

There are things I'm going to say here that people will tell you, He can't know that. But that's because they're ignorant of how I did it. Sometimes, all you have to do is just keep your mouth shut and listen. You'd be surprised what people will tell you when you let them, but the folks I worked for had other ways of knowing things, too. Ways I can't talk about, especially not with that treason business waiting to crawl out from under the rug and bite me on the ankle. That's one thing I'm not going into no matter how much you ask, so you might as well not bother.

And there are people, and plenty of them, who accuse me of spackling over the empty spaces when I don't know every little detail about what I'm talking about. There may be something to that, but most of what I'm going to say is truer than you'd guess. You just have to realize that knowing things was my job and I was very good at it.

What I can tell you is that all I wanted out of my final assignment was to be shuffled off to some quiet place where I could finish out my career in peace. I pulled the few strings I had and got us posted to Morocco, where Rachelle could keep doing what she was doing and I could slide halfway into retirement without having to do much of anything at all. That's the problem

with being the son of a preacher man. The Almighty takes too much notice of you.

Now I know god's famous for a lot of things, but those jokes he plays on me, they're right at the top of His list and, looking back, Rachelle and I would have been a lot better off if I'd picked some less exciting locale to serve out my remaining couple of years, like Pakistan or Afghanistan.

1

Like everybody else in my section, my real job was to keep an eye on al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. My nominal job, if anybody'd cared enough to ask, was to do something about the money-laundering going on in Morocco. That was a good cover. Working for the Treasury Department isn't working for State, which meant the ambassador wasn't looking over my shoulder and I could come and go pretty much like I wanted. In Morocco, it was the exactly the kind of backburner assignment I'd been hoping for.

My boss knew that what I really wanted was to wind up my career and go home to Brunswick, and the less involved I got in any real business, the better. Also, we'd worked together before and, not to put too fine a point on it, the fitness reports she'd written hadn't exactly advanced my career. So she just assigned me to do my nominal job and find out what was going on inside a place called the Club Oblivion where a lot of connected Europeans spent a lot of time. Which kept me away from any real work and suited the both of us just fine.

Our people had been making half-assed tries at getting into that place for years and, with any luck at all, I wouldn't be able to either. After which

Rachelle and I could just go home and my boss wouldn't have to bother about me anymore. Why Uncle would even care what French drug lords did with their ill-gotten euros in North Africa was a question nobody ever seemed to ask. Truth is, they could have been bootlegging pork out the back door and it still wouldn't have made any difference to us. Putting me in that job was a win win all around and would have been the ideal situation if god hadn't taken the opportunity to play one of his jokes.

About three days into the assignment I discovered what everybody else already knew, that it wasn't just money that got repurposed at the Club Oblivion. It was underage girls. And my opinion on how I wanted to spend the last two years of my working life changed.

That whole business about children turned my stomach. Worse, it made me think about Amelia. And that makes me feel bad about myself every time I remember it.

I was nine at the time. Amelia was the big sister I never had, and I'd had a crush on her as long as I could remember. I'd go over to her house after school, or on Saturdays, and she'd be practicing the bugle, at least until the neighbors called the police. After that, she'd be tinkering with one of her airplane motors, figuring out how to make the propeller buzz faster. One time she built an entire German Stuka dive bomber with flaps on the wings, and tail flaps, and a remote controller, and we flew it around the yard at Daddy's church

until one day I tangled it in the Spanish moss hanging down from that big live oak they've still got there and it never flew again. She was eleven.

People talk a lot about kids growing up without fathers, but there are different ways to do that. My situation wasn't anything I could complain about, at least not to Amelia. Her daddy disappeared before she was born. Mine was a preacher, which is why I didn't spend Sundays in her place.

There was no better time to be a preacher than 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was working its way through Congress. Mother had gone up to Atlanta to help with that, and Daddy did his lobbying from the fancy, carved desk he kept in the cheap house we rented. Mother had money and we could have done better, but living on the Georgia coast and being at one with the disinherited and downtrodden of this world was one of their causes. Whatever, I got most of my mothering from Amelia. And, then one day after school when nobody else was around, she told me about her mother's boyfriend slipping into her bed at night.

That was the Reverend Washington and he was big in Civil Rights, too, and somebody my daddy admired for all he did for his people. When I tried to tell him about Amelia he just said, "Satan has been slandering the Reverend for years to undermine all the good he's doing. Don't let me ever catch you repeating any of that evil. You *hear* me?"

There wasn't any way I didn't hear him, and I nodded, but that wasn't good enough. He made me say it out loud, that I didn't know what I knew.

Then I asked him if Amelia could come live with us, just until Mother got back. "You don't sleep in the same bed, so there's a place for her and everything."

Daddy didn't usually show much emotion but the way he shoved back from his desk and came around to my side, I thought he was going to hit me. But he was much too evolved to believe in hitting. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me and said, "I know what you're up to with that question and don't ever try to con me with nonsense like that again. You hear me?" He made me say that out loud, too. He had bigger worries on his mind than what was happening to the girl down the street.

The Civil Rights Act got passed but Mother never did come back. Daddy lost his job at the church in some scandal I never heard the details of, and had to sell the fancy desk just to keep the cheap booze he drank on the table. And we never could afford to move out of that house.

The thing about the Reverend Washingtons of this world is, it's not just the people they hurt who come away hurt. They make everybody who knows what's going on and can't do anything about it feel bad, too. I was so ashamed about what he was doing to Amelia I started avoiding her. Sometimes during lunch at school I'd catch her crying. A couple of times she caught me on the

way home and begged me to help her figure some way to escape, but I didn't have any better ideas than she did. In the end the only way she could think of was to go to work for LeMond. She did that on her thirteenth birthday. "At least I'll get paid," she said, and I never saw her again, except years later in Jacksonville when she came up to me on the street and offered me a freebie, "for old time's sake." And for the cash she knew I had on me.

2

From then on I wasn't just pretending about trying to get inside the Club Oblivion. It was the purpose of my life. But, like generations before me I never could talk my way past the bouncers. Then one evening a prince showed up with a dagger in his gut and I found my chance.

Not that he was an important prince, just some kind of distant relation the king would have had to be introduced to at family gatherings. A man like him showing up murdered should have been an occasion to party for every decent citizen in Morocco. But that was Royal Blood seeping into the carpet, which automatically made it a big deal. I would have liked to have seen the body but it was gone by the time I arrived. People from a private ambulance company hauled it away as soon as the Palace Police finished taking their photographs. The fact that the Palace Police were involved instead of ordinary cops told you a lot about how the matter was handled.

One of the girls had put the knife in him. They had her in custody and there wasn't any question she was the one. Nobody else had even been in the suite with Mr Dead Prince, the security cameras showed that. Camerawise, the Club Oblivion was more secure than those NASA clean rooms where you can't

be so much as a mote of dust without getting your portrait taken from three different directions. They had cameras at both ends of every corridor and two at the entrance, and at every other outside door. They even had cameras watching the cameras in case somebody wanted to fool with a camera, and none of them showed anybody going into the rooms the prince used that night. Or back out again, except that one girl.

Usually Uncle doesn't get mixed up in local crimes, but the graceful way to say this is that we have . . . resources . . . that aren't available to law-enforcement otherwise. I'm not going to go too deeply into what those resources are only to say what everybody already knows, that there isn't an American embassy or consulate anywhere in the world that doesn't record every electronic communication within a hundred miles. And in Morocco we have an embassy in Rabat *and* a consulate in Casablanca, which covers a lot of landscape. And that a murder that comes even close to somebody at the Palace is a very high-profile murder. Mohammed VI is one of the few friends we have left in Muslim parts of the world, and staying friends with the people who live in that palace is Number One on our list of to-do's, so we help out where we can.

Okay, so I didn't exactly check with my boss before inviting myself to the party, but in the words of one George Washington Plunkitt, I seen my opportunities and I took em, and flashed a Treasury Department badge and walked in like I belonged there and nobody said boo. That's another reason it's

handy to fly under the cover of Treasury. Even in America, most people don't actually read a badge and, when they do, they don't know what the job description of a Treasury Agent is supposed to be, and wave you on through. You'd be surprised the places you can get into with a badge like mine.

The club looked pretty much the way upper-crust nightclubs look. There was a long, shiny bar, a platform for the band and racks of strobe lights which were turned off. This being Friday, the customers were down at the mosque purifying themselves from what they'd done Thursday night, but were really holed up in private suites sleeping it off. Which is the kind of thing people everywhere do but, in the Lands of the Faithful, no good Muslim wants to talk about. Especially around foreigners.

I didn't get as much of a feel for the layout of the place. The Palace Police didn't want outsiders doing that, and rushed me down a darkened corridor to where the girls were being questioned. There were a couple of dozen of them in little groups waiting to give their statements, and they were scared out of their minds.

People who work in places like the Club Oblivion are never comfortable around cops. But these girls were more terrified than usual. In the first place these cops were Palace Police, and Palace Police could and do pretty much anything they wanted. Palace Police aren't beholden to anybody but the king. And the king isn't beholden to anybody at all.

In the second place, the girls didn't have anywhere else to go, and the police knew it. They all owed some kind of trumped-up debt to the Club, and were indentured there until they worked it off. Which was never. Or, at least, never until they were too old to be worth the food they ate, or too pregnant, or one of the customers cut them up in an effusion of passion and, then, it was out on the street to earn their keep as best they could.

Half of the girls were underage, but the one who killed the prince was under that. She claimed she was fourteen, but you couldn't prove it by me. She had narrow hips and narrow shoulders and, except for the breasts shifting around under the see-through robe, she could have passed for a precocious fourth-grader. The prince had been in his fifties but he could have passed for a fourth-grader himself, given his taste in companions. He liked them young and he liked them buxom.

