacts, for the most part. Purely physical gratification. Oh, there have been a few exceptions. This will amuse you. In Cairo, I actually took up with an Egyptian woman. She became my mistress. She was beautiful, and kind, and very sensual. Perhaps I thought she could ‘cure’ me. I even thought about offering her marriage, because by then my divorce had been finalized. I had fantasies of having children with this woman, of starting a new family with her. But of course, I was deluding myself. I never felt with her that hot, helpless lust, that desire, that I always experience when I am attracted to another man.

“Apart from her, I have met some agreeable men, especially during my recent travels. Men who, for some reason I cannot fathom, seem to be attracted to me and to enjoy my company—for a little while, at least. I am grateful to them. But except for the pleasure I take in the sex act, I feel nothing for very long. I’m glad to move on.” He flashed Perce a bitter smile. “At the risk of offending you, Perce—perhaps we have that in common.”

“I’m not offended, but I disagree. I enjoy the act of sex, of course. But I enjoy the company and the companionship of men, as well. You think I’m some sort of homosexual Don Juan, exploiting other men for my own selfish pleasure, don’t you? But much of my pleasure comes from the excitement and the pleasure and the satisfaction of my partner. Or partners, if there happens to be more than one at a time. I won’t lie to you about that. Such situations, which many people would no doubt call depraved, can be extremely fulfilling. And I have managed to remain good friends with all of the men I have been intimate with—provided, of course, I remained in contact with them. For, like you, I have had my share of fleeting encounters. And even those temporary connections, which may have lasted for no more than a night, or even for no more than an hour, have usually had a certain undeniable...a sense of warmth and fellowship, I would say, about them. The brevity of the encounter has nothing to do with its intensity.”

“But do you believe that men like us are capable of lasting relationships?”

“The equivalent of marriages, you mean?”

“Yes. The kind of marriage, unlike mine, in which there is fidelity. Or even the acceptance of the possibility of infidelity, which would at least be honest.”

“I don’t know. I do believe that we are men just like other men, except in this one thing. And that means that, like all men, we are capable of good and evil, and everything that lies in between.”

Preston put his empty wineglass back in the hamper and stood up.

“I think I will move my equipment over there and do another painting, from that angle. No, don’t get up, Perce. Stay here, if you’re comfortable. Don’t be offended, but I feel as though I am talked out, at least for the time being. I have some things running through my mind now, as a result of what we have just talked about, that I want to try to think through. Are you sure you’re not bored? You don’t want to head back?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m enjoying myself. I, too, am thinking...I’m not sure about exactly what,” Perce confessed.

Preston had picked up his pochade kit and was carrying it a short distance away, striding barefoot through the sand.

Perce watched Preston paint. The Englishman stood behind his pochade box, on its tripod, dividing his attention among the brick and stone structures in the near distance, the paper in front of him, and his paint pans and little palette. He didn’t look at Perce, who thus felt free to observe him quite openly. The bright sunlight glinted on Preston’s glossy brown beard and reflected from the tiny droplets of sweat on his face and bare forearms. Perce noticed how sturdily built Preston was: he rather resembled a Colossus of Rhodes, standing there erect with his legs positioned wide apart and his bare feet and ankles half buried in the sand.

“It needs more raw sienna,” he said out loud, but to himself, at one point, as he mixed a color on his palette with a few drops of water and his brush.

After a few minutes, he did address Perce, although without taking his eyes off his work.

“The sun makes the colors here change constantly,” Preston remarked. “You think the sand is yellow, for example, or brown. But it’s everything from white and pale gray, through the whole range of beiges and golds and browns, even oranges and reds, all the way to near black. It all depends on the time of day and the angle of the sun. The variety of color here is amazing. I can never get enough of it...even though it’s just about impossible to reproduce with paint.”

“Lots of things are elusive, or changeable, and hard to capture,” Perce replied.

“Oh? Such as?”

Evidently, Preston was once again in a mood to talk—if not necessarily about personal matters.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Perce admitted. “Feelings, perhaps. Other people. Can you ever really know what another person is thinking or feeling?”

“I think it’s difficult to conceal things from someone you are physically intimate with,” Preston said.

“I agree. It’s hard to lie, in bed, although some men manage to do so.”

“Maybe that’s been my problem. I don’t hold anything back. I may seem to be too...needy.”

“Don’t change. I prefer honesty to calculation, to putting on an act. The kind of men who are afraid to see honest emotions, honest reactions, and to respond to them—well, those are the kind of men who aren’t good for much, except a brief diversion, in the first place.”

“I’ll be finished with this picture in a little while.”

“Don’t hurry on my account, Preston. I like it out here. I am enjoying myself.”

“I’m still trying to get the sand right.”

Perce plunged his hand into the sand he was sitting on, past his wrist.

“Yes, it’s elusive, too, isn’t it? The desert is elusive. It seems to stay the same, and yet now I can see how it’s always changing, subtly. Feel how warm the sand is,” he commented, marveling at the feel of the grains in his hand. “It’s like a living thing. It almost seems to breathe.” He pulled his hand free and let the sand trickle slowly out of his grasp. “I may take a nap,” he told Preston, who was leaning forward, his face close to his paper, making a series of tiny brushstrokes.

“Go ahead,” Preston invited him.

Perce lay on his back, with his hands cupped behind his head, and gazed up dreamily at the cloudless blue sky. Tommy would lecture him if he came back from this excursion with sand in his clothes, but Perce was willing to risk his valet's wrath.

He began to feel decidedly drowsy. He closed his eyes to shut out the glare of the strong sunlight.

He didn't realize that he had actually fallen asleep, until, returning gradually to a pleasantly groggy sort of semiconsciousness, he sensed Preston's presence. Preston was kneeling beside him.

"Perce," Preston said in a whisper. "Don't open your eyes. Don't move."

"Why? Don't tell me there's a scorpion about to crawl on me or something like that?"

"Don't make jokes. In fact, don't talk for a moment. Don't talk, don't open your eyes, and don't move."

Perce had no idea what kind of a game this was that Preston wanted them to play, but he was willing to give it a try. He did his best to remain absolutely motionless. He became acutely aware of the warm sand he was lying on, the hot sun beating down on his body and his face, the dry stillness of the air. He waited, patiently.

He sensed that Preston was leaning over him. He fought the urge to open his eyes. And then, to his delight, he felt Preston's hand on his cheek, the palm moist with sweat, cupping his face, giving it the faintest hint of a caress. Next, Preston's beard, surprisingly soft, was rubbing against his face, and Preston's bearded lips were touching his, kissing him. Perce opened his mouth in blind acceptance and invitation. Preston's mouth pressed down against his, more firmly. Their tongue tips touched. Still keeping his eyes squeezed tightly shut, Perce reached out and up with one hand, found the thick, soft locks of hair on the back of Preston's head, and parted them, and touched his fingertips to Preston's scalp, and exerted a gentle but insistent pressure, prolonging their oral contact and intensifying the kiss. He heard and felt Preston let out a muffled little moan of



pleasure, and he answered it with a deep, sensuous groan of his own.

Preston broke the kiss and sat up beside him again. Perce lifted himself slightly on one elbow. He assumed it was now permissible to open his eyes. Preston was blushing—actually blushing, like a schoolboy!—and avoiding Perce’s gaze, looking off into the distance.

“Well, that was definitely preferable to being stung by a scorpion,” Perce declared.

“I’m sorry, Perce.”

“Don’t apologize. That was some kiss.”

“Some impulse came over me. You looked so...desirable, lying there asleep. I felt I had to kiss you. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“You may kiss me again, if you want to. And then we can deal with any other uncontrollable impulses that you may be suffering from.”

“We can’t do this.”

“No, maybe not here. It feels good, lying here in the hot sand, but I imagine it would be a lot less comfortable if we took our clothes off. We can ride back to town and go up to my room—”

“I mean, we can’t do this. We can’t be intimate. Not here, not back at the hotel, not anywhere.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know why. Yes, I do. Oh, I don’t know what I’m saying. You confuse me. You torment me. I can’t think clearly, or speak coherently, when I’m with you.”

“Surely that’s not true. You have been speaking to me quite coherently all this time, up until now.”

“Perhaps. But now I feel myself to be in such a wretched state.”

“There’s a name for your condition, Preston. It’s called being in love.”

“I’m not in love with you, Perceval Fain.”

“Well, that’s not very flattering for me to hear.”

“Stop teasing me. Stop trying to seduce me. You don’t have to. The damage has already been done. I’m not in love with you. I’m

lusting for you. I want you. I desire you—you know I do. I’m going mad from my desire for you.”

“Then why not—?”

“I can’t sleep with you the way I might sleep with some other man I happened to pick up and forget about him the next morning, after rutting with him all night long, like a couple of mindless animals,” Preston said, brutally, the words coming out of him in a rush. “No, from you, I’d want more, and you’re not the man to give it. I won’t let myself get involved with another man, not for more than that one night. That sort of thing has already caused me heartbreak and disgrace. I won’t put myself through that again. Not even for you.”

Perce, always so quick to pick up on other men’s signals and clues, verbal or otherwise, immediately seized upon Preston’s last words.

“Not even for me? What’s so different about me?”

“Don’t be coy. It doesn’t become you. You know very well that you are a handsome man, a desirable man, that men—men who share our preferences—find you hard to resist. How you must enjoy it, seeing men lose their heads over you, making fools of themselves over you. But it’s not just your looks. There’s some force of personality in you that drains men like me of their free will. I don’t understand it, but I can feel it working in me, making me weaken, and it frightens me. *You* frighten me.” Preston paused, waiting for a response. When Perce said nothing, Preston went on. “Are you angry with me for talking to you like this?”

“No. Now that we’ve started speaking so honestly to each other, sharing our innermost thoughts, why should we stop? But you’ve given me something to think about. I know you think I’m silly and superficial and useless. But I can be serious, too, when I want to be. How you must despise me, and probably for good reason.”

“I don’t despise you. I’m...in thrall to you. Under your spell. And it terrifies me. Spare me. Spare me, if there’s any decency in you. Don’t destroy me.”

"Preston. For God's sake. Try not to be quite so...tragic about it. Nobody ever died, or went mad, or even suffered very much, when it comes to that, because he chose *not* to have sex with another man."

"I think I may be going mad right now."

