

CHAPTER 1

Clemence

Kasbah du Paradis, Morocco, July 1966

People still did occasionally flee and vanish into the mountains, just as once upon a time they had disappeared into the dungeons of the warlords, but if there were restless spirits wandering here, Clemence Petier had never seen them. In this place of infinite beauty, she had found peace of sorts.

She gazed out of her open bedroom window, hoping to catch the changing of the light; her daily rituals kept her steady, living in the present, and centred. And as she watched the sun rising, the mist burnt off, the mountains began to shine, and the glorious fragrance of wild herbs drifted in the air.

A perfect day.

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Perched up high in the Atlas Mountains, the kasbah had once been a fortress built to withstand attack. Derelict and forgotten when she first found it, now it spelt safety for her. She loved the dazzling sunlight, the deep blue shadows, the glittering stars at night, and the blindingly white snow in winter.

Clemence wrapped the turquoise robe around her, fastened its ties, and as she did every morning, left the main house to walk across to the annexe.

As she crossed the terrace she paused only to run her fingertips over the velvety climbing roses. Blowzy, crimson and almost at an end, their petals dropped at her touch. *Like blood*, she thought, lingering for one more moment before walking on. She unlocked the door to the annexe, slid the bolts, and went inside.

At first glance, it appeared just as idyllic as the terrace outside, but something was wrong.

Birds were clamouring at an open window which overlooked a private courtyard with access to the mountains beyond. Two small copper-coloured butterflies were dancing in the sunlight, but the window should not have been open. And the room should not have been empty. Clemence glanced around, taking in the tray of uneaten breakfast – cooling French coffee, two pieces of freshly baked baguette, butter melting in the early sunlight – and the white robe lying crumpled on the rug. *'Touche du bois,'* she muttered and reached out to touch the gleaming wooden arm of a chair before she ran to the bathroom. *Touch wood.*

A tap had been left running but no one was there, so

she turned off the water and hurried to the living room where she found no sign of her.

‘Madeleine,’ she called, aware of the tremble in her voice. But all she could hear in response were the birds.

Then. Right then, she felt the panic. Madeleine had bolted.

As the distant past reared up her mouth felt dry, the old fear fluttering as if it were one of the butterflies. She dashed outside and called for Ahmed, her youthful assistant, whom she trusted more than anyone else in the world.

‘Help me,’ she pleaded as he approached. ‘She’s gone.’

She held out her hands and the young man enclosed them in his much larger ones for a few moments. ‘She can’t have gone far, Madame. I carried her breakfast in only half an hour ago and she was there. Has she eaten it?’

Clemence shook her head.

‘She can only have been gone half an hour at most,’ he said, his voice calm as they left the terrace.

‘Did *you* unlock the window?’

‘I’m sorry. She complained about the room being stuffy.’

Her heart sank. ‘We have to keep her inside. She can’t be allowed out alone. Not ever. I thought I explained.’

‘The window was so stiff, I didn’t think she’d have the strength to push it wide open.’

‘I’ll have to install bars. Or a filagree screen would at least look better. If we find her . . .’

‘We will.’

But Clemence wasn’t so sure. Madeleine could be devious.

‘Ahmed, look for her as you head down the track. Take the motorbike to pick up my granddaughter,’ she

said. 'I might need the jeep to search for Madeleine.'

Her granddaughter might complain about having to take the long journey from Marrakech railway station to the kasbah on the back of a motorbike, but there was no time to worry about it now.

Clemence turned her back on Ahmed and set off to search the complex. With few remaining perimeter walls, her kasbah was at the same altitude as the last of the trees and nothing much grew above it, the mountain sides barren and rocky.

Looking down it was different. Looking down it was lush. The little village of Imlil huddled below, where the year-long supply of water from the river ensured the terraced hillsides would always be cultivated. From her vantage point she could see the walnut and pine forests where she collected cones for the fire. And lower down the agricultural land where villagers grew vegetables, potatoes, and onions, plus alfalfa for feeding a few cows, and below them the orchards of plums, figs, almonds and apricots. But there was no chance Madeleine could have gone that far on foot.

The air blowing down from the mountain top was thin and pure, and feeling the cool of it on her skin, Clemence glanced up at the rocky slopes. Where had she got to?