Even all streaked and crying with her hair messed up and blood splattered on her robes, it wasn't hard to see that she was turning into a real beauty. Beautiful the way girls from the High Atlas Mountains are beautiful. It was no wonder the prince wanted her. She had enormous eyes and gorgeous long hair, at least it was going to be gorgeous once she ran a comb through it.

She could have been a case study in a master's seminar in economics, the tragedy of the commons: too many people jumping her bones before she was ready. In America she'd have been whisked off to the Department of

Children and Family Services before the police tape got unrolled. Here, she was huddled on a chair and out of her head from crying and babbling and hugging herself. She'd been in love with Mr Dead Prince. He was going to rescue her from the Club Oblivion. He was going to take her with him, and make her into a princess, and what was she going to do now?

Well, maybe, but the cop doing the questioning was no fool. Princes don't run off with whores, no matter how good looking Julia Roberts is, although that's just the kind of fantasy a ten-year-old girl with hormone injections might latch onto. I'd seen too much of that wishful thinking back in grade school.

It didn't take CSI Las Vegas to know she'd been in a fight. Besides the blood on her robes she had bruises on her throat and her wrists, and scratches on her arm, and marks on her face. There's a saying in my line of work, "when you hear laughing on the other side of the wall, don't think hyenas. Think there's a party you didn't get invited to."

She and Mr Dead Prince had gotten in a fight, he'd slapped her around, she'd grabbed one of the daggers decorating the walls and let him have it in the belly and up into the chest cavity. It was one of those straight-bladed daggers like the Tuareg use down south, not the sickle-shaped kind Arabs flash around, and it was the right choice to sink into the diaphragm of a child rapist. Mr Dead Prince hadn't even been able to yell. He just fought for a while then

collapsed on the fancy rug and died while she headed back to her own room and pretended nothing happened.

It was a pity about the carpet. If he'd had the courtesy to land a few feet to the side, he'd have bled on the floor tiles and somebody could have mopped it up. That man had wasted a lot of things in his life and, at the end, spoiled a beautiful piece of work some lady in the Atlas Mountains had spent half a winter laboring over just to have a low-rent child rapist bleed to death on it. I know, I know, that's the way they do things in the Muslim world and I should be more culturally sensitive, but it's hard to get all multicultural where children are concerned.

The suite was done up in whorehouse Arab, which explains the weapons decorating the walls, and the panels inscribed with verses from the Qur'an tacked up in between. The room was fitted out with carpets and silks and a brass brazier that, in a room with central heating, didn't do any brazieing. Besides the daggers there were crossed scimitars and mirrors and plates of fruit. I don't think it ever occurred to that dead son of a bitch that keeping weapons handy might not be such a hot idea. Not that I ever met the son of a bitch in question, but I've got my opinions.

The girl had watched enough Egyptian soap operas to know to wipe her prints off the dagger, but she hadn't been able to do anything about the Prince-blood on her robes. Or the bits of skin under his fingernails that

matched the claw marks on her arm. That's as far as I got because the major domo, or whatever that muckety-muck called himself, cottoned to the fact that I wasn't on the guest list and invited me back out onto the street and, next Monday I was on my way to Marrakech.

If this was a spy-thriller instead of me just telling you what happened, here's where I'd march myself into my boss's office and have a face-to-face with the old fool and tell her my spider sense was tingling, and that there was more to what happened to the dead prince than meets the eye. And she'd tell me it wasn't my problem and keep my nose out of it. Then we'd get in a big fight and I'd stomp out and start hanging around the Club Oblivion and risk my career on what looked like a fool's errand until I saved the world.

It's not that my boss wasn't an old fool, I'm not going to take a position on what kind of fool my boss was. Not in public, anyway. But the truth is she didn't have any more choice in the matter than I had. It didn't take more than one phone call from her boss back in DC before she discovered that Marrakech was the place I needed to focus my investigative abilities on until the Palace forgot about my busting in on their private crime scene. Which wasn't going to happen during the remaining lifetime of the Milky Way Galaxy.

And there was something else. Before I left, Rachelle told me the word around the embassy was that Chinese were up to something in Marrakech. And that Wu might be involved. Rachelle didn't know about everything that had

gone on between me and Wu, but she knew enough to think I had a need to know, even if nobody else at the embassy thought I needed to be in any loops at all. What everybody in the know, knew, was that Wu had been up to his ears in the embassy bombing in Nairobi and, with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb hanging around the south part of the country, something might be about to happen. And I should be careful it didn't happen to me. Wu wasn't going to be posting any warnings. Not this time.

I wanted Rachelle to come down with me, but that woman was as headstrong as ever and had too many of her own irons in the fire. And I just rented a room in a riad and visited her on weekends when I could.

3

The fact that I was in Marrakech that was on Uncle. And the fact I was drawing a per diem, that was on Uncle, too. So I did what I could and dressed up like a tourist and went down to the Jemaa el F'naa and found a table on a balcony where I could drink coffee and watch the show going on below. And make the most out of being almost retired.

The Jemaa el F'naa is the main plaza in Marrakech and I'd tell you what the name means, only I don't know any more than anybody else. Some say it's the Assembly of the Dead. Others will tell you it's the Mosque of Nothingness, or the Place of Execution. But none of that makes sense when you go there. When you actually go there, the place is more like some raucous carnival that's been running nonstop for a thousand years.

They've got fortunetellers and men blowing flames out of their mouths. They have scribes with ancient, upright typewriters waiting to take a letter if you can't write one for yourself, which most people can't. There are acrobats tumbling around and, when you're down there with them, you have to watch your back or you'll get tumbled on. There are carts selling pastries, or oranges they'll make into juice for you if you're watching. Or pour it out of cheap

orangeade bottles if you aren't. Tables are piled with teeth to show off the talents of whichever dentist is lounging nearby with pliers. Boom-boxes blast out bad children's songs about Allah that get stuck in your brain like toothpaste commercials.

They have monkeys wearing diapers for tourists who want to have their picture taken with a diaper-wearing monkey on their head. Chickens cluck underneath baskets in case you want to buy a chicken out from under a basket. Other baskets hold Egyptian cobras that rise up and look around when the man who owns the basket toots on a tin horn, so you have to be careful about your baskets. There are lots of smaller snakes I didn't even want to think about, except to know where they were so I wouldn't walk on them. And there are cats.

These are the kind of cats you don't mess with. They're rangy and on edge and lead lives that are hard in every way a cat's life can be hard, except for dogs. Dogs are unclean and, if you associate with a dog, you have to go through an extra layer of ablutions five times a day at the mosque, and who needs that? So you don't see many dogs in Marrakech.

One thing I could do right at my table and still act like I was working, was chat up the waiters. Nobody gets to listen in on more people who don't think they're being listened to, than waiters. Which make waiters a prime target to sign up on Uncle's payroll.

Making a new friend for America or, as the Moroccan government would put it, suborning one of their citizens, is not the kind of thing you want to rush, but I had my eye on a kid named Tariq. I liked that boy. He was hardworking and earnest and had a mother and four sisters to take care of, and the whole thing made me feel fatherly. Which is a feeling I never got from that fool nephew of mine back in Brunswick, who just made me feel homicidal.

Somebody else I had my eye on was the old man who came out in the evening and told stories at the far end of the Jemaa el F'naa. Tariq told me he'd been doing that for fifty years, and his grandfather before him. After that, I took to hanging around the back of the crowd to get a feeling for whether he might be the kind of old man who'd like to go to work for our side. That involved some blending in if I didn't want to call attention to myself as an American who spoke more of the local lingo than he was supposed to, so I went into the souk and outfitted myself with one of those long, woolen djellabas with the tan stripes and, presto-digito, I'm in with the in-crowd. And, come evening, I pulled the hood over my head and walked over to listen to the storyteller just like my ancestors would have been doing for generations, if generations of my ancestors had ever been there and done anything like it.

One thing you have to say about that old storyteller, he could tell a story. A hundred-and-fifty, two-hundred people, maybe, were in a circle half-a-dozen deep watching him wave a stick with a knob on the end while he spun

out the Tale of Abdelilah and the Flying Horse. Abdelilah needed the stick to fight off a tribe of hill demons who lived on the far side of the Crystal Mountains. Most of the old man's stories took place on the far side of the Crystal Mountains.

He had a brass bowl at his feet and a horse egg in his other hand. The bowl was for coins listeners might want to drop in, and the horse egg was not just any horse egg. It was an egg stolen from the nest of al-Buraq, the horse that flew Mohammad up to the Seventh Heaven to check out Paradise. And a good thing he did, too, because while he was there he had a sit-down with god and negotiated the prayer thing down to five times a day. The original sentence was fifty, so if you wonder why the Prophet is held in such high esteem, that's Reason Number One.

In the world on the far side of the Crystal Mountains, flying horses hatch from eggs. In the world where we live, the egg came from an ostrich. It was a great story and had been chipped into shape and polished and smoothed by a thousand years of being told on that exact spot, and made me regret not knowing it when my boys were younger.

I got as wrapped up in listening as everybody else, and it seemed like no time before the song of a muezzin rang out. The first star was about to appear and the hour had come for all good people to head over to the mosque and make a public display of their righteousness.

Before the first muezzin was done, a second cut loose and, then, another until a whole cascade of muezzins had picked up the chorus. Now I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be counted among the Faithful because god would see right through something like that, but sometimes when those calls got to going, even us infidels would catch our breaths and listen for a while.

After a bit the old man picked up the brass bowl and the horse egg and tucked the stick under his arm and left the plaza and headed down an alley and disappeared into the shop where he lived with his son.