"Listen to me. A little while ago, you asked me, what can I do for you? Now I know. I can be your friend, if you'll let me. How long has it been since you've had another man as a friend? You've spent too much time alone. It's all bottled up inside you, guilt and rage and frustration and despair. You've got to let it out, or you'll burst. I know I'm selfish and foolish, but surely I'm better than nothing. You can talk to me. You know that now. You can tell me anything, and I won't judge you. Ask me for my honest opinion on something, though, and I'll try my best to give it. I promise you, I respect you too much to lie to you or to tell you what I think you might like to hear. But you must promise to be just as honest with me and not spare my feelings."

"Perce, you are so very...sweet."

"And you are so very vulnerable. I wish I could do something about that. I wish I could just—" Perce scooped up a double handful of sand and let it trickle out from between his fingers again. "I wish I could somehow just pour strength and confidence and optimism into you, the way this sand pours out of my hands." He brushed his palms together to shake the loose grains from them. "What time is it? How long was I asleep?"

"About half an hour. I've done my other picture. I think that may be enough for today."

"Come on, then. Maybe we should start back to town. I think this has all been a rather intense experience for you, hasn't it? We can talk again, later. Anytime you want."

"Yes, let's go."

They brushed the sand from their feet as best they could and pulled their socks and boots back on. Perce almost hated to be wearing the footwear again: it seemed to signal, in a sense, a transition from the freedom of the open spaces of the desert, back to

the constraints and artificialities of the so-called “civilized” world. They packed up their things, got on the horses, and rode—slowly, not pushing the horses too hard in the fiercely blazing afternoon sun, under the cloudless blue sky.

They stopped once, at one of the villages, to rest the horses and to drink from their canteens. They didn’t talk much. Often, however, as they rode along, side by side, they glanced at one another and smiled—the deceptively simple, yet eloquent, smiles of men who had reached a certain understanding and who now had few secrets from one another.

It was a pleasant journey. Perce didn’t want it to end.

## Chapter Ten

### Convergence

In Tin Ouzel, at the hotel, Preston and Perce pressed a rather sheepish-looking Jean-Baptiste Verdeau into service to go and fetch the grooms to take the horses back to the stable. Perce smiled as he watched Jean-Baptiste walk away.

“I’m glad I’m not his age,” Perce confessed. “Even for me, it was difficult, at first. To accept myself for what I am.”

Preston sighed. “But eventually, of course, you did accept it. I’m not certain I have—even now.”

“We have a little time to kill before dinnertime,” Perce observed. “Have you had enough of me for a while? Shall I leave you alone, to get some rest?”

“No, Perce. I have an idea of how to spend some time. Come up to my room, and I will show you some of my pictures, if you’d like to see them.”

“I would, very much. I’ll have the waiter send some nice cold drinks up to us.”

Preston’s room was not unlike his own in its proportions, but in the short time he had been there, Preston had managed to make it rather chaotic. He had, indeed, rigged up a cord, strung from one wall to another, from which to hang the clothes he washed out himself so they could dry. One of his suitcases sat, open, on a chair. Another, also opened, was on the floor nearby, with clothes spilling out of both of them. Other items of clothing were strewn about on the floor and on top of the bed. A small trunk’s open lid revealed that it held Preston’s surplus art supplies. And, everywhere, there were stacks of

portfolios and folders, containing drawings and watercolors.

Like Perce, he had picked up a few local items to make the room more his own: notably, a very brightly colored rug, and several overstuffed cushions with elaborately embroidered covers of woven wool. The latter were strewn about at random, on the unmade bed and on the floor.

Rather shyly, Preston offered, for Perce's inspection, a succession of watercolors, mostly landscapes, but some of them portraits. They had been painted in Spain, the South of France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and, of course, Northern Africa.

"I've been traveling around the circumference of the Mediterranean, you see," Preston joked. "Clockwise!"

"But these are exquisite, Preston," Perce said sincerely. "I particularly like these views of the ancient Egyptian temples and tombs. You must let me buy some of them from you instead of sending them off to your dealers."

Preston looked slightly embarrassed. Perce assumed that Preston must be thinking he had shown an interest in purchasing some of the pictures as a form of charity. Perce was about to apologize, and to insist that nothing could be further from his intent—he really did like the paintings—when Preston spoke.

"I have some other watercolors which you might be interested in seeing. They are figure studies. Male nudes. Not the sort of thing I can show to just anyone, of course."

"Really? Please let me see them. I should very much like to."

Preston, Perce noticed, kept this particular portfolio discreetly hidden away, in a bottom drawer, covered up by his carelessly folded shirts.

Perce sat on the edge of the bed, took the portfolio Preston handed him, and eagerly examined its contents. There were naked men of many nationalities, from Basques to Sicilians to Cypriots to Levantines to Egyptians to Sudanese, and the range of lovingly rendered skin colors was extraordinary. Something about the style of

the paintings struck him as oddly familiar.

Then Perce noticed the initials, penciled in the lower right-hand corner of some of these pictures: *G.P.M.* Instantly, he made the connection. Gordon Preston McCandless.

“Why, I already own one of your pictures!” he exclaimed. “It’s hanging on the wall in my room—a picture of a black Algerian man, standing nude, against the sand and the sky, underneath the sun. I bought it in M. Robineaux’s bookshop, in Paris.”

Preston actually blushed. “Oh, M. Robineaux? He’s a decent fellow. He pays at a fair rate, unlike a lot of other art dealers I could mention. Of course, he doesn’t carry my *real* work, the landscapes and so on. He’s only interested in the male nudes. Not that I’m complaining. It’s a steady source of income. But I suppose I ought to be embarrassed, to be doing all those paintings of naked men, just to titillate—” He checked himself.

Perce smiled. “No, don’t censor yourself. You were about to say, to titillate a lot of jaded, decadent, perverted men, like me—weren’t you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I think you and I are going to have to make a pact. We must agree to stop apologizing to each other over every little thing. And I think these male nudes of yours are wonderful. You have no reason to be ashamed of them. Tell me, is it difficult to find models?”

“Oddly enough, no. Lots of men are proud of their bodies and want to show them off. Of course, I always offer the models at least a token fee. But I find that the ones who are eager to pose for money are often the least effective models. They tend to be stiff and self-conscious. And, naturally, they’re often prostitutes, who assume that the posing is just an excuse for further intimacies. They’re annoyed if you don’t want to hire them for that, as well. The men who are willing to pose, just for the hell of it, so to speak, are usually the most interesting ones to work with. Not that I haven’t ended up having sex with some of *them*, I must admit.”

"I know you've been specializing in these various exotic types, from the looks of it, but you really ought to get my valet, Tommy, to pose for you. He'd probably be very good at it, and he has a fine body."

"Do you really think he'd be willing to?"

"I know he would. You could do some of these quick studies, of him. To send to M. Robineaux. And, if you decide you like working with Tommy, I would like to commission one or two large watercolors of him. They'd look splendid in my bedroom back home in Boston. And you can do one or two for him to keep, as well. He's such an egotist, I'm sure he wouldn't mind having pictures of himself to look at."

"Of course, I couldn't afford to pay him very much."

"Oh, Tommy will do it for free. And not just to please me. He's quite uninhibited, and perhaps even a bit of an exhibitionist. I'll speak to him about it. And, for that matter, I'd be perfectly willing to pose for you, myself, at any time. Nude, of course."

"But, Perce! A gentleman like you just doesn't *do* such things!"

"That's what you think. I could tell you some stories...and maybe I will, someday. Anyway, I wish you'd stop referring to me as 'a gentleman,' as though I were some sort of a weird, exotic subspecies of the human race that has just been discovered and catalogued by scientists."

They parted—reluctantly—and Perce hurried to his own room to clean up and change for dinner.

When he was dressed, he sat down at the desk, reached for a hairbrush, but did not actually use it. Instead, he sat there in a kind of stupor, lost in thought as he restlessly toyed with the brush in his hand.

Tommy was about to make a crack about the condition of Perce's discarded clothes—socks filled with sand, no less!—when he noticed his master's preoccupation.

"Are you unwell, Mr. Fain?" he asked anxiously. "Maybe it



wasn't wise to exert yourself so much today."

"No, I'm fine, Tommy. I'm...I may be a little tired, but I had a delightful outing."

*Delightful*, he thought with a smile, seemed like an odd way to describe it. And yet, the time he had spent with Preston, emotionally wrenching though it had been, *had* been enjoyable. Perce would not have missed a moment of it. He was eager to see Preston again, to spend more time in his company. To talk to him again. To do what little he could to try to comfort him.

"Good. Let me do that for you, sir." Tommy took the brush and applied it to Perce's hair.

Perce examined the bottles he had purchased from the perfume vendor, which were lined up in a row on the desk. He chose one and began to dab its contents onto his wrists and behind his ears.

Tommy crinkled his nose. "What is that strange scent you're putting on, sir?"

"It's *hyraceum*. I'm surprised you're not familiar with it," Perce said with an air of smug superiority. He conveniently neglected to mention that he had never heard the word *hyraceum*, himself, until the morning when he'd purchased the perfumes at the bazaar. The morning, he now recalled, when he'd met the marabout.

"It smells like cat piss."

"Oh, don't exaggerate, Tommy. I'll grant you it's a bit intense. I find it exotic."

"Exotic, huh? I could name a dozen barrooms, and other dives, back home in Boston, that smell just as 'exotic' as that stuff does on you."

Perce went down to dinner. Preston was already in the lobby, waiting for him, and Perce was amused, but also rather touched, to see that Preston had made considerable efforts to smarten himself up—no doubt for Perce's sake. He was wearing clean trousers and shirt, and a tie of a daring, for him, color combination: bright pink with narrow cobalt blue stripes. His hair had been given a thorough brushing, and

he smelled distinctly of soap.

They had seated themselves at a table in the dining room, and had ordered, before Preston caught Perce's own effluence.

"Are you wearing a perfume made from hyraceum, by any chance?"

"Yes. I'm told it's made from some animal or other?"

"The rock hyrax, yes. That's a small mammal, not unlike a guinea pig in size and appearance. They're found all over Africa."

"I imagine the perfume is made from the poor creatures' scent glands, after they're caught and killed?"

"On the contrary. They aren't harmed. The perfume is made from their petrified excrement and urine, which is collected and processed in order to concentrate it."

"Oh, Preston—you're making fun of me!"

"Not at all. I'm quite serious. I imagine the man who sold it to you neglected to mention that fact."

"No wonder Tommy said it smells like cat piss."

"No offense, Perce, but he wasn't too far off the mark."