'And in a nightdress,' she muttered. '*Pour l'amour de Dieu!*'

She had felt so harried these last months looking after Madeleine. And of course this had to happen just moments before her granddaughter's arrival, which was already causing enough worry. Had it been foolish to

allow her to come, this girl she didn't know? Not that she'd been given much choice.

Clemence passed through the bougainvillea-clad pergola, peered behind the rosemary hedge, checked in between the palms, and went back into the private courtyard where clouds of scented white jasmine spilt over the walls. Nothing. Not a sign of her at all. She ran to look down the steep downward track Ahmed had taken leading to where she kept her 1950s Hotchkiss jeep, close to Imlil. *Please, please, let us find her soon.* The heat could be cruel – so, so cruel – especially if you didn't know your way and the longer Madeleine was out there, the greater the risk.

Forty minutes later, there was still no sign of her. By now Ahmed would have alerted the villagers of Imlil on his way to Marrakech, and Clemence hoped they would help look. As she checked every nook and cranny of the building again, she heard Ahmed's sister Nadia calling for Madeleine too, her voice shrill and urgent. Clemence rubbed her forehead and took several deep breaths, trying to calm herself, but her fear was rocketing.

Suddenly she heard a pounding at the front entrance to the kasbah. She raced along the corridor to the door, flung it wide open, and saw Madeleine standing on the step. Still wearing a grubby nightdress, her white hair grey with grime, her face streaked with tears and her skin caked with dust, she looked absolutely exhausted. A man stood beside her, propping her up, though Clemence had barely glanced at him as she pulled her mother to her.

'Oh thank God,' she whispered, relief making her voice shake as she held her tight.

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‘Poor old soul,’ the man said. ‘I found her crawling on all fours not far from one of the tracks to the village.’

His voice was immediately familiar. Clemence would have recognised it anywhere, but surely it could not be . . . Hardly able to believe it and with dread already knotting in her stomach, she forced herself to look up. It was as if a bitter wind blew right through her, and even in the heat, she felt icily cold. He was dressed in smart grey slacks and a crisp blue linen shirt. Nothing remarkable – he could be any European, but Clemence knew he was not.

‘Seems very frail and made no sense at all. I—’

He stopped speaking and stared at her. She felt a nerve twitching in her temple and fought the urge to run.

‘Adèle? Adèle Garnier?’ he asked, surprise clear in his voice. ‘Can it really be you?’

She had not been called that name in fifty years. Could she deny it? His was a face she had not thought she would ever see again, had *hoped* she would never see again but there he was. She nodded silently and reached out to wipe the old lady’s tear-stained face with her fingertips.

‘Come on,’ she said, her voice soft and low. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’

The man frowned, clearly expecting more from her.

‘I’m afraid I have to go,’ she said to him, maintaining a tight hold of Madeleine. ‘These days, I go by my second name, Clemence, and I am Madame Petier. Thank you for bringing her back, Monsieur Callier.’

‘Patrice.’ He corrected her as if offended, wiping his brow with his fingers. ‘If it’s not too much trouble, may I beg a glass of something cool?’

‘Of course. Nadia will bring it.’

Nadia, who was standing to the side watching, inclined her head. Clemence hurried her mother into the annexe, quickly ensuring none of the windows were unlocked and with shaking hands helped her to sip some water. How was it that Patrice Callier could still make her skin crawl?

She closed the shutters, unfolded a clean nightdress, and after rinsing her mother’s hair and sitting her on the lavatory, she put her back to bed. Docile and exhausted after her adventure, the ninety-two-year-old woman complied without a murmur.

Clemence clasped her hands together tightly, digging her fingernails into her flesh. What was Patrice doing here? She had left him – along with the rest of her past – far behind her. She took several deep calming breaths, hoping he might have already gone, allowing the time to stretch out as far as she dared before returning outside. Her shame had been her undoing years ago and it must *not* resurface now. But whether he was gone or not, the only question that really mattered was . . . how much did Patrice Callier know?

CHAPTER 2

Vicky

Marrakech railway station

In the station yard, Vicky Baudin shaded her eyes from the dazzling white sunlight. She glanced left and right and then straight ahead through the chaos of donkeys laden with panniers, bicycles and motorbikes, and old men gathered in knots, smoking and gossiping. There was no sign of anyone who might be her grandmother. Her grandfather Jacques, a taciturn elderly man living quietly in their French village, had reluctantly given Vicky the woman's name and a PO number, but no description, insisting he had not seen Clemence for more than fifty years. And when Vicky had pressed him to tell her more, he had clammed up entirely.