4

A week later I was drinking coffee at the Argana, that was the name of the café I was operating out of, and relaxing and feeling good about myself. It was a pretty day in April, Uncle was paying me to be a tourist, the dossier on the old storyteller had arrived from the Sûreté Nationale, and I'd guessed right. If there was anybody in all of Marrakech who might be willing to sell a little piece of his country to America, he was the one. Add to that the fact I'd just signed up Tariq, and it was a good day all around.

Odd thing about that boy, he always came to work in a pair of black tuxedo pants with a stripe down the side. They'd been donated by a charity in New Jersey, but he'd had to pay full price anyway. That's pretty standard in a lot of places around the world. Still, he was the most grateful of boys. He was thankful for the pants, he was thankful for his sisters, and he was so thankful for the money I'd be giving him he took me outside to meet his mom.

She sold pastries from one of the carts parked in front of the Argana and almost wept when she grasped my hands and thanked me for what I was doing for her family, and invited me to dinner. Then she sent me back inside with a pink paper bag full of lemon tarts to munch on while I read through the dossier on the old storyteller, not that she knew about the dossier.

His official name was Isma'il, but that was just because his mother needed to sign him up as a citizen. The government refused to acknowledge

anybody who didn't have an Islamic name, so she told the Keeper of the Records to write down Isma'il, and that was the end of it. In real life he was Baghurr, which means "Fox" in the local language, because of the red hair he was born with. And because foxes are smart, and that's something she wanted for her son. Plenty of people look down on the Berber tongues, but she called the one she spoke the Language of the Free People, which is what Berbers call themselves.

Good as I am with languages, I couldn't hold a candle to that old man. Besides the Middle-Atlas Tamazight he told his stories in, he spoke Darija, which is the version of Arabic they speak in Morocco and nobody outside the country can make heads or tails of. He spoke Modern Standard Arabic as well as any Arab, Standard, or Modern or otherwise, could speak it. He could get by in French and Spanish and Italian and German and English from spending so much time around tourists. And he was fluent in the speech of the Free People in the Rif Mountains.

Spectacular as all that would have been in an American, it was pretty standard issue for somebody who earned his living at the Jemaa el F'naa and none of it bothered the government. But there were other things in the dossier, things that made the Sûreté Nationale question his loyalty to king and country. And made me think I might be just who I was looking for.

One of the things that bothered the government was that he'd grown up in a family of smugglers. The fact that there wasn't any record of him actually smuggling didn't prove anything, only that he hadn't been paying off the right officials. Which by itself was enough to draw attention to him.

Another thing that made the Sûreté suspicious, in a general kind of way, was that Baghurr was a storyteller. Storytellers are automatically suspect because stories involve metaphors, and metaphors can involve religion. Or the king, and you never can tell what something like that might lead to. But in Baghurr's case there were more specific things the Sûreté worried about. Namely, that his eldest son had disappeared into police custody. Some of what happened was in the dossier, but most I had to find out about on my own,

The boy's name was Khalil and it all started when he married Habebe. Habebe means Sweetheart, and her parents had named her right. Everybody said she'd been the most devoted of brides when he brought her home, and the most modest. Also, one of the most beautiful, everybody said that, too. They still did, for that matter, and Baghurr and his wife had fallen in love with her the moment they laid eyes on her. Then, one morning, Habebe left to carry dough to the communal oven and never came back. The loaves were still waiting when Khalil showed up looking for her.

A gang of boys saw what happened. A BMW was cruising the streets and Habebe had been dragged inside. The boys didn't think anything about

that, women got dragged into cars all the time by brothers and uncles who had nothing but their best interests in mind, but there's nothing like a fancy car to attract attention. One of the boys even remembered the license number. It belonged to Maurice the Honeybeak.

People called him that because he had a pointed nose, and because of the money he made off his connections at the Palace. Alcohol. Drugs. Little boys. Girls, you name it and Maurice supplied it. He was always careful to kick some of the profits upstairs to people with even better connections than he had, which made justice very expensive when Maurice the Honeybeak was involved.

Khalil tried anyway, the whole family did. They paid every dirham Baghurr's father bequeathed him from the slave-trading business. Then they sold their house and borrowed more money and raised such a stink that a women's-rights outfit from Switzerland got involved. Not that any of it made any difference to Maurice the Honeybeak. He just smirked when the detectives asked what he'd done with Habebe.

Months after she disappeared, she showed up at the Club Oblivion. When the police interviewed her, it turned out Maurice's beak wasn't the only thing he'd been dipping. He'd raped her for weeks, then forced her to work as a dancer when he got tired of her. The police believed her story, they just didn't take it seriously. Everybody knows what dancers really do, and how could

you rape a whore? The fact that she hadn't been a whore, or a dancer, before Maurice dragged her into his BMW didn't cut any ice, and they gave her back to the club. Those people had a business to run, after all. Then they issued a formal apology for the trouble they'd caused.

When Khalil found out where she was he headed up to Rabat to get her back. But he wasn't Maurice the Honeybeak and he didn't have friends at the Palace, and nobody was about to let a piece of street trash into the Club Oblivion. He caught a glimpse of her from the door, and that's the last he ever saw of her. She had her back to him and was drinking champagne with an oily-looking man. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, she had bruises on her slender neck and on her arms, her dress was scooped so far down the back she was naked almost to the waist and it was clear she wasn't wearing anything underneath. The man had his hand on the skin of the small of her back and, when Khalil yelled to her, the bouncers kicked him off the steps.

When he refused to leave the street, they called the cops. A two-hundred-and-thirty-pound sergeant hit him in the side of the head with a nightstick, tossed him into the back of a police van, and nobody ever saw him again. Not long after that, somebody from the Palace accused the women's-rights organization of proselytizing for Jesus, and they were thrown out of the country. A year later, Baghurr got word that Habebe was scrubbing floors in a

hotel down at the edge of the desert. Now that she had the baby, she wasn't fit to work at the club and had to make do as a chambermaid.

"My daughter," Baghurr said when he saw her, "you are welcome in our home. But she'd been too ashamed of what had been done to her to ever return to Marrakech. Or to her parents in the mountains, for that matter. At least that's what she told him. But there was more to it.

I agreed with the Sûreté on their assessment of Baghurr. Any man who'd been so thoroughly betrayed by his own government would be ripe to cut a deal with foreigners. Add to that a lifetime in the Jemaa el F'naa keeping tabs on what was going on in every language under the sun, and that man was right out of central casting.

The only hold-up was that Yours Truly wasn't exactly in a position to conjure up the money to pay him. The people who could get him and Tariq on the payroll were the same people who'd sent me to Marrakech to get rid of me. Which meant that whatever applications I made were going to take more time processing their way through channels than I had left before heading home to the Georgia coast, no matter how long I took to retire.

There was no way I could cover what I'd need to give the old man, but I'd decided to pay Tariq out of my own pocket. Well, not exactly my own pocket, but close. I had a small entertainment budget I could dip into. It wasn't really designed to hand out money to waiters, but close enough. The people

checking the paperwork were in Rabat, I was in Marrakech and, besides, I liked the kid. I had enough boys of my own to know what he was going through and his mother had given me a bag of lemon tarts. Who could overlook something like that?

Besides, there'd been a time when a foreigner took me under his wing when I needed a daddy to look up to even if it did come with strings attached.

5

The foreigner's name was Wu and he is, maybe, the smartest person I ever met. Smarter than any of you. Smarter even than that champion card player from North Korea who disappeared out of a high-stakes canasta tournament in Hong Kong, which is another thing I'm not going to tell you about.

Smart enough to keep our people off his back for decades with hints about switching sides and coming to work for us, which would have been a very big deal, indeed. Only thing was, it seemed like everybody who tried to finalize the arrangements wound up getting recruited in the other direction. And the ones who didn't, he ruined them, too, because who really knows after somebody's spent time with Wu?

There was a third kind of person, the ones we never found out about because they were already working for him when they came to work for us. Like happened with me. The thing was, working for Wu was overstating it, at least in my case. That happened back when I was an Israeli Jew and once he had me signed up, he returned me to America and applauded while I went to college and got my job, and got promoted until I was in the job I'm in, now. It was easy to be grateful for all that, but gratitude didn't stop me from worrying

about what would happen when Wu said the secret word and turned me into a Chinese super weapon. Only he never said it.

The secret word was three words: “Elvis is dead.” Don’t get me wrong, this wasn’t a Manchurian Candidate sort of thing where I’d climb up in the rafters and shoot my own momma. It’s just that Wu needed some way of letting me know when my services would be required. I was a dumb-ass small-town southern boy fooling around with a guitar when he took me under his wing and Elvis was a hero of mine. So telling me Elvis is dead was a surefire way to get my attention.

Wu hardly even had to recruit me. I’d run up some gambling debts with a couple of Chinese gentlemen who ran a game back of a food market, and didn’t know where to turn. That’s when Wu introduced himself. He was old and wise and seemed like a daddy, and that was something I needed right then. Heck, that was something I’d needed my whole life. Maybe he felt like one, too, I don’t know. His wife had smacked up against that one-child rule they had in China. Boys are what most people hold out for because they’ll take care of you in your old age. But when Bao-Yu got pregnant there was no way she was going to murder her little boy, even when he turned out to be a girl. So that could be part of it, the fact that I reminded Wu of the son he never had.

We spent a lot of time in restaurants. He’d buy the meals, which made him seem more like a daddy, I suppose, and made me feel taken-care of.

Besides, I always liked good food, and he had an expense account that the people back in the Peoples' Republic took care of. With Wu, it never was just one reason. You were lucky when you could figure out half of them.