They relaxed, throughout the meal and after it, then lingered over coffee, joking and laughing, about one nonsensical thing after another, like a couple of schoolboys. It was though the intensity of the experience they had shared earlier that day had broken down some invisible barrier that had stood between them.

After dinner, they went outside and walked about the square. The sun had set, and in the deep indigo blue of the dusk, the stars were very bright.

"Isn't the night sky beautiful?" Perce asked. "If I were a painter, I would try to paint that. But then, if I were an artist, talented like you are, I would want to paint everything I see." He stared up at the sky. *I have seen your destiny written in the stars*, he thought. "I wonder what the future has in store for me," he said aloud.

"We all wonder that, Perce, from time to time. Maybe it's what prevents us from being too disappointed with the present. What are

your plans, Perce? I mean, where will you go, what will you do, when you leave here?"

"I have no plans. Except to stay here in Algeria for a little while, perhaps right here in this town, and...do nothing, except think. You have given me a great deal to think about. I've never taken the time to sit back and ask myself, 'What do you intend to do with the rest of your life?' The question never occurred to me. I took it for granted that I would just keep going on and on, in the same old way. What about you?"

"I'd like to stay here long enough to paint some pictures of the natives, and their houses, in the small villages. Then I will return to Algiers and paint there for a while. And then I would like to travel through Morocco and on to Gibraltar. I think I told you, I began in Spain and have made my way around the Mediterranean, from west to east, then south to Egypt, then back west. Gibraltar will close the circle. And then, for all I know, I may start all over again. I like the warm climates, you see, and there are many places I have not been to—Portugal, Corsica, Sardinia, Turkey. Even the areas around the Black Sea that are Russian territory."

"You have no desire to go back to the big cities—Paris, for example?"

"I have nothing against them, but there is really nothing waiting for me in any of them. I don't want to paint sophisticated urban scenes—not just now, anyway. I enjoy what I am doing."

Perce hesitated.

"I have a proposition to offer you, Preston," he finally said.

Preston smiled. "You look and sound so solemn again. The way you did when we were standing in front of the tomb. It isn't like you."

"I have been doing some serious thinking, not only about myself, but about you, as well. The idea is only half formed in my mind, but...hear me out. Don't interrupt until I'm finished, and don't take offense at what I'm going to suggest."

"All right. I'm listening."

“After you’ve finished this new round of travels, it may be time for you to make a change. You could go to France—if not to Paris, then perhaps to one of the small towns in the countryside, which are quiet and charming. I’ve been in Provence. I know a family that farms there. Their son is Yves Dinaux, the boxer. You would enjoy meeting them. In any event, what I am suggesting, in my roundabout way, is that I could find a little studio for you, either in Paris or somewhere in the countryside, where you could stay in one place for a while and concentrate on your work. You could do some paintings in oils, in addition to your watercolors. I have many friends who would be interested in your pictures. I know people in the art world, including dealers, not just in Paris, but back home in the United States.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Perce went on quickly, not giving Preston a chance to interrupt. “But this would not be charity. It will be a business arrangement, an investment on my part. My father made his money by gambling on what he felt were sure things, and so can I, if I set my mind to it. When you are a big success—and I know you will be—I warn you, I will be absolutely shameless about taking the credit for it. I will be the man who ‘discovered’ Gordon Preston McCandless, the famous artist. I will dine out on that, as they say. People will invite me in hopes of hearing about, or meeting, you.

“And after France, or as an alternative to France...have you ever been to America, Preston?”

“No, I’ve never crossed the Atlantic, Perce.”

“Think of the things you could see and paint there! Florida, the American Southwest, Mexico, the Caribbean, South America...and those are just the warm areas, which you say you like. You might eventually be persuaded to bundle up against the cold and paint some snow scenes, in New England or Canada or even Alaska. After all, it’s not for nothing that it’s called the New World. It could be a new beginning for you, Preston, the start of a new life.

“Think of something else. It’s true, money isn’t everything. It can’t buy everything. But it can have its uses. It’s a tool that can be

used to good effect, as well as squandered or misused. Court decrees are not written in stone. Gordon Preston McCandless, the famous, successful artist, would have resources and a certain clout that Gordon Preston McCandless, the unknown, struggling artist, does not. My brother Lance and I know some very prominent and clever lawyers. We might be able to help you obtain visitation rights, so you could see your children from time to time. At the very least.” Perce paused. “I’m done. Don’t be angry with me. These are only suggestions, after all.”

“How can I be angry with you, when I know that all you’re trying to do is help me? Don’t take this the wrong way, but...what you just said is a little overwhelming, and intimidating. It’s hard to take in all at once. And you sound a little like the devil, promising to give me the whole world, if I will only fall down and worship you.”

Perce grinned. “Do I? But I don’t want you to fall down and worship me, Preston. People are not close to the idols they choose to worship. They worship them from a distance, because if they do get too close to them, they might realize that they are only stone and clay. I want us to be close. I want you to see me for what I am, flaws and all. I don’t want there to be a distance between us. I would like to raise you up. I want you to be my equal—my superior, even. I would like people to envy me for having you as my friend. I will admit that there is a lot more devil than angel in me.”

“But tell me one thing, Perce.”

“Yes?”

“Would you be willing to do all this for me, even if we were not lovers?”

“Yes. And my motives would not be entirely unselfish. Now I would like to do something worthwhile, for somebody, for once in my life. I am tired of being an idle, useless person. I believe it would be good for me to have something to live for besides myself. Even though—”

“What?”

“Even though I should like to deserve to be your lover, as well as your friend, so very much. Oh, I didn’t mean to say that. It just slipped out. Oh well, it’s too late now. But, logically, if I am going to try to stop being an altogether useless person, and contribute something to society, then I could do worse than—shall we say, associate?—with a hardworking man. To whatever degree of intimacy the hardworking man in question may see fit.”

“What an extraordinary man you are, Perce. What a bundle of contradictions.”

“The bundle of contradictions is sleepy. It’s been a long day. Let’s go back in. But will you think about what I have said?”

“I will.”

They went into the hotel and climbed the staircase together. They paused in front of the door of Perce’s room. Preston’s, Perce remembered, was farther down the hallway, and around a corner. All these nights, Perce thought, Preston had slept in the bed in that room. Only a few steps away from where Perce had slept.

“Good night, Perce,” Preston said. There was a new warmth, almost a tenderness, in his tone of voice, and he sounded reluctant to let Perce go.

“Preston?”

“Yes?”

“If you don’t mind—please don’t take this the wrong way. If you’d rather not, I will understand,” Perce stammered. “Oh, hell! Let me come right out and say it. I would like it so very much if you would let me kiss you good night. I kiss my men friends good night, after all. Even some of the ones who, ah, do not share our inclinations.”

Perce saw that Preston was smiling—and, almost experiencing a feeling of shame, Perce knew what the other man found so amusing. There he was, Perceval Fain, the playboy, the experienced lover of other men, asking for a kiss, like some shy, infatuated schoolboy! But in some strange way, Perce’s sudden insecurity immediately seemed

to have bolstered Preston's own confidence.

"You seem rather flustered, Perce, over something as trivial as a good-night kiss."

"I can't stop thinking about how you kissed me earlier today," Perce confessed. "About how good it felt...about how much I liked it. About how it was over all too soon."

"Well," Preston said, slowly. To Perce, he seemed to be giving the matter some serious thought. He looked and sounded as though he couldn't resist teasing Perce a little by drawing the suspense out. "Since you have been such a good boy, and since you have behaved yourself...I suppose you have deserved one perfectly harmless little good-night kiss."

He stepped closed to Perce, took him in his arms, and kissed him. The perfectly harmless little good-night kiss went on for quite some time as the two men clung to each other and eagerly, thoroughly explored each other's mouths. Preston backed Perce against the wall, and they both moaned with undisguised, shameless mutual pleasure as they embraced, their lips never breaking contact. Anyone who might have happened to come up the stairs and walk down the hall would've been treated to an eye-opening, and presumably shocking, spectacle of unrestrained homoerotic desire. But Perce and Preston didn't care who might see them. And no one came upstairs. The hotel was quiet.

Preston finally stopped actually kissing Perce on the mouth, although the two men's faces remained so close together that his lips and his soft beard continued to brush against Perce's flushed cheek.

"Perce. My beautiful Perce," Preston whispered. "So. You have made a conquest out of me after all. Even though I swore to myself I would not allow you to."

"No, you're the one who has conquered me. When I'm with you, I don't think of myself, for some reason. All I can think about is you."

"You take my breath away. You deprive me of rational thought. Oh, my beautiful Perce," Preston repeated. "That's all I say—your name, over and over again!"

“Think of it. Only this morning, you were addressing me as ‘Mr. Fain,’ and you were still ‘Mr. McCandless’ to me. Now you call me *your* Perce. Am I your Perce?”

“Oh, how I wish you were.”

“How I wish I could be. How I wish that I could be everything to you that you would want me to be. If only I could wipe out the past and start all over again.”

“Let’s not talk about any of that, not any more tonight. You must be tired. I know I am. Let’s go to bed. You in your room, I in mine. Let’s not...rush into anything.”

“No, let’s not rush. Let’s take our time. But not too much time, I hope. I’m so happy,” Perce confessed. “If only I could make you happy, too. No, don’t say anything. We’ll go to bed, as you said. In the morning, when Tommy comes to wake me, I will ask him...about whether he would like to pose for you, remember? No, I will ask him tonight—right now, before I go to bed.” Perce kissed Preston again. “Before I go to bed,” he repeated, breathlessly. He kissed Preston again. “Before I go to bed and fall asleep,” he panted. Another kiss. He was stalling for time, postponing the moment when they must part. “And dream...We had better stop this, hadn’t we?”

“Yes,” Preston agreed—although this time, he was the one who immediately initiated the next punctuating kiss. “We had better stop now.” Another kiss. “So you can go to bed, and fall asleep, and dream—”

“And dream,” Perce whispered between kisses. “Dream about you. All night long.” He treated himself to a final, lingering kiss, then tore himself away from Preston and quickly opened his door. “My beautiful Preston,” he said in a rush of emotion before he went inside his room and closed the door.

Perce leaned against the door, pressing his forehead and both of his palms against the smooth painted wood. He let out his breath in a long, voluptuous sigh.

He heard its echo, deeper in pitch, perhaps, but equal in its



passion, through the panel. "Preston, are you still out there?" he asked from the other side of the barrier between them.

"Yes. Now go to bed."

"Yes, I will. I'm going to lock my door. You had better lock yourself in, as well."