She checked her watch. The train had arrived on time. 'Damn, damn, damn,' she muttered. 'What now?'

Although it was still early and not yet blazing hot, her skin was prickling. Everything around her was so very different to home, the air hotter, the sky brighter, the landscapes drier, but after the dazzling stone of Tangier, she had expected something more romantic. Instead Marrakech felt shabby and forlorn. The ground was littered, the painted windows of the station building peeling. But at least the train journey was over.

The jumble of voices eddied and peaked – alarming voices, as if all the short vowels had dropped out of the world. And yet amid the unfamiliar clusters of consonants she picked out a word or two of French. *Dommage. Jour. Demain.*

Although she assumed Moroccan Arabic must be the dominant language she felt lucky that some French was still spoken here. According to her grandfather, the country had once been a French protectorate and had only gained full independence from France a decade ago. But it meant Vicky should be able to understand and communicate a little. Or at least enough to buy a baguette or a croissant.

She looked around, taking it all in. She could not believe she was finally here. When her grandfather had let slip that she had a grandmother still living it had been a shock. There had never been a whisper of who her dead father's mother might have been. And when Jacques said this mysterious, long-lost grandmother was living in Morocco, it had felt like fate. Because Marrakech was also the favourite city of Yves Saint Laurent, a designer who meant more to Vicky than she could ever explain. And after the pain and hardship of the past year, she had suddenly felt

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certain that travelling to Marrakech to find them both might be the answer to all of her troubles. It might restore her belief in herself, leave behind her heartbreak over her boyfriend's callous rejection of her, and perhaps even finally find the answer to the mysteries her family had been hiding all her life.

In the station yard a few women dressed in black gawped at her, and heat rose in her cheeks. She held her head up and tried to remain aloof while furtively tugging at the hem of her bright yellow minidress. Splashed with large pink poppies, it did nothing to conceal her ample curves, and too late she realised that here in Marrakech, it ought to. On the train she had covered herself with a thin blanket but now she glanced around wondering if there was a public loo where she could at least slip into some trousers and put on a long-sleeved shirt. There didn't seem to be. One of the women came closer, made a strange cat-like hissing sound and moved off again. Vicky shrank back: so far, not the best of beginnings.

I am not afraid. I am NOT afraid, she told herself, forcing back the tears that seemed about to spring to her eyes. She prided herself on always appearing strong, whatever the provocation, whatever she was feeling inside. When the children at school had been spiteful about her parentage, she had not blubbed. When her mother had refused, yet again, to tell her anything about her father, she had not wept, and when her boyfriend Russell had cruelly insulted her dreams, she had not shed a tear. Well that wasn't entirely true, but she certainly wasn't going to start crying now.

Vicky marched forward, emboldened, and identified a taxi rank but with no waiting taxis. How far away did her grandmother live? Would a taxi all the way to the kasbah be expensive? From her pocket she pulled out the postcard Clemence had sent after she had contacted her via the PO box. Kasbah du Paradis – no address, just that and a few words.

Finally spotting a porter, she showed him the card. He indicated she should throw her case into a donkey cart, but she shook her head and feeling increasingly hot and sweaty, sat down on a low wall to wait in the hope her grandmother would turn up soon.

After what felt like hours a monstrous motorbike pulled up, hooting and honking, and the tanned young rider wearing a blue bandana and a stern expression held up a card with 'BAUDIN' scrawled on it. She let out a huge sigh of relief and dashed over.

'Ahmed Hassan,' he said and held out his hand. 'Sorry to be late.'

'It doesn't matter. I'm just pleased you're here.' She passed him her case and he tied it onto the back of the bike before removing a large black-and-white cotton scarf from his neck.

'Cover your mouth and nose. Wrap it around your head,' he said, and after he was firmly seated, he invited her to ride pillion. Vicky climbed on, grinning with pleasure, the scarf knotted firmly at the back of her neck. Her adventure was beginning at last.

Ahmed gunned the engine and shot away from the station, wheeling around a roundabout and speeding along

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an avenue of jacaranda trees. She felt light as a bird. She was in Marrakech. She really was in Marrakech, and on the back of a motorbike with a total stranger. Whatever would her mother say? She let out a great *whoop* of triumph and held on tight.