Restaurants were good places to meet. There are other tables in restaurants, which meant somebody could keep an eye on him and make sure I wasn't the one doing the recruiting. At least, that's what I thought the other somebodies were doing. No matter how important a Chinaman gets, he never gets important enough to be left alone with a foreigner. So I didn't give much thought to the guys at the other tables until years later when it occurred to me they'd have pictures. And tape recordings, too, and none of it would leave any doubt I'd be jumping up and saluting the moment Wu said the secret words, regardless of what my current opinions on the matter might be. But what sealed the deal was what he did after I shot up the beach in Haifa.

I don't think he had anything to do with setting that up but like I said, with Wu, you never could be certain. What happened was, I was at a café eating falafel and waiting for him to show up when a gang of thugs attacked a girl no more than fifty feet away. I remember that part, the falafel and the humus. It was a beachfront café looking out across the Mediterranean with a big, crescent moon halfway up the sky. She was a Palestinian girl in a Western bathing suit, a modest one-piece with a skirt around the hips, and attacked is the only word for it. They had her backed up against a bath house and were

pulling down her suit and had their hands all over her. She was struggling and trying to cry out, but one of them had his mouth on hers so there wasn't much noise coming out. She couldn't have been more than twelve.

Memories of Amelia came flooding back and I was on my feet and reaching for my pistol the way I'd fantasized about years ago. I was out of uniform just then so I wasn't required to be armed, but the Israel Defense Forces "highly encouraged" us to carry weapons when we went out in public, and I fired a couple of shots into the air.

Five of the boys ran into the dark, but one turned and looked straight at me and reached into his pocket.

I didn't shoot into the air that time.

I fired into the sand next to his feet, which wasn't what I had in mind. What I had in mind was to shoot his balls off but I pulled the trigger too quick. All my training was not to let the gun jump and shoot high, so I pulled the trigger too quick and shot low and hit sand.

He threw his hands over his head and fell to his knees. And I went down and grabbed him by the collar and pulled his jacket off and gave it to the girl to cover herself while he scrambled to his feet and ran away.

I brought her to my table and waited with her until her parents arrived. They were in traditional clothes and just the kind of people who were likely to take it out on their little girl for causing all the trouble. By then, Wu had shown

up and spent half-an-hour explaining how he'd seen everything and none of it was her fault. And another hour explaining to the police how it wasn't my fault, either.

Good as I felt about all that, it wasn't where it ended. Things never just stop when you get to the part where you feel good about them. They just keep going. In this case there'd been a shooting and, even though nobody got shot, the IDF didn't have any choice but to launch a court of inquiry. There was an election coming up and the whole thing landed in the papers. Palestinians started throwing rocks. A couple of international civil rights organizations got involved and the IDF figured that the easiest way to put the matter behind it was to come down hard on me. Which meant calling in witnesses to say what I did.

There hadn't been many people at the café, and those who'd been there hadn't been paying attention to me until they heard my first two shots. Then they looked up and saw me pointing a gun at a Palestinian kid.

Wu was the only one who'd seen the whole thing. He testified for four hours explaining how the punks had been in the process of raping the girl, how I'd shot twice into the air to stop them, how one had reached for a weapon and I fired a warning shot into the sand next to his feet and how, when I'd gone down to help the girl he'd turned tail and run off. Exactly the way it happened, only none of it was true. Because he hadn't been there to see.

He hadn't arrived until a good twenty minutes after it was all over. But what he said, the way he took up for me, the way he told the court how, out of all those people I was the only one to do anything to help the girl, those were words I'd been waiting fifteen years for my daddy to say. Wu may have been thinking about his own little girl, but he was talking about me and, from then on, it wasn't just that Wu was like my daddy, he'd turned into the daddy I'd always wanted.

When we walked out of the court, he announced it was time for me and Rachelle to head back to America and wait for Elvis to be dead. To tell the truth, I was fed up with Israel by then anyway. And the IDF was ready to see me go. Fact is, that was pretty much the terms of my release.

When I got home, he worked a scholarship for me at Georgia State, which is more than my Daddy or Uncle ever did. He might have even had some behind-the-scenes thing going that got me my present employment, I wouldn't really know.

The flaw in the ointment was that Wu was playing a very long game, and it was too long for me. I graduated from college and went to work for the State Department. The Israel days got smaller in my rearview mirror while the whole time I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but nobody ever said anything about Elvis being dead.

Rachelle popped out the first of our boys and, then, another. Life turned better than I ever thought it could get, and I stopped having to pretend so hard to be a good American. I just naturally changed into one. The morning came when I woke up with her snuggling next to me, and more kids than I could keep track of jouncing on the bed, and birds outside the window, and I realized I didn't have to pretend anymore.

On paper, that would have been a very good time to come clean about Wu and the whole Chinese connection, but nothing will put you in jail quicker than putting your faith in things on paper. The moment I mentioned something about that, I'd find myself in a private room having to answer follow-up questions along the lines of, Howcome you didn't mention this ten years ago? No matter what I said, our guys would put two and two together and come up with something a lot bigger than four. Like fifty-five-to-life, unless there was a firing-squad in it first.

6

After I'd finished with the dossier on the old storyteller, I met Tariq in the men's room and paid him the first installment of what he had coming. Then I headed downstairs and out into the Jemaa el F'naa and . . . found myself face down on the paving tiles with shards of glass and pieces of flatware and busted chairs and chunks of concrete smashing down around me. Reactions from my days in the Israel Defense Forces kicked in before I even noticed there'd been an explosion.

When I got back to my feet the air was filled with dust and women screaming. People were running toward me and people were running the other way, but mostly they were just staring at the Argana Café. Smoke was pouring out of the windows, the roof was caved in, the walls on the third floor were blown out, the balcony was twisted and collapsed and injured people were staggering out of the shops on the ground floor. I know I shouldn't have done it, it was newbie trick running back inside and attracting attention to myself like that. It was the kind of thing I'd promised myself I wasn't ever going to do, but Tariq was in there and I didn't see where I had any choice but to go find him.

Shreds of plaster hung in rags from the ceiling like rotten laundry. Postcards and trinkets and splinters of cheap ceramic covered the floor. Robes and scarves and sandals were tangled together, and everything was gray with dust from the shattered concrete.

A woman stumbled by howling and tracking blood and my eyes began to tear up, but it wasn't tears. When I wiped my face, my sleeve came back bloody from where I'd split my forehead diving onto the ground. Other people had blood on their faces, too.

"Help us," a gang of hippies yelled at me. They were plainclothes cops pulling at a fallen timber that blocked the steps to the balcony.

My feet tangled in a pile of tipped-over walking canes when I tried to go over to them. I grasped at a broken display case to keep from falling, and cut my hand on the glass. When I made it to the cops, I grabbed hold of the timber and began pulling along with them.

When it came loose a chunk of concrete the size of an air-conditioning unit smashed down from the ceiling. We had to clear that away, too, before we could go up the steps. By the time we reached the balcony, we were so covered with dust you couldn't tell me from them.

Blood was everywhere, splattered across the pieces of wall that were still standing, and sprayed over broken tables. It was on crumpled chairs and pooled on the floor and dripping from overhead in slow, sticky drops.

A girl who couldn't have been more than about twenty was moaning to herself. Her hair was matted with blood, one of her legs was twisted so her heel was touching her ear and, when I bent to take her pulse, she didn't feel me lift her wrist. Somewhere in the wreckage a baby was shrieking.

I'd had my share of experiences with this kind of thing when I was in Israel and pulled a tablecloth from under a turned-over table and covered her from the chin down. This time when I started to tear up, it really was tears. Seeing that woman I kept thinking of Rachelle and how close she'd come when the embassy in Nairobi blew and how it could be the wife of my years lying shivering in the wreckage.

It was a warm afternoon but the girl kept shivering. She was French, I knew that because she'd been sitting at the table behind me. Somebody would be waiting for her back home but I didn't think she'd make it. I wasn't so sure she'd want to. If it had been me, I wouldn't have wanted to, but I wasn't her and it was hard to know what a young woman would want. By then, other people were streaming onto the balcony.

I found a half-smoked Marlboro and put it between her lips, and she sucked on it. Then she let it fall from her mouth and said something I couldn't recognize and her eyes rolled back in her head. For a moment I thought she was dead, but she was shivering too hard for that.

I stood up and noticed a body smashed against the wall and half-covered with fallen ceramic tiles. At first, I thought maybe it was Tariq but it wasn't wearing tuxedo pants. He had a baby in a carrier on his chest that, somehow, had escaped the blast.

A lady who may have been the mother was making swimming motions across the floor, tearing her hands and arms and face on the broken glass and smashed tiles as she tried to get to them. Her right leg was gone below the knee.

She was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt with a high collar, which made the fact that her skirt had been ripped off all the more obscene. One of the cops was standing over her trying to decide whether to go away and leave her some modesty, or try to do something about the blood spurting from her leg. Modesty wasn't something I worried much about and I got a piece of cloth around her thigh and tightened it with a bit of wood. While I was doing that a cat dragged itself by with its front legs, leaving a wet streak from the intestine hanging out. Another cat hissed and leapt out from behind a pile of wreckage and tried to swat it.

I went over to a leg sticking from a pile of collapsed wall and dug away at the rubble, but there wasn't anything else there. Just the leg. It came loose in my hands and dumped blood out of the boot and onto my clothes. Tariq hadn't been wearing boots. I tried to wipe my face but it didn't do any good.

My hands and sleeves and the whole front of my clothes were covered with blood. Some of it might have been Tariq's, but I didn't have any way of knowing.