"Why?" Preston asked.

"Because if you don't, I may get up in the middle of the night and come down the hall, and break your door down, and have my way with you."

"Locking it won't prevent you from breaking it down," Preston pointed out.

"Oh. I guess you're right. I'm so sleepy, I don't know what I'm saying."

"You are so silly. You are so sweet. Go to sleep. Good night."

"Good night."

## Chapter Eleven

### Nothing in the Rules Against It

Perce was as good as his word. The next morning, Preston was finishing his breakfast in the hotel's dining room when Tommy came downstairs. He smiled and nodded at Preston, asked the waiter to give him a cup of coffee, and then carried it over to Preston's table.

"Good morning, Mr. McCandless. May I join you?"

"Please do."

Tommy sipped his coffee, then got right to the point. "Mr. Fain told me you'd like to paint some pictures of me. Naked."

"Ah...we did discuss the possibility, yes."

"Well, there's no time like the present, as they say. How about right now?"

"Where is Perce? I mean, where is Mr. Fain? Isn't he coming down for breakfast?"

"He's in his room, fast asleep. I just checked on him. I took the liberty of not waking him up. He had quite a tiring day yesterday, and a late night. I thought I would let him rest. That's why this would be a good time for you and I to get together, if you'd like."

"Have you ever posed for an artist before?"

"Not professionally, not like those models they have in Paris, that make their living at it. But I've taken off my clothes in front of other men more times than I can count. Come to think of it, I *have* posed in the nude for amateur photographers. Some of them even took the trouble to put a plate in the camera first." Tommy waited for a reaction, and, when he got none, he added, "That was a *joke*, Mr. McCandless. It's okay for you to laugh at me."

“You’re very free in your speech, Mr. Flanagan.”

“And you’re awfully serious. Call me Tommy, won’t you? Oh, I can talk all prissy and refined, when I have to, I guess. I didn’t think it was necessary with you.”

“No, it isn’t, Tommy. I like the way you talk.”

“Well, should we give it a whirl? The posing, I mean.”

“I’d be delighted to.”

“Good! You finish your breakfast, and let me finish my coffee, and then we’ll go upstairs.”

When they were in his room, Preston took care to turn the key in the door. He didn’t want one of the hotel’s maids, coming to tidy up the room, inadvertently walking in on them. Then he went over to the windows, opened the shutters, and drew back the curtains, allowing the soft golden morning sunlight to pour into the room.

Tommy was already undressing, as always neatly folding his discarded clothes before depositing them on a chair.

“Do you want me to stand up, Mr. McCandless, or sit on a chair, or lie down on the bed, or what?”

“Call me Preston. There’s no need for us to be formal with each other, is there? Especially under these circumstances. I’ve got an idea. I want to create a sort of little oasis for you, over here in front of the windows.”

Preston threw two large cushions, and a smaller one, onto the floor, then draped his brilliantly patterned Oriental rug over them. On top of this improvised bed, he placed three more small cushions.

“That looks comfy, Preston,” Tommy observed as Preston stepped back and studied the effect.

“Yes. And you ought to look splendid, with your light skin and red hair, against all those intense blues and reds and greens in the rug, and the contrasting colors and patterns of the cushions.”

Tommy, already nude, sat down on the bed Preston had created and watched as he quickly got his easel and paints ready. Preston rolled up his sleeves and was ready to begin.

“What I want to do, Tommy, are some quick watercolor studies of you in different poses. I’d like you to just get comfortable. I don’t want you to ‘pose,’ not in a self-conscious way. Just relax, and sit or lie there, the way you would if you were alone.”

“Like this?” Tommy assumed a nonchalant half-sitting, half-lying back position, supporting himself on one elbow. His penis and testicles sagged down toward the rug he was lying on, bulky and weighty even in their present relaxed state.

“That’s perfect.” Preston began to paint quickly.

After a few minutes of intense work, he spoke again: “I’m glad we decided to do this, Tommy. You have a beautiful face and physique.”

“Are you speaking as an artist or as a man who likes to look at other men?”

“Both, I admit. At the moment, though, I hope it’s the artist in me that happens to be in the ascendant. You do have an extraordinary coloring. It’s going to be difficult to reproduce your skin tone.”

“Well, we’ll keep at it, until you get it right,” Tommy teased. “So...do you think I’ve got what it takes to be one of those professional Paris models?”

“No,” Preston retorted, “because the artists who hired you would never get any drawing or painting done. They wouldn’t be able to keep their hands off you. Even the artists who prefer women might be sorely tempted to change their luck—and their subject matter. There’d soon be a sudden shortage, in the Parisian art world, of paintings of female nudes, and a surplus of pictures of you—all of them showing you flaunting that impressive cock of yours.”

“Oh my God. You *can* joke, after all. I wasn’t sure, for a while there.”

“I’m trying not to be too serious, for a change.”

“Is it all right for me to talk? I mean, you’re not painting my mouth, if you know what I mean?”

“Go ahead and talk all you want. When I do want to concentrate on your facial expression, your moving your lips doesn’t get in my

way. Not for the purposes of these sketches, anyway. What would you like to talk about?"

"You and Mr. Fain."

"What about me and Mr. Fain?"

"I'd like to know what your game is. What you want from Mr. Fain and what he'd like to get from you."

"I don't...Well, I was about to say, 'I don't want anything from Mr. Fain,' but that's not quite true. I would like to get to know him a little better."

"And he would like to get to know you a *lot* better."

"Has he told you that?"

"He didn't have to. Not in so many words, in any event. I know him too well for that. When he came into his room last night and I put him to bed, he was positively giddy. I was actually afraid he had come down with sunstroke, for a moment. Then I realized he had come down with something, all right. A bad case of *manstroke*, to coin a phrase. He's got the hots for you, all right, and in the worst way."

"You're very blunt, Tommy."

"I am that. With you, I think I can be. It saves time."

"You are quite devoted to Mr. Fain, aren't you?"

"I am that, too. And for good reason." Tommy grinned. "If you care to hear my story, you don't have to be coy about it. You can come right out and ask me. I haven't told it to many people, but I'll be glad to tell you. For one thing, you don't seem to me to be the kind of man who will be shocked by some of the details. And, for another, it may help you to understand Mr. Fain—and me—a little better."

"I'll be glad to listen to anything you care to tell me, Tommy."

"Mr. Fain took me out of a house in Boston where I was rented by the hour," Tommy began bluntly. "Any man who walked in off the street with money in his pocket could pay to use my mouth or my dick or my ass, or all three of them. You don't look shocked so far. That's encouraging."

"I'm not entirely naïve, Tommy. I know that such places do exist,

in large cities such as London. Now do me a favor, though, and try a new position. Turn over onto your side, perhaps, and face me? Can you bend your right knee a little more? That's fine. Hold that pose for now, if you will. And please, go on with your story."

Tommy did so: "Anyway, so there I was, a male whore, and I wasn't even seeing a cent of what I earned. You see, before that, I'd run with a gang of crooks. I was a pickpocket, a petty thief, a burglar, a con artist—anything to make money, as long as it wasn't honest work, or legal. I also liked to gamble. I don't do that anymore. When Mr. Fain and I are in a place like Monte Carlo, and we go to the casino, I won't so much as touch a card. I learned my lesson. Gambling is what got me into big trouble back in Boston.

"I owed a bookie a lot of money, and I couldn't pay it. He had my note, promising to pay the money, with interest, of course. I figured I could pull off a couple of big jobs, steal enough to settle my debt.

"But there was this man, just a few years older than me—I was nineteen at the time, and he was about twenty-two or -three—named Ned Kerrigan. An Irishman, like me. Kerrigan was muscle, you know what I mean?"

"Not quite. You're not talking just about his physique, are you?"

"No, although, as a matter of fact, he had a fine, hard body on him. When I say 'muscle,' that means he was a big, tough, muscle-bound bastard, a hoodlum who did the gang boss's dirty business for him," Tommy explained. "Beat up anyone the gang boss wanted beat up, and so on. Kerrigan was a boxer, a prizefighter. I thought he was my friend. I let him suck my cock a few times, just for some fast relief, you know, when I was horny and I couldn't find anybody I liked better to fool around with. Ned had a nice body, like I said, and he wasn't exactly ugly—he was kind of good-looking and sexy, in a rough way—but he was too mean and stupid to be my boyfriend, I thought. I may have been a little slut back then, you see, but I wasn't completely indiscriminating." Tommy laughed, and Preston laughed with him.

“But maybe Ned wasn’t as stupid as I thought. One night he invited me to come to his room—for a drink, he said. When I got there, he showed me my note, the one I’d given the bookie. ‘I bought your note,’ he told me. ‘Paid it off, interest and all.’

“Well, talk about stupid—for a moment, I was actually dumb enough, myself, to think that Kerrigan had done it for me as a favor! I started to thank him, to tell him that I’d pay him back his money as soon as I could.

“‘Oh, you’re gonna pay me back, all right, you little bitch,’ he said. ‘You’re gonna start paying me back right now. Take off your clothes.’

“Then it dawned on me. The bastard expected me to be his bitch. To service him, anytime he wanted, and any way he wanted, because now I owed *him* the money.

“I got mad, and I started to mouth off to him, and then, of course, he got mad, too, and he started slapping me around. It’s a good thing he didn’t use his fists on me, just the flat of his hand, or he’d have knocked me clear out of Boston. ‘Stuck-up little bitch,’ he told me. ‘Thought you were doing me a big favor, didn’t you, letting me suck your dick? Well, you’re gonna do *everything* I tell you to from now on, no matter how sexual. Every dirty thing I’ve ever read about or heard that two guys can do to each other, you’re gonna do for me, and you’d damn well better act as though you enjoy it!’

“So I became Kerrigan’s bitch, his sex slave. He really got off on humiliating me, making me do things I didn’t want to do...even though I’ve learned to enjoy most of them since. It’s really a question of who the other man is, you know. I hated Kerrigan’s guts, so I hated every minute I had to spend in bed with him. With somebody like Mr. Fain, it’s different. I’d do anything *he* asked me to do, and I’d probably love it.