CHAPTER 3

Vicky

‘Look,’ Ahmed said, coming to a halt. ‘Down there is the Ourika valley.’

Vicky contemplated the sun-drenched river valley below and saw a couple of dusky pink villages with citrus orchards threading around them.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she whispered, and Ahmed nodded his agreement.

As the bike climbed steadily, a glittering landscape of terracotta slopes and craggy sun-streaked mountains opened up before her. In the distance, bleached by the blistering sun, they turned to the colour of ash. On one of the tight bends along the bumpy, unmade mountain tracks, Ahmed offered his apologies and told her to hold on tight. They were stuck in a pothole, the wheels spinning and causing clouds of sandy pink dust to spiral upwards,

and Vicky wiped her stinging eyelids with her fingers. The scarf had not covered her eyes. Ahmed soon released the bike, and they carried on ascending until he came to a stop again. From there they continued on foot with him pushing the bike through a rabbit warren of steep and uneven alleys in a small Berber village.

‘Short cut,’ he explained, and soon after that he paused at the start of a rough track lined with wildflowers. ‘Sorry,’ he said again, indicating the path ahead. ‘Up to the kasbah now.’

He stored the motorbike in a small shed, locked it, and deftly relieving her of the case, began to move off. ‘Very light,’ he said as he swung it in the air.

‘I’m banking on clothes being cheap here,’ she said, handing him back the scarf he had lent her.

They climbed the track all the way to a low-built, rose-coloured building perched on a small plateau.

‘*Voilà! Kasbah du Paradis de la montagne.* Our gateway to the snow-capped Atlas Mountains,’ he said with a flourish, pointing to the peaks.

And as she gazed around, she saw it was indeed a paradise.

‘I’ll take you to see gazelles if you like.’

‘What? Now?’ Vicky said excitedly.

He laughed. ‘No. And the best time to see the Atlas is at sunset. Sorry it’s not the season for snow.’

Up until now she’d only noted his stern expression but since arriving at the kasbah he seemed to have changed and as he walked her towards the building, his brown eyes had softened.

‘Wow. This is so cool!’ she said as she glanced up at the sky, feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin and her body unwinding as she watched a huge bird swoop for its prey.

‘Golden eagle,’ Ahmed said and smiled, and she saw he had the most beautiful white teeth.

‘The kasbah has been restored in the traditional Berber way with rammed mud walls – pisé, we call it,’ he said facing the building again.

She spun on the spot, holding her arms out wide and inhaling sparkling mountain air bursting with the energising scent of rosemary and mint. Made of several interconnecting parts and blending perfectly into its surroundings, the kasbah looked as if it had been lifted from the Middle Ages. It spread out almost like separate dwellings or a little village joined together by outdoor corridors or walkways. Indoor corridors too, she imagined. It was nothing like her stepfather’s French chateau where, from the age of seven, she had grown up with her mother Élise. Nor did it resemble the big manor house near her aunt Florence and uncle Jack’s cottage in Devon, where she’d spent school holidays playing with her cousin Beatrice. Vicky had grown up in the Dordogne in France but had just finished her course at an art college in London and this place was certainly not like anything there either.

Ahmed led her past a long terrace where beneath a cobalt blue awning a day bed covered in bright orange shimmered against the deep pink of the kasbah, the colours electrifying. Further along, a huge wooden dining table and matching chairs sat beneath a second identical canopy.

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‘Madame likes to sit out here,’ he said. ‘For the view.’

He opened a heavy wooden door at the side and took her through a long cool hall and into a large room with a fireplace and windows overlooking red hills. The stone floor was laid with rugs, paintings hung everywhere and the pale terracotta walls shone. Captivated, Vicky smiled with pleasure.

‘*Tadelakt* plasterwork,’ he said, breaking into her thoughts. ‘The walls. Made from lime plaster with added colour pigment and finished with black olive soap. It came from these hills. Waterproof you see. Berbers used it to seal cisterns for storing drinking water, but now it is everywhere. Beautiful, no?’

It was but Vicky, forgetting the walls, had turned to see that a tall woman had almost soundlessly entered the room and was standing just inside, seeming to catch her breath.

‘Oh, you’re here,’ the woman said coolly while looking her up and down, her expression unreadable. ‘I’ve had rather a busy morning and didn’t realise, but I see Ahmed is showing you round.’