"Careful, Father," a medic laid a hand on my shoulder. I'd almost stumbled into the hole blown through the foot-thick reinforced concrete floor where the bomb had gone off. "Let me take a look at you." He sat me on an overturned cash register. "God has been merciful," he said. "Everybody else up here was"

"I wasn't here," I told him. "I was looking for my friend."

"Have you found him?"

"I couldn't recognize him. He was"

"God will know him," the medic said in a kind voice. "And the hospital will determine which one he is so that you may provide him with a proper"

I nodded.

"You need to go, now," he said. "They want everybody out of the building."

Outside, the police had pushed people back twenty-five meters from the Argana. Tariq's mother was struggling to escape from two big cops who were keeping her from running inside.

"My son," she yelled when I went to comfort her. "Is he in there?"

“I don’t know, My Sister,” I put my hand on her shoulder. “I couldn’t recognize him.”

A pair of medics worked their way past. They were carrying a stretcher with a woman clutching a baby to herself with bloody hands. Dark stains from her missing leg soaked the blanket.

“This was his day off,” Tariq’s mother said in a very soft voice. “He wasn’t supposed to be here today. *You*,” she shrieked and tore at my face. “He was there to meet *you*,” and collapsed into great, howling sobs.

I wished her peace and walked away, tracking blood and concrete dust and bits of shattered glass halfway across the Jemaa el F’naa.

7

There's nothing like a good terrorist bombing to shake the leaves off Uncle's money tree and, suddenly, my job went from being exiled out in the sticks with nothing special to keep me, to Our Man in Marrakech with more work to do than any three people who'd stayed behind in Rabat. Papers were signed, approvals were approved, permissions came through, and a few weeks later I headed over to the shop to sign Baghurr up to work for us.

"I know you from the Jemaa el F'naa," the old storyteller said when I walked in. He was sitting on a carpet next to a table stacked with inlaid wooden boxes. "You dress like one of us, but I do not think you are." Propped against the wall was a sink carved out of fossil-bearing marble from the High Atlas Mountains. It's a weakness in me, I know it, but I've always been fascinated by fossils, and I liked the looks of that sink. I could imagine washing my face in fossils every morning when I shaved.

"I'm American," I told him. It's always good to start off with the truth. It builds confidence.

"And yet you speak the Language of the Free People."

"Americans speak many languages."

“Indeed,” the old man shrugged and leaned back against the wall and didn’t say anything.

Dead air makes most people nervous, but not that old fellow let the silence drag on. An American dressed like a one of us and speaking Middle-Atlas Tamazight hadn’t come into the shop to buy a cheap purse for his girlfriend. He knew that.

After a while he gestured at a leather purse hanging from the ceiling. “That handbag is Tuareg.” It’s surprising how many things turn out to be Tuareg when a foreigner walks into a shop. Foreigners will pay almost anything for something Tuareg.

“Yet it was manufactured in Fes.” I’d spent enough time at the tanneries to know what purses from Fes looked like.

“It was . . .” Baghurr seemed as if he wasn’t sure how far to stretch the truth with somebody who spoke the Language of the Free People. “. . . It belonged to a Tuareg woman.” Banter was his way of checking me out.

“You found it in the trash?”

“It’s true the lady no longer desired it.”

“She was a woman of discretion.”

“Her husband had taken a second wife and he needed to console her, so he let her pick out a new purse. She chose one made of snake leather.” He

pointed at a python-skin purse with a garish chrome G for a clasp. “Like all ladies, she wanted to be unique.”

“It’s cheaper to be unique when the snake is a factory in Shanghai,” I said.

“God alone knows the ways of a woman.”

“Sometimes even god does not know the ways of a shopkeeper. I can buy this sort of Gucci on the street in Atlanta.”

“This is genuine Tuareg,” a Canadian whispered to his son as they pushed through the beaded curtain at the back of the shop. “You don’t see much of this anymore.”

A young man rolled his wheelchair through the curtain and followed the Canadians to the front and took their money. His name was Omaar and he was Baghurr’s second son, the one who hadn’t been clubbed to death by a cop. Omaar didn’t see any reason to point that out that the dagger the man was so excited about had been stamped out of sheet metal by a small-business coop organized by a Peace Corps volunteer.

“Atlanta?” Omaar wheeled his way over to us after the Canadians had left. “I have a cousin in Memphis.” Omaar had cousins in Italy, and France, and San Francisco and every other place a customer might come from. If the customer hailed from outer space, Omaar would discover a whole line of cousins on Mars. “Where are you staying?” he asked.

“I’ve got a place in a riad,” I told him.

That wasn’t the answer he wanted. What he wanted to hear was that I stayed in a fancy hotel. The fancier the hotel, the more I’d spend in his shop, was the way he figured it. “A riad,” he grinned. “Then you’re one of us.”

With any luck I’d turn out to be a businessman or some kind of international lawyer who didn’t get out much. Those people don’t have any more clue what things cost that tourists do. “You grew up in Atlanta?” Omaar said.

“Southern Georgia. On the coast near Brunswick.”

“Is that a good place for a child to grow up?”

“Not so bad for me. My nephew, Dietrich, wasn’t so lucky.”

“Dietrich? Dietrich is a German name. Many Germans do business in this shop.”

“My mother was German.”

“That makes you German, too.”

“That makes me American.”

“And your father? He was American?” That was a lot of questions to ask from somebody he’d just met, but Baghurr knew I was in his shop for a reason and he wanted to find out all he could about me.

“My daddy was as American as you can get. He was very godly.”

“And you are godly as well?”

“My daddy’s god wasn’t for me.”

“You are an apostate, then?”

“I just figured that as long as I grew up praying to an Old Testament god, I might as well go to Israel and learn about the real thing.” Which was true enough if you glossed over the detour through Catholicism but, as my buddy Spoons used to say, “a little oversimplification is worth hours of explanation.”

“Then you are a Jew. We used to have many famous Jews in this country.”

“I was. For a while. But I came home.”

“Your nephew Dietrich? He is a Jew as well?” This was exactly where I wanted the conversation to go.

“Dietrich? No. He doesn’t believe in anything.”

“People who don’t believe in anything lose their way too easily.”

“Dietrich spent two terms in Reidsville so I guess you’re right.”

“Reidsville?”

“Georgia State Prison at Reidsville. The slams. Jail. Lots of boys wind up there.”

“And you? You were in jail, too?”

“Not me. Like I said, I was lucky. I got busted once for throwing tear gas back at the pigs but I was a kid, then, and they let me go.”

“Pigs are unclean. I don’t think you should have been sent to jail for throwing things at pigs.”

“These were a different kind of pig, but I hear what you’re saying.”

“Your nephew . . . did he throw things at pigs?”

“He sells marijuana.” That’s not the kind of thing I usually talk about with somebody who isn’t family, but it was the only way I could think of to get Baghurr to trust me. “He’s back on the street, now.”

“The street isn’t a bad place,” he said. “I’ve made my living on the street since the French were here.” He poured each of us a cup of very sweet tea.

“In America, the street isn’t as a good a place earn a living as it is here. These are . . .” I ran my hand over the marble sink “. . . fossils?” The time had come to change the subject.

“Orthoceras,” Omaar answered. “There are many such in the mountains.” That man knew more about fossils than I did.

“How much do you want for the sink?”

“Another American was here today . . .” Omaar took a sip of tea “. . . who wants to buy this sink.” The man knew his business. Another-buyer-was-in-here-today is a classic opening gambit.

“Yes,” I nodded. “But how much do you want?”

“This other Americans is very devout,” he said, putting off saying how much. “He’s from Oklahoma and thinks seashells in the mountains prove the truth of Nuh’s Flood.”

“And all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened and the rain was upon the earth for forty days and forty nights,” I said.

“You attended Madrassa that you may quote scripture?”

“As I said, my father was very religious.” I ran my fingers over the sink again. “You haven’t told me what you want for this.” Always make the other side go first.

“And he taught you how to pray?” Omaar still hadn’t given me a price.

“Watching my father pray taught me that prayer has nothing to do with getting what you want.”

Omaar nodded, as if he suspected the same thing but didn’t want to admit it. “Five-thousand dirhams.” Another classic gambit. The way he figured it, I’d counter with half of whatever he opened with. We’d meet in the middle and I’d go home and brag about how I’d talked him down twenty-five percent. “Five-thousand dirhams is a very good price.”

“Excuse me,” I clutched my stomach. “I must have”

“Is it the tea?” Omaar said. “Perhaps it’s the sugar. My cousin in Chicago tells me that Americans are not accustomed to so much sweetness.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not the sugar. It’s just that . . . for a moment there . . . I’m sorry, I thought you said five-thousand dirhams.”

“It’s a very good price.”

“It’s a very good price for a car. But I wish to buy a sink. I’ll give you two.”

“Selling marijuana is not such a bad business,” Baghurr said, changing the subject back, “many young men support their families that way.”

“Maybe in Morocco. Dietrich earns a dollar and twenty-nine cents an hour standing on a street corner in Brunswick trying not to be gunned down by some other guy selling marijuana. We figured it out one time. He’s over thirty and when he’s not in jail lives with his mother because he can’t pay for a place of his own. Like I said, I’ll give you two for the sink.”

“Your nephew earns twelve dirham an hour to let people shoot at him? Truly, this is not a good way to earn money.”

“Two?” Omaar said. “Two-thousand dirhams? This is a joke.”

“Not Two thousand,” I said. “*Two*. I will give you *two* dirham for the sink. It’s a very good amount.” People who don’t know will tell you it’s an insult to offer too low a price, but I never met a shopkeeper who seemed offended. They start high. I start low, and we both have fun.