“It didn’t take Kerrigan long to figure out how he could start recouping the money he’d paid out on me. First, he made me turn over most of what I was making from the jobs I pulled. Then he made

me start working in that male whorehouse, afternoons and nights, seven days a week. Sometimes he even pimped me out himself, to other men. And, like I said, I didn't see a cent of any of that money. Ned kept it all himself. The few times I worked up enough nerve to whine about it, he slapped me around some more, and made a point of fucking me good and rough, hurting me, and that shut me up, real fast. I had to perform with all those men, pretend I was enjoying it, even when I didn't. Any time Ned got any complaints, either from the son of a bitch who ran the whorehouse or from a customer, about me not behaving like a good little whore, Ned would beat me up. And then he'd fuck me some more, rough, to make sure I'd learned my lesson.

"If I hadn't been raised as a good Catholic boy, I'd have probably started thinking about killing myself. As it was, I just hated myself. Say, would you like me to change position again?"

"Yes, please. Why don't you roll over onto your stomach?"

"I've heard *that* one before."

"I want to paint those incredible buttocks of yours, if you'll pardon me for being so crude, and the taper of your back. And the backs of your thighs. Yes, that's perfect. My God, you *are* exquisite."

"Oh, I guess I'm not so bad to look at. But you should see Mr. Fain, in this position, from the angle you're standing there, looking at me. He's an Adonis, as they say. He's got an ass on him that could make a strong man weep for joy. And, speaking of Mr. Fain—

"So there I was, the worst kind of a whore, a 'white slave,' as they call it, I suppose. Then one night Mr. Fain came to the whorehouse. I'll be honest with you—he was just slumming, looking for a little cheap excitement and a cheap piece of ass. So there didn't seem to be much difference between him and any of the other men who patronized the establishment, except that he was younger and better-looking than a lot of them. He chose me from the selection of boys who were on duty that night, and I took him up to my room and took care of him, like I'd take care of any other customer.

"After we were done, he wanted to talk, which wasn't unusual—a



lot of them do. What did surprise me was that he asked me, ‘Why are you doing this, when you don’t seem to be enjoying it?’

“For some reason—there was just something about him—I didn’t brush him off. Instead, I answered him honestly. I told him about Kerrigan, and my note. I wasn’t looking for any sympathy. Maybe I just needed to talk to somebody, finally, about it.

“Mr. Fain was no fool. He’d heard plenty of hard-luck stories before, most of them bogus. A rich man like him can be an easy target for that kind of a con job.

“He left, and I thought no more of it. And then, the very next night, he was back. I found out later that he’d asked around, checked out my story. He’d even gone to the police and found out exactly what kind of a record I had.

“‘I bought your note from Ned Kerrigan,’ he told me, right away, there in the entrance hall of the whorehouse, without even taking his coat off, let alone going upstairs with me. ‘I’ve paid off the balance, and the interest, and I’ve...*persuaded* Mr. Kerrigan to let you alone from now on. He won’t bother you anymore. Now, come on. If you have any belongings here, go get them, quickly. You’re coming to my father’s house, with me, and you’re not coming back here.’

“I followed him out of the whorehouse in a kind of daze. I couldn’t believe it...and I couldn’t figure out what his angle was, what he might expect from me in return. I even thought that Mr. Fain might turn out to be just another Ned Kerrigan, only better dressed and with better manners—that he was another fucking sadist who wanted to buy himself a bitch to abuse. I did expect, at the very least, that I’d be putting out for him—not that I particularly minded the prospect.

“So the next thing I knew, there I was, inside Charles Fain’s big mansion, in Mr. Perceval’s rooms. He had a bedroom, a bathroom, a dressing room, and a study—a typical rich, young bachelor’s quarters. ‘Take a nice hot bath,’ he told me, ‘and I’ll have our cook send up something for you to eat, on a tray.’ I assumed, of course, that all this

hospitality was just a prelude to sex. For all I knew, after Mr. Fain had his fun with me, he planned to throw me out on the street and forget about me. Well, if he did, I was surely no worse off than I was before, so I decided to make the most of it while I could.

“I had my bath, and Mr. Fain lent me one of his dressing gowns to put on, and then I ate my supper and drank some wine he poured out for us both, there in his study, with him sitting behind his desk. I kept wondering how long it would be before he made his move, and took me into his bedroom, so I could start paying him back.

“Then he took out his address book and started leafing through it. ‘You can sleep in one of the guest rooms tonight,’ he told me. ‘God knows we have plenty of them. In the morning, we’ll start looking for an honest job for you. One of my friends is sure to have something. It won’t be much, probably menial work at a low wage to begin with, but it could be a fresh start for you, if you want it. Unless you prefer to go on with your life of crime?’ And he looked at me with that kind of sly, seductive smile of his that can just about make a man’s heart melt. ‘If you don’t mind my saying so, Tommy, it doesn’t seem to have been a particularly successful or lucrative career for you so far.’

“I couldn’t believe it. I asked him if he was serious.

“‘Of course I’m serious. I’ve decided to take you on as my own personal reform project. After all, we Irish-Americans have to stick together, don’t we? God knows there are plenty of people who are prejudiced against us. I see a certain potential in you. You have talents which are going to waste. Perhaps you’d like to work for my brother, Lancelot? He might be able to use you as a stable boy at his country house. Again, it would be menial work, but you might enjoy living out in the country, in the fresh air. And you’d never have to have sex with another man again, unless you chose to of your own free will. That’s important, isn’t it? To have choices?’

“Something inside me just broke when he said that. I interrupted him. I got down on my hands and knees, right there on the floor in front of his desk, and I begged him—I begged him—to let me work

for *him*. I begged him not to send me away, to let me stay with him. I told him I'd do anything, any kind of work, shovel horse manure, scrub his toilet, yes, wipe his ass for him, anything. I told him I'd kiss his hands and his feet, if only he'd let me stay with him. I started bawling, like a baby, and Mr. Fain looked kind of stunned for a moment, and then he got up and came over to me and knelt down beside me and took me in his arms.

“‘You silly boy,’ he kind of scolded me as he hugged me. ‘I think you’ve had enough of that wine for one night. You’re getting a little drunk, and awfully sentimental. It’s very Irish of you. Of course you can stay here, and work for me, if you want to. We’ll find something for you to do to earn your keep, and I think I can promise it will be a little more interesting than shoveling manure. Now I’m going to put you to bed.’ Which is exactly what he did, in the guest room, where I slept that night, by myself.

“In the morning, Mr. Fain introduced me to his valet, Leighton, and told him to take me in hand and start teaching me everything I needed to know. Leighton was a snooty, stuck-up type, like a lot of the servants are in fine houses, but he was good at his job. He was one of those men who only like women, you see, and he didn’t really like traveling, so Mr. Fain had already decided that Leighton would groom me to be his successor, eventually. Once I was trained, I would be Mr. Fain’s valet, and start traveling with him, and Leighton would stay on in Boston and work for Mr. Fain’s brother, Lancelot, instead. This was fine with Leighton. He taught me all about to how to be a gentleman’s gentleman, how to take care of his clothes, cut his hair and shave him, take care of his personal business. And not just that, but how to talk and conduct myself like a proper servant when I was on duty. I may have been just a punk from the wrong side of the tracks, but I wasn’t stupid, and I knew I was being handed a golden opportunity to make something of myself. So I worked hard and learned everything I could.

“And yes, I soon started sleeping in Mr. Fain’s bed, taking care of

him there, too, whenever he wanted me to. I'm not ashamed of it. I made the first move. I begged him to let me satisfy him, anytime he wanted. Mr. Fain is a good man, the finest man I've ever known, but even I have to admit he's no saint when it comes to sex. He likes a good roll in the hay as much as any other man. Well, maybe more than most," Tommy admitted with a wry laugh. "You know the rest. Mr. Fain and I have been together ever since."

"It sounds as though you're happy being with him."

"I am. I'd lay down my life for him. If anybody ever tried to hurt him, he'd have to answer to me. I'd kill the man before I let him do anything to hurt Mr. Fain."

"This might be a good time for me to declare that I have no intention whatsoever of ever doing anything that might injure Mr. Fain."

"You'd better not. For some reason, Mr. Fain is quite taken with you. I don't understand why. That's not an insult. It's just that you aren't the kind of man Mr. Fain usually goes for. He likes to have a good time, in bed and out, but he tends to back off a little if the other man starts to get too clingy and possessive—do you know what I mean? You seem to take this 'men loving other men' thing awfully seriously, as though it were the end of the world, which it ain't. It's just sex. Well, I suppose it can be a lot more than just sex: there's friendship, and companionship, and loyalty, and having interests in common. Just being men together. But you seem to keep tearing yourself up inside over it. And, frankly, I'm astonished that you haven't scared Mr. Fain away. On the contrary, he seems to have fallen for you, in a big way. Even though the two of you haven't even had sex with each other yet—have you?"

Preston pondered for a moment.

"No," he admitted, finally. "We haven't. We've just kissed."

"My God. I always knew that Mr. Fain would fall in love—I mean, *really* fall in love, not just think he was in love—with some man, someday. But—no offense, Preston—I never imagined it would

be someone like you. Someone...well, I'll give you credit where it's due, Preston: someone who's pretty down-to-earth and who knows what it's like to live in the real world."

Preston smiled. "Are you saying that Perce doesn't live in the real world?"

"Let's face it. His money does protect him, to some extent. Not that I begrudge him a penny of it. If I'd grown up rich, like Mr. Fain, I'd probably be an arrogant, selfish prick, impossible to live with. And Mr. Fain's not like that at all."

"Do you really think he could be in love with me?"

"I know Mr. Fain well enough by now I can read him like a book. Of course he's in love with you. The question is, are you in love with him?"

"How much has Mr. Fain told you about me?" he asked.

"Very little."

"Nothing about...the conversation he and I had yesterday?"

"Mr. Fain and I have very few secrets from one another, but he's not the kind of man who'd break a confidence, if that's what you're worried about. I don't know anything about any such conversation. I did get the impression that *something* happened between the two of you yesterday, when you were out in the desert together, but it wasn't sex."

"No, it wasn't sex. Not yet, anyway," Preston admitted ruefully. "Shall we try another pose? You choose—anything that makes you feel comfortable. Yes, that's fine. Stay like that. And, now that you've told me your story, I'll tell you mine. What I told Perce, about myself, and how I ended up like this." Briefly, Preston did so.

"Well, that explains a lot," Tommy admitted when Preston had finished his story. "Maybe I'm stepping outside of my place, but—"

"No, go on, Tommy. Don't stop now. Speak frankly to me. Say what you want to."

"I was just going to say...all right, now I know you've lost your wife and your kids because of what happened to you. Because you

prefer to be intimate with men, and other people found out about it, and they didn't like it, even though it was none of their damn business. They blamed you for something you can't help, because it's what you *are*, and you weren't enough of a hypocrite to lie about it. Yes, that's a terrible thing, to face the truth about yourself, and accept it, and be punished for that. And losing that fellow you thought you were in love with couldn't have helped. Well, now, in my opinion, you can do one of two things. You can lie down like a whipped dog and wait to die, or you can get back up on your legs and try to get on with it, with living, and take whatever good might come your way along with the bad. The latter course...that'd be my advice to you."

Preston smiled. "I may just take your advice, Tommy. You seem to have a clever head on your shoulders. And I do know one thing for sure—I'd rather have you as my friend than my enemy. Shall we do one more quick sketch? Try a different pose—seated, perhaps, facing me. Good. I must admit—I'm curious about Mr. Fain's older brother, now that you've mentioned him," Preston said as he set to work, quickly, on a fresh sheet of paper. "Tell me something about him."

"Mr. Lancelot? Well, he's every bit as handsome as Mr. Perceval. But, other than that, they're as different as night and day. Mr. Lancelot was the old man's favorite, you see, and he sure takes after him. I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Lancelot was still a virgin on his wedding night. If he was, then he and his missus have made up for all that lost time. She's already knocked up. Mr. Perceval will soon be an uncle. The last time I saw Mr. Lancelot, just before Mr. Perceval and I left on this trip, he was strutting around like a rooster in a barnyard, practically crowing, he was so proud of himself because he'd gotten his wife pregnant. Maybe there's hope for him, yet. I have three brothers and two sisters, you see, so my mother never exactly saw pregnancy as 'a blessed event,' as the saying goes. Quite apart from the fact that we all had different fathers."

"Ah...your mother was married six times?"

"My mother was married twice. I was one of the bastards, born

without the benefit of clergy, as they say. Mama always liked men, and she still does,” Tommy said matter-of-factly. “Maybe it’s what they call a hereditary trait.”

Preston began to rinse out his brushes. “I think that’s enough for one session. You’ve done very well. I’ve enjoyed having you as a model.”

Tommy got up and stretched, then began to pull on his clothes. “Can I see the pictures?”

“Of course.”

Buttoning up his shirt, Tommy walked over to the easel and examined the pictures. “Do I really look like that?”

“Don’t you like them?”

“They’re very good, but that’s not exactly how I see myself when I look in the mirror.”

“That’s the difference between drawing or painting and photography. These are my impressions of you. They’re not intended to be accurate in every detail, in a photographic sense. I’m attempting to capture a certain...sensuality that I see in you.”

“They *are* kind of sexy.”

“Do you think Mr. Fain would like them?”

“Oh, I *know* Mr. Fain will like them. I know his tastes, what he likes and dislikes. But, if you’d *really* like to please him—?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe next time, we could do something more explicit. In terms of the poses, I mean.”

Preston laughed. “Don’t tempt me. I might take you up on that offer. Are you sure I can’t give you a little money for your trouble?”

“No, thanks. I don’t take money from my friends, Preston. And I guess we’re friends, now, aren’t we? What you *can* do is take me downstairs and buy me a drink.”

“Most willingly.”

Tommy grinned. “We can have a further discussion about your intentions toward my employer. Whether they are honorable or not.”

“And the possible consequences, for me, should my intentions not be honorable?”

“Precisely.”

“I can see I’m going to have to have that drink. A good strong one.”

\* \* \* \*

About two hours later, Perce was finishing a late breakfast, alone, in the dining room.

“Have you seen M. McCandless this morning?” he asked the waiter.

“I have already seen him coming and going several times. Just before you came down to breakfast, m’sieur, I saw him leave the hotel and walk across the square, that way, toward the marketplace.”

“Thank you. I will see if I can find him.”

Perce crossed the square, chose a street to walk down at random, negotiated a labyrinth of other narrow streets, and turned a corner. He found himself in front of the Moorish café where he had first met Alain Costinguet.

He was surprised, but delighted, to see Preston there, sitting at a table on the sidewalk, drinking coffee and smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. When Preston looked up and caught sight of him, the sudden warmth in his green eyes and the seductive allure of his smile made Perce flush with hot pleasure. He was sure he was blushing, like some silly schoolboy who had been noticed and spoken to kindly by the boy he had a juvenile crush on. Perce didn’t care.

“Good morning, Preston.”

“Good morning, Mr. Fain.”

“Oh dear. Are we back to ‘Mr. Fain’ and ‘Mr. McCandless’?”

“We are, when it’s a question of discussing business. Which is what I would like to do. But sit down, and have some coffee first.” Preston signaled to the waiter.



“You don’t have your painting equipment with you, I see. Aren’t you working today?”

Preston laughed. “I slept so soundly last night that I was up quite early this morning. For your information, I have already had a most productive painting session, indoors, with a very promising new model. Didn’t Tommy say anything about it to you?”

“No, although I thought he had a rather smug look on his face when I finally dragged myself out of bed just now and he helped me get dressed. He has already posed for you?”

“Yes, and it was most pleasurable. I am eager to avail myself of his services again, if I may. Then I took my equipment along with me and painted some of the old houses in the poorer area of the town.”

“You really are appallingly energetic.” Perce gratefully sipped the strong, hot coffee that the waiter brought him.

“And now I am doing something I rarely allow myself to do this early in the daytime. I am taking a break from my work, and I am being completely, irresponsibly idle.”

“Thank God,” Perce said. “So you are human, after all, not a painting machine. I was beginning to have my doubts.”

“I’m feeling only too human after our conversations yesterday. And I haven’t been entirely idle, perhaps. Even sitting here, drinking my coffee, supposedly doing nothing, I have been somewhat preoccupied.”

“I take it you’ve been thinking about some of the things we talked about yesterday?”

“I’ve been able to think about little else, Perce. And I have decided to accept your offer, if it still stands.”

“Of course it does. Subject to any modifications you might care to suggest. I am willing to negotiate.”

“Then, after I have completed this second round of travels around the Mediterranean, and perhaps the Black Sea as well, I will join you in France and try to paint there for a while, too. We will have to see how that works out before we can think about my going to America—

although, of course, I should like to do so, eventually.”

“I am so glad. But you say, *join* me in France. May I not accompany you right now?”

“Of course you are free to do so. But remember, I shall be wandering about and working the whole time—very intensely, I hope. And I will be avoiding large cities, and glamorous spots, for the most part. I will continue to try to live as economically as possible. It’s in my nature. I will be ‘roughing it,’ as they say. You might find it tedious.”

“No, I won’t. I’ve had my fill of cities, and glamour, and superficial excitement, and even of luxury, for the time being. And I could make myself useful. I could pose for you, just like Tommy. I could carry your equipment for you, and clean up after you, and rinse out your brushes, and—”

Preston burst out laughing.

“How dare you laugh at me,” Perce sputtered, trying his best to look indignant, but failing.

“What a mental image. Perceval Fain, the artist’s model and assistant. His fetch-and-carry and cleanup boy. Perceval Fain, the industrious brush-washer.”

“I’ll show you,” Perce said stubbornly. “You might be surprised at what I can do once I set my mind on it. Why, I may even try my hand at watercolor myself. Give you a little healthy competition. Before you know it, M. Robineaux may be selling male nudes signed *P.F.* And they might be just as good as yours.”

“You just want an excuse to look at naked men. Which brings me to our second point of business, Mr. Fain.”

“And that is, Mr. McCandless?”

“Whether our relationship will be strictly a business one, or of a more intimate nature.”

“Oh, the latter, I think. Sooner or later. Preferably sooner, if I have any say in the matter.”

“In which case, I would not expect you to be monogamous. It’s

not in your nature. And perhaps it is not in mine, either. It was being obsessed with one man, to the exclusion of all else, that got me into my present situation. I need to become more open-minded about such things. With your help, I'm sure I could be."

"I'd be delighted to help you in any way I can. And I can change, too—a little. I couldn't possibly give up Tommy, for example. I hope that's understood."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I find Mr. Flanagan...charming. For one thing, he has the makings of an excellent artist's model. Even though I can't imagine him washing brushes. We'll leave that to you."

"He'll begin to boss you around, the same way he does me."

"He might not find me so easy to bully. But I'm sure he and I will reach an understanding. We've already made a good start at finding our common ground."

"I might be able to cut down on some of my other...indulgences and distractions," Perce mused, the way a man might say he was going to try to cut down on cigarettes, or coffee, or sweets.

"I wouldn't expect you to give them up entirely. I might even find some of them to be suitable recreational activities, myself, for when I need to take the occasional break from my work."

"Well, Mr. McCandless, we seem to have come to an agreement. Shall we shake on it?"

"We have, indeed, Mr. Fain. Let's." They shook hands across the table. "Of course, we have entered into this business agreement with one little point still left undecided."

"And what is that?"

"You don't know, after all, whether I would be at all satisfactory as a lover."

"I'm sure that, under my tutelage, any deficiencies you might have in that area would be quickly rectified. If you'll teach me how to paint in watercolors, and how to be a model and an artist's assistant...then, Mr. McCandless, I promise to teach you everything I know about my own areas of expertise."

"I'm sure your experience and expertise would be invaluable to me in that regard. Still, before you commit yourself to this contract..."

"We had better put the matter to the test, should we not?"

"Exactly."

"When?"

"As Tommy said to me just this morning—there's no time like the present."

"Are you serious?"

"Very. I'm afraid that having Tommy pose for me was quite stimulating, and gave me certain ideas. I can't help thinking—if that's what the servant looks like in the nude, I can only imagine what the master must be like. And if the master is that exquisite just to look at, he must be even more delightful to touch."

"Mr. McCandless, are you getting as hard as I am just thinking about it?"

"I don't know about you, Mr. Fain, but I'm already so hard that I could drive nails with it."

"It's agonizing, isn't it?"

"It's torture."

"It can't be healthy to deny ourselves physical relief, when our mutual need is obviously so urgent. Come on, I'll race you back to the hotel."

"Literally? Shall we race? Run, I mean?"

"It was a figure of speech, but sure, now that you mention it, why not? I am a fairly good sprinter," Perce said, without false modesty. "I will beat you, easily."

"Ha! That remains to be seen."

"All right, then. We will race. On a count of three," Perce proposed.

"Wait. What prize shall there be, for the winner?"

"The winner gets to choose the first specific sex act," Perce suggested, "and the loser must accommodate him, without hesitation

or question.”

“Agreed.”

They stood up, and Perce threw money down on the table to pay for his coffee. So did Preston.