“We need,” Omaar looked like he was recalibrating what he could get out of me, “to find a price that is good for both of us. Give me two-thousand five-hundred. That’s my best price.”

“Five,” I said.

“Five-hundred dirham isn’t enough.”

“Not five hundred. *Five*. I’ll give you five dirham.”

“Five dirham? I asked for your best price.”

“My friend, I came up from two. You came down from five-thousand. I have more than doubled my offer and you’ve only cut yours in half.” Even I didn’t think that made sense, but it was a kick to say.

“Two thousand. That’s my best offer.”

“I’ll give you ten.”

“Your government lets you cheat poor shopkeepers but jailed your nephew for selling marijuana? One-thousand five-hundred. That’s my very best price.”

“Our government forbids us to sell marijuana. It merely warns us about shopkeepers. Fifty dirham.” I grabbed my stomach again.

“You hold your belly,” Baghurr laughed. “Yet my son has not said a price.”

“I thought I heard myself say fifty dirham. Maybe something’s wrong with the tea after all.”

“Berber whiskey,” Omaar grinned. “It loosens the tongue.”

“I should leave this shop before my tongue falls out of my mouth.”

“Your nephew,” Baghurr said. “Why doesn’t he quit this evil business?”

“He can’t. He owes money to a man.”

“And this man forces him to risk his life selling marijuana for twelve dirhams an hour. How did such a thing happen?” There, we’d come down to it. That was the question I needed him to ask.

“When Dietrich was a boy he went to work for a man named LeMond who uses children to sell marijuana because children don’t go to jail when they get caught. Once, when Dietrich was twelve, thirteen years old, he got arrested with a couple of kilograms of marijuana. The police let him go, but they kept the marijuana. When he got home, LeMond told him he owed him for the marijuana.”

“And, now, your nephew needs to sell marijuana on the street so he can stop selling marijuana on the street?” Baghurr nodded, and I knew I had him. He wasn’t thinking about Dietrich and the marijuana. He was thinking about Habebe at the Club Oblivion, only it wasn’t marijuana she’d been forced to sell.

“You’re his uncle. Can’t you give him the money?”

“He asked once but I”

“You refused your nephew? He’s your blood and you refused him?”

“I’m also a diplomat at the United States Embassy. There’s no way I can get mixed up in something like that.”

“There’s no way you were willing to risk being caught,” Omaar said in a quiet voice.

“There’s no shame in honoring the oath I took to my government.” That’s what I said, but it embarrassed me how easily he’d cut to the truth. Then I turned to Baghurr, “you’ve been telling stories in the Jemaa el F’naa for many years?”

“What I have been doing depends upon who you are.” He hadn’t liked the sound of the United States Embassy, but I needed him to know I worked for our government. “You have something you want to discuss with me?”

“I do.”

Neither one of us said anything for a long time.

“We should work together.” I hated to be the one to break the silence, but it was me one who wanted something. “My people and yours have many interests in common.”

“True enough,” Baghurr said. “But the interests you have in mind are more . . . specific?”

“There are men who wish both of our countries harm,” I gestured in the direction of the door. “So that these men may be stopped, my government

wishes to make the acquaintance of people in a position to hear things that, perhaps, your own government won't learn about in time."

"A shopkeeper and a storyteller?" Omaar said.

"Who better?"

"You are talking about the men from the south who preach Jihad? Truly, these men do not wish our country well."

"Those men, certainly. But the ones I'm most interested in are the godless ones who sell young girls into bondage for other men to commit abominations upon."

"And if we learn of such men?" His expression didn't change, but I knew I had him. "You want us to tell you?"

"Sometimes," I said. "Often, all you'll need to do is tell your own government. The police, maybe." If there were any two people in all of Morocco who had reason not to go to the police, Baghurr and Omaar were the ones. Still, I had to throw it out there.

"And other times?"

"Other times the police will be too . . . slow," I put it as politely as I could.

"These other times? Why should we trust you more than we trust our own police?" In other words, why should they trust me at all?

“You should trust yourself,” I said. “Every man should trust himself. But you can rely upon Mr Jackson.”

“Who is this Mr Jackson?”

“I think you already know him,” I laid a twenty-dollar bill on the carpet in front of where he was sitting.

“This Mr Jackson . . .” Baghurr held the bill to the light. “Does he have brothers?” He slipped the twenty into his djellaba.

“Mr Jackson is from a very large family,” I said, laying more bills on the carpet. “He has many brothers. Perhaps you will find it your heart to be of service to your country.”

“Perhaps Mr Jackson will find it in his heart to reply to such a service?”

“Mr Jackson can be very appreciative. He’ll check in with you every month, if that’s what you want.”

“Then so be it,” Baghurr said. “If we hear something, how can we find you?”

“Call this number,” I pulled a flyer out of my pocket. It had a drawing of a sapling made out of pencils with the words PLANT A TREE IN A CHILD’S MIND written across the top. And a phone number.

“Ah, a non-governmental organization,” Omaar was having trouble not laughing. “You want us to call people who plant trees in children’s minds?”

“My wife works for them. They’ll know how to get hold of me.”

“Your wife is a spy, too?”

“My wife is a progressive.”

“These progressives, do they go around putting their noses in other people’s business the way spies do?”

“Not the way spies do, the way progressives do. She thinks it’s her mission to make other people better.”

“By using pencils to . . . ?”

“The idea was to get every child in America to donate a pencil to the children of Morocco, but it turned out there were already plenty of pencils in Morocco.”

“Truly,” Baghurr said.

“So, now, they’ve turned their attention to Play-Doh.”

Omaar looked blank.

“Play-Doh. It’s like modelling clay, only better. Lots of colors. Doesn’t dry out. Plant-a-Tree supplies Play-Doh to the children of North Africa who don’t have access to” I was having trouble not laughing too.

“Drying out,” Baghurr looked thoughtful, “is a problem with clay.”

“Alas, I laughed, “there doesn’t seem to be as much desire for Play-Doh as the people at Plant-a-Tree hoped. My wife has an apartment full of it.” That hadn’t gone down as smoothly as Wu would have managed, but I’d made contact and that’s what counts.

“One-thousand three-hundred dirham for the sink. That is my final offer,” Omaar said.

“Two-hundred.” The real bargaining was about to start.

“One thousand dirham but no lower. I paid as much.”

“Two-hundred and seventy-five,” I said.

“You,” Omaar took a long sip of tea, “bargain like Berber. Nine-hundred dirham, and that is my very best price.”

“And you,” I said, also taking a long sip of tea, “*are* a Berber. Two-hundred and ninety.”

“It’s true,” Omaar laughed. “We are Free Men.”

In the end, we settled on four-hundred and fifty dirham. I know I got taken, but what the hey? The sink had fossils in it. Besides, I liked those guys.

8

It's not like god's always against me, I'm not enough of a theologian to guess what He spends the rest of His days doing when He's not focusing on me, but sometimes you've got to ask yourself, What is happening here?

Maybe all that talk about Dietrich is what set Him off, I don't know, but as loose cannons go, that nephew of mine could blow away whole armies of common sense. I'd hardly gotten out of bed the next morning when a text landed in my cellphone telling me to drive to Casablanca and pick him up at the airport.

"You gotta be shitting me, Uncle," Dietrich said when he got a look at the government car I was driving. "*This* soapbox-derby thing is all they let you have?"

"That's all you've got to say? No, 'good morning, Uncle?' No, 'thanks for driving all the way to Casablanca to rescue my sorry ass, Uncle?' No, 'how's Rachelle, Uncle?' Just, 'this soapbox-derby thing is all they let you have?'"

"You know I'm grateful for all the things you do for me. But if a man wants to look like he means business, he needs to *look* like he means business."

“And if *you* want to look like you mean business, you need to stop acting like a street punk and tell people when you plan to drop in on them.”

“It wasn’t exactly like I had a lot of time to tell anything. Besides, that’s why I came to Morocco, to rehabilitate myself and put that street business behind me.” He’d come to Morocco to put something behind him all right, but it wasn’t his street-punk ways. It was his parole officer back in Brunswick. And it was LeMond.

“So, how long do you plan to rehabilitate yourself this time?” He’d already rehabilitated himself half-a-dozen times. That’s what he kept promising, anyway, but where Dietrich was concerned rehabilitation never lasted longer than it took to get out of whatever situation he’d gotten himself into.

“Awww, Uncle, don’t go looking at me in that tone of voice. It’s not like I’ll be in your hair forever. Just until things cool off.” Which brought up another question.

“How’d they even let you have a passport? You weren’t supposed to leave the state.”

“Money talks, Uncle. You know that. Where’re you taking me?”

Not to Marrakech, that was for sure. There was no way I was letting that fool anywhere near the Jemaa el F’naa. I’d already attracted enough attention running back into the Argana. If the Chinese found out about Dietrich,

they'd flip him quicker than a cheap burger. So I headed to the apartment Rachelle and I lived in, at least when I was in Rabat to live in it with her. Putting up with Dietrich was going to be a surprise but nothing she couldn't handle. I could come home with a hyena spitting rabies and Rachelle would be on top of the situation by the time we walked in the door.

The trip in from the Casablanca airport wasn't much more than an hour but Dietrich didn't have any way of knowing that, and I took the opportunity to cruise around a bit and conduct an entrance interview. The first thing I wanted to know was, What kind of trouble was he running away from?

"Don't you preach to *me* about running away from trouble. I know all about what happened that time you got busted for rioting."

"I did exactly what the judge told me to do, which is why I never went to Reidsville." That little sister of mine had been telling tales on me since about three months before she was born.

"You went to Israel, which is why you never went to Reidsville."