“Ready?” Perce asked.

Preston nodded.

“All right, then. One—”

“Two—”

“Three!”

They dashed around the corner and up the first of the streets that led back toward the hotel. Perce had assumed that he would outdistance Preston easily. But Preston was surprisingly strong-legged and fast, and he had an advantage in the snug-fitting, flexible-soled canvas shoes he was wearing. Perce’s fashionable handmade leather shoes were not designed for running.

The people they ran past stared at them and turned their heads to see who might be pursuing the two running men.

Preston suddenly veered into a narrow alleyway.

“What the hell?” Perce gasped.

“Shortcut!” Preston shouted as he disappeared.

“Son of a bitch!” Afraid of getting lost and thus losing time, Perce stuck to the route he knew. Preston eventually reappeared, darting out of another alleyway, well ahead of him. “Son of a bitch!” Perce repeated. “Cheater!”

“Nothing in the rules against it,” Preston taunted him.

They were already in sight of the square, on the far side of which stood the hotel. Perce increased his pace, determined to catch up with Preston.

“What’s the finish line?” he demanded, breathlessly, as they crossed the square.

“First one to touch the railing of the staircase, inside,” Preston proposed.

“Agreed!”

In the doorway of the hotel, Perce elbowed Preston aside, and, as Preston stumbled and struggled to keep his balance, Perce skidded across the polished tiles of the lobby floor, grabbing on to the staircase railing to keep himself from falling.

“Cheater!” Preston protested.

“Nothing in the rules against it,” Perce retorted. “I win!”

Mme Verdeau, who happened to be walking through the lobby at the moment, stared at them. “Is something wrong, gentlemen?”

“Nothing, madame! Nothing at all!” Perce assured her, breathlessly, as he ran upstairs, with Preston hard at his heels.

Once they were in Perce’s room, they tore their clothes off as though each item, like the shirt of Nessus, was saturated with a deadly poison. Standing naked together in front of the windows, through which the noon sun was pouring, they embraced with an almost bruising violence, their hard-ons dueling between their bodies. They kissed almost painfully, too, and when their lips did separate for an instant, Preston seized a fistful of Perce’s dark blond hair and pulled Perce’s head back into kissing position, kissing him again. He was the aggressor: he kissed Perce forcefully and possessively, his tongue forcing its way between Perce’s teeth to explore the warm softness of the interior of his mouth. Perce savored the lingering taste of tobacco on Preston’s tongue. He opened his mouth wide and threw his arms around the other man, writhing against him, caressing Preston’s lips with his own lips, kneading the solid muscles of Preston’s back with restless fingertips.

“I seem to recall...Mr. McCandless...something about...” Perce panted between kisses.

“Yes, Mr. Fain?”

“Something about...the winner of the race...being able to choose...”

“Ah, yes. Well, you did win, whether by fair means or foul. Name it. Name it, and I’ll do it. If I don’t know how to do...If you want us to do something I’ve never done before...explain to me just how it’s

done, and I'll try my best to please you."

"Fuck me. Fuck me now, and fuck me hard. We can do the rest—everything else, anything *you* want—later. But I'll go insane if I can't give myself to you, right now, and give myself to you totally—if you don't possess me, and make me yours!"

Preston grinned and reached up with one hand to rumple Perce's already mussed hair. "You will find, Mr. Fain, that I am a very good loser. Now get that hot arse of yours on the bed!"

He didn't wait for Perce to obey, but seized him and tumbled down onto the mattress with him. "Do you have anything to grease up my dick with?" he asked.

"In the drawer, there, beside the bed—the little jar." Perce gasped—breathless not only as a result of their race, but from a desperate anticipation unlike anything he had ever experienced prior to abandoning himself to sex with another man.

Preston found the scented cold cream and quickly coated his erection with it. Then he dipped his fingertips into the jar again and inserted them in Perce's ass. He explored the tight aperture, probing, massaging, slicking it up with the lubricant. His green eyes smoldered with anticipation as he stared down at Perce's face. Perce felt extraordinarily vulnerable. He was sure Preston could see the raw need written there, in his features.

"You have such a beautiful arse," Preston whispered, his voice a caress. "I could finger it like this forever and not get enough of it. Do you like it when I play with your arse like this?"

"Oh, God, Preston, hurry," Perce urged. "Your fingers feel so good in there, I don't want you to stop, but I know your cock is going to feel so much better! Put it in me quick! Can you do it twice, do you think?" he pleaded, raising his face level with Preston's so that their lips could meet in another impassioned kiss. "Can you come twice?"

"With you—the way I feel right now—yes, easily."

"Good! Then we can take it fast the first time, and slow the second." Perce pulled Preston on top of him, spreading his husky

thighs wide to accommodate him. His hand guided Preston's cock down into the cleft between his buttocks, and even as Preston began his insertion, Perce moved to facilitate the process, sliding his calves around Preston's back to hold the other man in place and push his erection further into him.

"Do it rough, fucker," Perce whimpered. "That's how I want it the first time, because that's the way I kept imagining it last night! I wanted to break down your door, all right. I wanted to break down your door and beg you to fuck me!"

"You don't have to beg for it," Preston promised. "I'm going to give it to you! Right now!"

Preston plunged, and Perce let out a little scream of pain—and delight. His whole body urged Preston on. Soon the bearded man had lost all control of his motions, and there was only the pistonlike rapidity of his strokes, while his blond partner egged him on with clawing fingers and obscene yet tender words.

Perce was very much in his element: naked in bed with another man, giving and taking pleasure, oblivious to the world outside the four bedroom walls. But, this time, there was a crucial difference. Perce didn't want to settle for mere transitory satisfaction. He desperately wanted Preston to feel that he was loved, that Perce was giving himself whole-heartedly to him—that Perce would do anything for him. He gazed up into Preston's green eyes, and when Preston returned his gaze, it was as though an electric current suddenly surged and crackled between the two of them.

What had the marabout, the holy man, said to him in the marketplace? He had spoken of the damned, forever veiled in the shroud of eternal fire, and the blessed who rejoice in paradise. He had spoken of a chasm being bridged. Now, at last, Perce understood the full import of those words.

His sweat-bedewed flesh felt as though it were wrapped in fire at the moment, but the sensation, far from being agonizing torture, was intensely pleasurable. And Preston, lying on top of him, fucking him,



possessing him, was bathed in a lather of perspiration, too. The hot drops fell from his body and rained down on Perce like a salty baptism.

As for the joys of the blessed—Perce now knew that they could be experienced by mere sinful mortals, right here on earth. He and Preston were surely savoring them together.

Even as his desire for Preston overwhelmed him, though, Perce retained enough presence of mind to draw upon his extensive repertory of erotic techniques, for his lover's benefit. Perce had quite a few tricks up his sleeve, and he might as well try one or two of them out on Preston, now!

Any doubts Perce may have had about the efficiency of his technique were instantly dispelled by his lover's response to his exertions.

Preston was just about to reach his climax when he felt a sudden violation of his own asshole. Perce had dipped his middle fingertip into the cold cream and had managed to reach around and push the fingertip through Preston's clenched sphincter muscle and deep inside his ass.

"Cheater!" Preston shouted, as the spasmodic response of his asshole to the probing finger sent a fierce warning throb through his balls and the base of his cock. "Goddamned cheater!"

"Nothing in the rules against it!" Perce gloated.

"I'm going to come! I'm going to come in your arse!"

Preston exploded. But, even as his ejaculation took possession of him, he knew that he wasn't going to stop—not even for a moment, not even to catch his breath. He knew his cock wasn't going to soften, not in the slightest. He also knew that Perce didn't want him to stop, that Perce's fierce need fully matched his own, and was going to inspire him to heroic efforts.

He seized Perce's ankles, forced Perce's legs back toward him, bending them at the knees, leaned over Perce, and fucked him even more forcefully.

“I’ll teach you, you goddamned cheater,” Preston threatened. “So you wanted it fast the first time, did you, and slow the second? Well, *that* was fast. Too fast, as far as I’m concerned. I hope you liked it. Because *this* is going to be slow, nice and slow, and rough, the way you said you like it. I intend to take my time, now. I’m going to fuck you again until I come in you again, if it takes all goddamned afternoon!”

“Do it!” Perce shouted. “Do it to me! Fast or slow, any way you want, over and over again! Fuck me all you want, for hours and hours. Don’t stop!”

Preston didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. He was ravenous for Perce. He threw off all restraint. He was as rampant now as any rutting bull, and he was not to be denied. He knew that the other man’s passion equaled his—perhaps even surpassed it, if that were possible. He saw nothing, thought of nothing, desired nothing except the man lying under him who had kindled and was stoking this maddening fire in his loins.

“Perce!” he cried as he took the other man, who exulted in his use of him. “Oh, God, my beautiful Perce!”

“Preston, Preston,” Perce moaned by way of helpless, besotted reply as his gray eyes stared up into Preston’s green ones. “Oh, my love, my love. I’m yours...I’m yours!”

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **The Gentlemen's Gentleman**

The scent of jasmine filled the air. Perce opened his eyes and realized that it was morning, and that he was in bed, in his hotel room, with Preston. He had slept with Preston, had woken up next to him, for the fourteenth or fifteenth time in a row—Perce wasn't certain of the exact count. He had happily lost track of time, had stopped worrying even about which day of the week it was. He did know that he and Preston had been together like this, every night, every morning, for approximately the past two weeks.

He would have to consult Tommy, and that famous diary of his, for the precise statistics.

Preston stirred beside, or rather behind, him: they were lying closely together in stacked spoons fashion, with Perce's buttocks fitted snugly against Preston's groin, Preston's arm around his waist, hugging him, and Preston's soft beard nuzzling his shoulder and neck.

"Is it morning?" Preston whispered.

"No."

"Are you awake?"

"No."

"Is it time to get up?"

"No."

"Three lies in a row." Preston had counted. "Even for you, Perceval Fain, that's rather brazen. You are such a prevaricator."

"It's much too early in the morning to use multisyllabic words like 'prevaricator,' my love. Just call me a damn liar, and let me go back to sleep, and be done with it." Preston kissed Perce's bare shoulder.

"I love you," Preston whispered. "There. Three monosyllables."

"Very good. I love you, too. There. Four more."

"Let me go back to sleep. In your arms." Preston made a quick mental computation. "What was that, nine syllables?"

"Let's make love. Before we get up. That's only eight. Let's keep things simple."

"I must admit I like your suggestion better than mine. Yes, let's stop counting, and make love."

Perce squirmed around to face his lover and kissed him on the mouth. They rubbed their bodies together, with the inevitable quick result: by the time their lips separated, both men were sporting rigid erections.

"Speaking of monosyllabic words," Perce said, "I think that *kiss*, *suck*, and *fuck* would be highly appropriate actions, under the circumstances, and in that order."

"All right," Preston agreed. "Kiss me again, and then we'll move on to the other two items on the agenda."

Their kissing, as usual, quickly led to a nude wrestling match, with disastrous consequences to the hotel's bedclothes: the top sheet was flung halfway over the foot of the bed, the bottom sheet was pulled free from one corner of the mattress, and one of the pillows ended up on the floor.

They sixty-nined, and then they took turns fucking each other. Perce, who took the active role first, stretched out on top of Preston's broad back, while Preston lay on his belly, with his legs spread and his bearded face comfortably buried in the pillow that remained on the bed. When it was Preston's turn to do the fucking, Perce got on his back, lifted his legs over Preston's shoulders, and pulled Preston's head down to his so they could kiss while Preston took him. They writhed together with unrestrained passion, their bodies locked together, their sweat mingling. When they both began to ejaculate, simultaneously, Perce grabbed a double handful of Preston's thick, disheveled hair and held his head in place as they kissed their way

through their shared orgasms, mouths glued against each other. Their moans of pleasure were muffled, trapped inside their throats as they kissed.

“Remind me to have Tommy order another dozen jars of this cream,” Perce said as he screwed the lid back on the depleted container of lubricant.

He refused to let Preston out of his embrace, holding the other man tightly against him with both arms as they kissed breathlessly, for long minutes on end.

It was Preston who finally called a firm halt to their after-play, delightful though it was.

“Now we have to get up,” he insisted. “I want my breakfast, my coffee, in particular, and then I must get outside and get to work.”

“Must you work today? Especially since it’s going to be our last day here in Tin Ouzel?”

“Yes. No slacking off. There are still one or two views of the town that I want to get down on paper. Don’t worry, you shall have me all to yourself this evening. We’ll do something special tonight, anything—you decide. Have you told Tommy yet that we will be leaving tomorrow?”

“No, I’ll tell him today. That will be all the time he needs to get everything ready. Tommy is remarkably efficient, if you haven’t already noticed.”

“He has to be to keep you under control,” Preston teased.

Preston, reluctantly, got out of the bed and began to get dressed. As he did so, he went over and stood at the window, beside the orange-and-blue pot with its extravagant display of purple, white, red, and orange flowers. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the white jasmine.

“What will you do with this lovely pot of flowers? It’s rather too large to take along with us, easily, isn’t it?”

“I will make a present of it, and of the rug you are standing on, to M. and Mme Verdeau. Let the next guest who takes this room enjoy

them. That reminds me. I must remember to take your wonderful picture of the Algerian man down from the wall and pack it in my luggage. I will have to put the picture of Jesus back up there in its place—also for the edification of future guests.”

After breakfast, they went their separate ways.

Perce left the hotel and walked to the marketplace. He wanted to find the marabout, and this time he was not disappointed. The man was seated cross-legged on the ground, between two of the many vendors who were displaying their wares on rugs spread over the sun-baked earth. He was observing the passersby, with a half-alert, half-contemplative look on his face.

“Good day, Father,” Perce said as he approached and squatted down beside the man.

“Ah, it is you, my son. The golden young man of my dreams.”

“How are you today? I am so glad I found you again. Please do me the favor of taking this money off my hands.”

“You are generous. Allah will bless you.”

“He already has, I believe. But tell me, Father—have you dreamed again?”

“Ah, I see you have changed. Before, you were kind, and you were tolerant of what you no doubt thought were the ravings of an old man. Now, you are still kind, but you are more inclined to...to believe, perhaps?”

“I have changed, yes. For the better, I hope.”

“The chasm has been bridged, I see.”

“It has not only been bridged. It has been filled in. It has ceased to exist. Like a ditch dug in the sand, with nothing to support its sides. Thus.” Perce dug a shallow furrow in the earth with his fingertip. “Eventually, its sides will collapse in on themselves, and it will be as though no ditch was ever there. Only the smooth surface of the sand remains for men to walk upon.”

“That is well. I have had many dreams. I have glimpsed the destinies of many men and women. Including yours, perhaps, if my

dreams can be trusted.”

“I am eager to hear anything you can tell me.”

“Again, I have seen you and the other man. The wanderer, the man who takes all the colors of the rainbow and does with them, thus—?” The marabout waved his hand back and forth in a tolerable imitation of an artist manipulating a small paintbrush.

“Yes, I understand. I did not know you had rainbows here in the desert.”

“They are rare, because they come only with the heavy rains, two or three times a year, that swell the river, but I have seen them. In my dreams I see you and this man, traveling together, to many strange countries. Not always in the desert—sometimes you are beside the sea—but nearly always under the hot sun. I see you later in life, living together in a great house, surrounded by luxury, but the luxury is not important to you. You give many alms to the poor. You are well known for your charity. I see you with children. You call them your grandchildren, and they call you Grandfather, but they are not, in fact, of your blood. They are the grandchildren of the other man. They love and honor you, as they love and honor him.”

“If the least part of this were to come true—I would be content.”

“I must warn you. I do not see your life as altogether easy. Some men will avoid you, condemn you—revile you, even. Because their eyes have not been opened.”

“Father, if the blessings you describe come my way, then I must humbly accept the bitter along with the sweet. All I can say is—Allah be praised.”

“Allah be praised, indeed.”

Perce rose. “I must take my leave of you. I shall leave Tin Ouzel soon. But perhaps I will return here, one day, and see you again.”

“No, my son. My dreams tell me that much, as well. You will, indeed, return here one day, you and the other man, to see once again the place where the chasm between you was bridged. You will be happy here, you two, together, when you look back and remember.

But I will not be here to greet you. I am an old man, and my days grow few. It is the will of Allah, which no man can question, or resist.”

“Farewell then, Father.”

“Farewell, my son.”

Perce spent a couple of hours walking about the town, looking at its familiar sights for the last time, and had lunch in a café. He returned to the hotel in the early afternoon and found Tommy in his room, seated on a chair and busying himself with a needle and thread, a darning egg, and a coarse wool sock with a hole in its toe.

“What on earth are you doing there, Tommy?”

“Darning one of Mr. McCandless’s socks. Really, Mr. Fain, the man has no respect for his clothes and no idea of how to take care of them.”

Perce, who had never to his knowledge worn a darned sock in his life, observed the procedure with great interest. “But why go to all that trouble? Why doesn’t Preston just throw that pair of socks away and buy a new pair?”

“If you’re going to get involved with a poor, hardworking man, Mr. Fain, you’re going to have to get used to his eccentricities,” Tommy warned. “Mr. McCandless is a bit of a penny-pincher. Not that I’m saying there’s anything wrong with economy, or with avoiding unnecessary waste. When I’m done with this sock, it’ll be as good as new—not that I can do anything about the coarse fabric, or the drab color. You’d think an artist would have more of a sense of the possibilities of color and dress himself up like a little more of a peacock.”

“I agree. And speaking of clothes, Tommy, you can begin packing our things, as well as Mr. McCandless’s things, if he’ll let you help him. All three of us will be leaving here in the morning. We will take the train back to Algiers.”

“And where will we be going from there, sir, if I may ask?”

“To Morocco first, then to Gibraltar, and then all around the



Mediterranean, to some places that you and I have not seen, where Mr. McCandless wants to paint. You see, Tommy, Mr. McCandless will be traveling with us, from now on—or it might be more accurate to say that we will be traveling with him. We will go back to Paris, eventually, and to Provence, and we will probably stay there for quite some time. And then, when we do go back to Boston, Preston will be living with us, in the house.”

“Oh? And what will Mr. Lancelot have to say about that?”

“Lance can like it or lump it. For that matter, I can always buy or build my own house, if I want to. Which might not be such a bad idea, now that Lance is married, and starting a family, and is so incorrigibly respectable. As I was saying, Tommy, this arrangement means that you will start taking care of Preston’s clothes, and his other personal needs, just as you have always taken care of mine. Of course, I shall increase your wages accordingly.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fain. But the money’s not all that important. It’s just as easy to take care of two gentlemen as it is to take care of one, I’m sure. But I must insist on one thing. Just because you have an artist for a lover, that’s no excuse for you to start turning into some sort of a grubby bohemian yourself, or for us to let our standards slip. The moment we get to Paris, we will take Mr. McCandless to your tailor there, and to the other shops you patronize. We will have to buy him an entire new wardrobe. And then, you will have to let me take his old clothes and burn them. *All* of them.” Tommy thought for a moment. “Well, of course, he will need a few practical things to wear while he is painting. But there’s no reason why *they* can’t be stylish, too. Trust me, sir. When I’m done with Mr. McCandless, he will set the fashion for other artists to imitate.”

Perce knew better than to argue with his valet. “Of course, Tommy. I give you *carte blanche* to do with Mr. McCandless as you see fit...as far as his clothes and his grooming go, I mean. In terms of the other personal services he may need...you may leave them to me, and I will call upon you to assist me, when necessary.”

Tommy grinned. "That will be my pleasure, Mr. Fain. I've got to admit that Mr. McCandless is a rather handsome man, and one with a certain undeniable potential. With a little help from me, he might clean up very nicely and be quite presentable."

Perce grinned, too. "He's not so bad when he's naked, and dirty, and sweaty, either. As you may well find out, soon enough, if you're a good boy."

Tommy pretended to be shocked. "*Really*, Mr. Fain! The *things* you say sometimes!"

**THE END**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roland Graeme is one of several pseudonyms used by a prolific writer of erotic fiction. Graeme, a descendant of Swiss immigrants and a native of Pennsylvania, resides in Buffalo, New York. He earned a Ph.D. in English by writing his doctoral dissertation on the novels of Sir Walter Scott ("Roland Graeme" is the protagonist of Scott's novel *The Abbot*). His interests, in addition to literature, include classical music (especially opera), history, and world religions, as well as, not surprisingly, human sexuality, in all its variety and richness. Graeme has been, at one time or another, a teacher, a factory worker, a civil servant, and a music critic. The one common denominator throughout his career(s) has been his passion for freelance writing. He continues to hold down his current full-time "day job" while writing in his spare time. Roland Graeme can be contacted at [couesnon1@aol.com](mailto:couesnon1@aol.com).



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