"It's none of your business where I went a long time ago. Your business is right now to figure out what you're going to do about jumping parole."

"You tell me what *you* would have done different if that woman had gotten on your case. First off, she started asking what I'd do if I won the lottery. So I told her what any fool already knows, that you can't make plans about winning a lottery unless you know what lottery you're going to win. If I won the

Cash 3 I'd walk away with five-hundred dollars and be a rich man until the day I needed to pay taxes on the money I'd already spent, and be in deeper than I started, so the Cash 3 wouldn't be cash for me, and I wouldn't be entering that one.

"She started writing on her clipboard about what kind of lottery to invest her government paycheck in, so I told her about the Mega-Millions. I looked it up and the jackpot that day was thirty-six million dollars. That kind of money comes with its own manager so I wouldn't have to worry about taxes. Of course everybody else knows the same thing, which makes the Mega-Millions a fool's game.

"When I said I wouldn't be entering that one ether, she told me I had a broke down sense of myself if I couldn't even imagine winning the lottery, and wrote a note about that, too. So I told her about my buddy Spuds who imagined winning the lottery so hard that he got sent back to Reidsville for it, and she wanted to know how that happened."

"I thought that was your buddy AJ," I said.

"Time marches on, Uncle. AJ shot a load of smack somebody put lye in, and it took him eight days up at Piedmont before he died. By then Spuds was back on the street working that bullshit lottery system he learned from his cellmate. He came close a couple of times before the troopers busted him for sticking up convenience stores to feed his lottery habit. Which made Little Ms

Parole Officer want to know what I'd do if I found a lottery ticket on the ground and it won the Mega-Millions.

"It didn't take Madame Rue, Sees All Knows all, to tell that was a trick question so I told her, "How'm I supposed to give something like that back? Half the people in these United States would claim they were the real owners, and half of *them* are going to have proof. Besides, if I gave it back, how was I going to open up a place for kids to get off the street in the afternoon?"

"Place for kids to get off the street? You told your parole officer you wanted to open up a place for kids to get off the street? You sure you aren't using again?"

We were stuck in a tangle of cars backed up at a stoplight and I grabbed his arm and checked for needle tracks but he came up clean. He was skinnier than he used to be and more fidgety and it was easy to think he was back on drugs, but he wasn't.

"They must give you government people a manual to read because that's the same thing she wanted to know." He snatched his arm back, "So I'm going to tell you what I told her, I haven't done that mess in years. Then she told me there wasn't any need for a boys' and girls' club because we already have those, but what does she know? Any boy caught in a place like that is going to get beat up, and no girl is going to have anything to do with a boy like that. Place I have in mind was for real kids to get off the street, not just hang

out in until their mommas want them back. Teach them how to get a job and make somethin of themselves.”

“*You* want to teach kids how to make something out of themselves?”

“That’s what she asked. So I said I’m going to tell them, ‘Kids go to Israel and marry yourself a nice Jew girl like worked for my uncle.’ Somebody should look into the credentials of the people they put in positions of authority because that woman didn’t have one bit of sense of humor and told me, ‘that’s all well and good but this isn’t about your uncle. What I want to know is, “howcome *you* haven’t found a job and made something out of yourself?’

“That woman knew just as well as me that the post office won’t hire somebody with the record I have. Mickey D won’t even look at you if you didn’t finish high school, and no man, anywhere, ever made money selling Mary K. I told her about how Billy D got a job as a watchman at a junkyard until a gang of junk-stealers beat him so bad he won’t ever walk again or have relations with his old lady, and now she’s hanging out with Bosco on account of a girl needs what she needs, and Bosco still has it and you don’t, and sorry about that.

“Somebody might be hiring janitors, but most of those jobs are part time and none of them are lookin for two-time losers. She knew all that, but she kept on nagging me to do something different and make something out of myself, and nagging, and nagging until, finally, I had to go and do it. Which is when LeMond offered me a situation in Mexico because I don’t have any strikes

down there. His business is expanding and he needs somebody he trusts to meet with the cartels and arrange for more product to come up.”

“You agreed to do *that*?”

“It wasn’t like I had a lot of choice, not with that parole officer pecking at me to make something of my life.”

“And LeMond . . .” dawn was starting to break on me, “he’s the one who arranged your passport.”

“Like I said. Money talks.”

“And he thinks you’re in *Mexico*.”

“*Damn*, Uncle. That’s what I’ve been trying to *tell* you. I came here to get away from all that. And that parole lady, too.”

“Whatever you’ve got in mind, it best not involve my money.”

“I can see that from the car you’re driving. All you need to do is get me one those government jobs with diplomatic immunity and I can start investigating crimes alongside you and we’ll both get famous together.”

“My sister was right about you. You’re not just a fool, you’re a spherical fool.”

“*Spherical* fool? What kind of fool are you calling me, Uncle?”

“Spherical. You’re a fool in any direction anybody looks at you. You think I can just sashay in and get you a job in the government?”

“Private, then. You make me into a private investigator and I’ll go undercover and find out about the drugs moving through here that you don’t have any way of knowing about on your own.”

“Nephew, you’re becoming more spherical as we speak. What does our government even care about drugs coming through Morocco? They’re Europe’s problem. So I’m going to ask you one more time. What do you plan to do for money?”

“I didn’t want to be the one to have to tell you this, but you’re growing naïve in your dotage. You think somebody like LeMond would send his most trusted lieutenant to Mexico without some way of buying himself into society?” He turned around and gestured at the suitcase in the backseat.

I wondered how much time it would take for LeMond to track Dietrich to Morocco and get his suitcase full of money back. Not long, as ostentatious as that boy was. Or maybe, when I thought about it, he wouldn’t bother. “So, you tell me. How long does my sister have before LeMond comes looking for her because he can’t find you?”

“It’s not like a hostage situation with a note setting out a deadline.”

“You’re telling me you’re going to get my little sister murdered and you don’t even know how long she’s got?” Then I had another thought. “Listen up, Nephew. Eighteen months from now Rachelle and I are going to retire back o

Brunswick and I don't need LeMond looking for me. Or our boys, either one. You understand me?"

"I didn't think about it quite that way." It was pretty clear he hadn't thought about it at all. "But we're blood, you and me, so we're going to make this work."

When I woke up that morning, all I had to worry about was seeing that Baghurr got paid, and keeping my head down long enough for Rachelle and me to retire and leave Morocco before Wu caught up with me. And, now, here I was driving a government car with a suitcase full of stolen drug money, along with a convicted felon who was on the lam from jumping parole with, incidentally, a murderous drug kingpin waiting for me when I returned home. And the felon in the government car with me, that idiot didn't have any more talent for keeping out of sight than a camel for hiding under a bed.

"One more thing, Nephew, you're going to be alone in our apartment the moment I drop you off. Do not. I say again, do *not* go showing yourself to anybody. Do not even open the door, no matter who knocks."

"You're embarrassed to be seen with me, that it?"

"Peewee Herman jerking off in a movie theater would be embarrassed to be seen with you."

There wasn't any way I could tell him about Wu and the Chinese but, it they hadn't spotted me already, there was no way they could miss Dietrich

calling attention to himself on the streets of Morocco like a foghorn. So I put it in terms he could understand.

“Nephew, you get this straight. You think you know LeMond, but you don’t have a clue who you’re dealing with. They give briefings about him at the embassy, that’s how powerful he is. He’s got people all over Morocco and we can’t do thing one to stop him.” I hadn’t spent time listening to that old storyteller at the Jemaa el F’naa without learning a thing or two.

“You step one foot out the door and LeMond’s going to know about it and we’re going to know, and you better pray that LeMond’s people get to you first because with LeMond, what happens will be over as soon as they pull the trigger. The people I work with know Oriental things that’ll keep you alive longer than you want and, blood or no blood, I won’t be able do anything about it. So lock your ass inside. And one more thing. Be careful how you act around Rachelle. You two are like oil and water. Just watch television and eat what’s in the kitchen and don’t go testing anybody’s limits.” It was all bullshit and I knew it wasn’t enough to keep Dietrich in the apartment for long, but I had to say something.

He lasted two weeks, which showed more self-restraint on Rachelle’s part than I’d given her credit for. Then they got into an argument about his television-watching habits, and he disappeared out the door and into the sites of Wu and his people.

9

I would have saved myself a lot of trouble if I'd paid more attention to the part of Baghurr's dossier that talked about his wife. Her name was Zoubida and the part I hadn't thought through was what she and Baghurr were going to do with the money I paid him. Being Bedouins, her family were automatically smugglers and, when they'd pocketed a couple of payments, they headed to the hotel down on the edge of the desert to visit their daughter-in-law, Habebe.

The Honeybeak never did let go of her. Fifteen years had gone by and she'd just gotten more beautiful. He kept her there earning her keep, and not all the earning happened during the day when she was picking up after guests. He had other girls who'd cycled through the Club Oblivion down there, too, especially if they were raising daughters. The daughters were his investment for a prosperous old age.

People will tell you Muslims don't use whores but that's like saying Baptists don't drink. Go to any small town in the Bible Belt and it won't take long to find out where to grab a bottle. In the case of Morocco, there are entire villages where every woman in town turns tricks, and the remoter the better because the more isolated you are, the less competition for your services. And

no place is more remote than the far side of the Atlas Mountains next to the Sahara.

Baghurr and Zoubida had been going down there for years, at first to visit Habebe and later on because they were worried about what was going to happen to their granddaughter. They never thought of her as anything other than that, their granddaughter.

When her daughter was born, Habebe gave her an ancient FreeWoman name and the girl grew up living the life of a ghost. Not that I blame Habebe, that woman had more than enough cause to do what she did, and then some.

After what happened, she'd been way too pissed to give her daughter an Islamic name. Not that she wouldn't have been pissed anyway, but what the Club Oblivion did to stay on the right side of god pretty much did it for Habebe as far as religion was concerned. Every time a client was led into her room he'd read aloud from a paper that created a temporary marriage. Half-an-hour later the marriage would expire, another client would come in and read from the paper, and godliness was preserved all around.

"If this is the way Islam treats its women," she told Zoubida, "my daughter doesn't need any part of it" and she named her Tismi, which means "Needle" in Middle-Atlas Tamazight, because she wanted to stick it to the mullahs and the imams and the Prophet and all the crooks who hung around the Palace. But also because the Needle is the name of the North Star and, from

then on, that's what Tismi was to her, the one fixed point in her life. She named her that even though the Keeper of the Records refused to write it in his book. Trust me on this, you can study the Qur'an all you want and Tismi just isn't there. And if the king couldn't find her in his book, ipso facto profundo Tismi didn't exist.

That's the kind of thing that can work against you in a country where babies and everybody else have to prove their bona fides at the drop of a policeman's hat. But Habebe was too pissed to care, and Tismi grew up living the life of a person who doesn't exist in a hotel nobody talks about. The girl wasn't exactly family, but she was as headstrong as any other woman in Baghurr's life. The afternoon her grandfather arrived at the hotel she was making faces in the mirror.

"Do you think I'm too skinny?" she said. "People think I'm skinny."

"Don't waste time worrying about what people think," Habebe had given up worrying about what people think the morning she was dragged into the BMW.

Tismi made an extra horrible face to show what she thought about not caring what people think.

"Careful you don't give yourself the evil eye," her mother laughed.

"That's what this is for," Tismi waggled the charm hanging around her neck. It was a flat little silver thing cut out in the shape of a hand, with a blue

stone in the middle and just about as ecumenical as a hand can get. Jews call it the Hand of Miriam in honor of the sister of Moses. Christians think it's the Hand of Mary. To Muslims, it's the Hand of Fatima. Whoever's hand it is, it's just the thing for slapping away evil eyes.

"You're looking at it in a mirror," Habebe said. "You need to turn it around before it pulls the evil eye into you."

Tismi studied her mother, trying to make out whether she was serious. With Habebe it was hard to tell, sometimes. Then she turned the charm around just in case.

"What," Habebe wrinkled up her own face, "is that unholy smell? It's . . . you aren't old enough to wear perfume."

"I'm almost as old as Layla and she gets to wear perfume."

"Her captain gave it to her?"

"It's for their wedding night. I'm just trying it on."

"I can think of other nights when this captain might want her to stink like a whore," Habebe said. "Nights before a wedding that keeps moving farther into the future."

Layla wasn't much older than Tismi but she'd blossomed into full-blown womanhood while Tismi was still a gangly fourteen-year-old. In the blossoming department, Layla was an early bloomer and her captain was her

ticket out of the hotel. A ticket to where, exactly, Habebe had a much better idea than either Tismi or Layla were willing to consider.

“It’s not like that,” Mother, “Tismi said, “Her captain’s a very important man.”

“And he’s rich?”

“He will be,” Tismi batted her eyelashes at the mirror, “He has a very big future in the army.”

“He told her so himself?”

“Everybody says that about him. He’s in charge of stopping the smuggling all along this part of the border.”

“He’ll be rich, that’s for sure. All these officers who put a stop smuggling get rich. They arrive in beat-up Citroens and leave in brand-new Mercedes.”

“He doesn’t take bribes, if that’s what you mean.”

“And, yet, so much smuggling continues to happen. What does this captain want from Layla that he gives her such cheap gifts?”

“He drives a Peugeot.”

“And wants his bride to smell like a whore?” Habebe said.

“If anybody knows what a whore smells like, it’s” Tismi bit her tongue. There were things even she wouldn’t say. “He’s not her captain yet, but he will be.”

“She should wait until he’s a colonel.” Habebe knew how long it took to become a colonel. “When he’s a colonel she can”

“When he’s a colonel she’ll be an old lady and nobody will want her.”

“Many men will want her.”

“Too bad for them. Her captain is going to take her with him when he moves to his next assignment and marry her and someday she’ll be the wife of a great general.”

“He’ll take her with him, *then* he’ll marry her?”

Tismi dropped her eyes. “How else is she supposed to get out of this stupid hotel?”

“He’ll take her away, that he’ll do. But he’ll never marry her. He’ll find some other stupid girl and leave Layla where he found the new girl.”

“He won’t leave her. She’s his little acorn.”

“He calls her an acorn?”

“It’s the beret. Layla says berets make ladies look sophisticated. The Captain says it makes her look like an acorn. Do you think I look like an acorn?” Tismi made an acorn face at the mirror.

“Does this captain know what her mother does?”

“Everybody knows what her mother does.”

“So, the man who wants to take her away before he marries her thinks her mother is a whore and she’s an acorn?”

“Her mother is an honorable woman.”

“Assuredly,” Habebe said in a soft voice. “And an acorn never falls far from the tree. And the daughter of a whore will be a whore.”

“He didn’t mean it that way.”

“Maybe not, but he’ll never marry her. I hope you’re not thinking about doing something so”

“What I want to do” Tismi said, her heart dancing in her throat at the idea, “is be a Frenchwoman.”

“A Frenchwoman?” Habebe laughed. “You want to be a *Frenchwoman*?”

“Frenchwomen smell good and have fine underthings. I see them when I pick up their rooms. If I wasn’t so skinny I’d marry a Frenchman and have fine underthings.”

“You’re a bright, spirited girl who”

“Looks like a boy.”

“You are *not* too skinny and you don’t look like a boy.”

“If I’m not too skinny, why is Layla the one the Captain wants to marry?”

“Listen,” Habebe grabbed Tismi by the shoulders. “You don’t need a man to have whatever you want.”

“If you didn’t want me to get married, why did you give me this stupid name? How else can I ever turn into a person unless I get married?”

“You think that when you get married you’ll turn into a person?”

“I think I’d have a name and the problem will go away.”

“We have a new king,” Habebe said. “You don’t need a husband to be a person. You can have your birth registered and still be Tismi.”

“If cows could fly we’d”

“All have to wear buckets on our heads,” Habebe laughed. “But if we could get the money, would you still want to marry a Frenchman?”

“I’d still want to live in France. But I’ll never get a passport because I don’t exist,” Tismi said. “And the moment I show my face in a government office to get my name registered, they’ll throw me in prison for sneaking into the country. Then they’ll deport me to Algeria or some place.”

“Your grandfather can witness for you.”

“He isn’t my grandfather, everybody knows that. And, anyway, he’s much too old-fashioned to pretend to be something he isn’t.”

“Don’t think ill of your grandfather for being honorable,” Habebe said.

“I don’t think ill of him. I just think he’s old-fashioned.”

“I can witness for you. Nobody ever accused me of being too honorable.”

“That’s why I love you,” Tismi gave her mother a hug. “You aren’t afraid of what people way.”

“I thought you loved me for my cooking.”

“Your *cooking?*” Tismi sniffed at the smell of couscous coming from the hotplate. “My life isn’t *that* sheltered. Besides, the Keeper of the Records won’t believe you.”

“Women can testify in court.”

“He won’t believe you.”

“He won’t need to. The official in Zagora can’t read, so he signs whatever people put in front of him.”

“Everybody knows that,” Tismi laughed. “It’s why he charges so much.” She scowled at the hand of Fatima in the mirror. Her problem wasn’t keeping the evil eye away. Her problem was that nobody would tell her how to put it on somebody. “Show me how to do the evil eye,” she said.

If I could do that,” Habebe laughed, “there are people who’d be in serious . . . I have a list.”

“A list? You have an evil-eye *list?*”

“In my head,” Habebe said. “You better be careful.”

“Maybe I should just use one eye,” Tismi said. “Nobody ever heard of giving somebody the evil eyes.” She closed an eye and made a hideous face at Habebe. “Feel anything?”

“No,” Habebe shook her head. “Try the other eye.”

Tismi squinted so the other eye was aimed at Habebe. “You’re not wearing a Hand of Fatima under your clothes are you? You should feel something.”

“No,” Habebe laughed. “I’m one of those modern women who wear their jewelry on the outside.”

“Are you sure you don’t feel anything?”

“You aren’t supposed to feel anything when somebody puts the evil eye on you. You don’t even know they’ve done it until something goes wrong and you need to figure out who to blame.”

“If you don’t feel it when it happens, how do you know who did it?”

“Easy. You just pick out somebody you think might have”

“You mean sometimes the person who gets blamed didn’t do it?” This put the evil-eye business in a whole new light. “Like the old lady who sold vegetables behind the mosque? Everybody said she put the evil eye on that boy with the withered arm and made him catch rabies.”

Habebe shook her head. If there was anybody who’d had the evil eye put on her, that old woman was the one. After her husband died she didn’t have enough money to pay the pharmacist for the free eye medicine the government provided and had to squint every time she came out in the sun, which made people nervous.

“The boy stole vegetables from her,” Tismi said. “Everybody said that was the reason she”

“Everybody stole from her,” Habebe said. “She couldn’t see well. But the boy with the withered arm was the only one bitten by a cat.”

“So the evil eye made the cat bite the boy?”

“It was the rabies that made the cat bite him.”

Tismi was silent for a moment, then, “would somebody blame me for the evil eye if they got bitten by a cat?”

“They might,” Habebe said.

“Then I need to know how to do it,” Tismi turned back to the mirror and began making faces. “If anybody blames me for the evil eye, I want to make sure they get it.”