Her very nearly stern features did not match the smooth rich sound of her voice. She was smiling and yet there was something just a little off, a wariness maybe, as if she was trying very hard to control herself. At first Vicky was so awestruck she couldn’t find any words: this woman didn’t look like any grandmother she knew. Could they really be related? Vicky knew she wasn’t bad-looking – her mouth was full, curling up at the corners, and she had large toffee-brown eyes shaded by very thick dark eyelashes – but she could see no trace of herself in this

glamorous, elegant woman. Her hair was completely white, cut quite short in a crisp modern style and elegantly swept back from her face. Her eyes were hazel and a network of barely visible lines covered her lightly tanned skin. She wore the most beautiful silk kaftan in pink and gold, the colours shifting as she moved. Her feet were bare, but her toenails, painted rose-gold, gleamed and she wore an anklet studded with what looked like real pearls.

‘Yes,’ Vicky eventually said as she found her voice. ‘Ahmed has shown me round a little.’

‘I am glad,’ she said, though Vicky could not hear any gladness in her tone. ‘Welcome to my home. I am Clemence.’

Vicky couldn’t help continuing to stare. It had only been a few weeks since her grandfather had revealed that Victor – his son, her father – had been born in Morocco and that Clemence was his mother. A woman Vicky had never heard mentioned, not by *Grand-père* Jacques, her mother, Élise, nor either of her aunts, Hélène and Florence. As a child it hadn’t seemed odd not to know anything about the past. It was just the way things were. She hadn’t had any idea what to expect coming here, yet still she found herself surprised and a bit taken aback.

‘Come. Let’s get you settled in your room. The cleaners came early today so it should be ready.’ Clemence slipped on some sandals and held out an arm rather stiffly.

Vicky searched her grandmother’s face in the hope of discovering something of her true feelings, either in her expression or her voice, but there was nothing. She followed her back into the hall and around a corner, passing an intimate terraced garden where the light fell on a huge

clay urn from which startlingly pink geraniums cascaded. After entering another long, low part of the sprawling complex they reached a pale painted door and after Clemence unlocked it she ushered Vicky through ahead of her. The green window shutters were partially closed, to keep the place cool, Clemence explained, and they cast a welcome deep blue shade across the whole room.

‘I have to see to—’ Clemence said but broke off, casting Ahmed a strangely significant look. Ahmed nodded as if to confirm what had not been voiced and Clemence carried on more firmly.

‘Well, I have things to attend to. Take your time unpacking and Ahmed will fetch you a cold drink. The bathroom is next door. We have our own hydro-electric power generator, although the water will probably run cold. Gravity brings our water from a spring many metres away.’

As she spoke, Clemence moved towards the door. ‘Feel free to look around. I’ll see you at about one for lunch.’

‘Thank you,’ Vicky said, feeling not the least bit welcome. Her grandmother sounded so aloof, so chilly. Why had she agreed to this visit if it was so tiresome?

‘Oh, and there are spare kaftans in the wardrobe. Wear any you like.’ She gestured to Vicky’s skimpy yellow minidress. ‘Best to cover your legs in Morocco, arms and shoulders too. We need to respect the Islamic culture here. And choose a hat. You’ll need one, though we get most things done very early at this time of year before the heat traps us indoors.’

Despite those relatively kind words, Vicky felt as if the woman had been relieved – or even eager – to leave.

Dinah Jefferies

She felt the curiosity that had been ignited within her ever since she'd discovered her grandmother's existence flare even brighter. She needed to find out more about her. Much more. For why had Clemence never visited her own son in France, not even once? And why was her grandfather, even now, so reluctant to speak of her?

CHAPTER 4

After her bath Vicky perched on the edge of the bed, opened her bag and pulled out the only photograph she had of her father Victor. Perhaps nobody had thought of taking pictures during the war. She didn't know, but she treasured the one she had and it always brought a lump to her throat. Although it was grainy, she could still make out his powerful frame, dark eyes, and intense gaze. What had he been doing that day? What had he been thinking when the picture was taken? And had Élise taken that picture? She wished she could hear what they had said to one another. How they had been. Her mother had never really answered her questions about Victor and nor had Jacques, and she was desperate to know more. She knew they had both been proud of Victor, but maybe it had just been too painful to speak about.

There was a knock at the door and Ahmed came in with a drink. After he'd gone she glanced at the bed, which

looked so inviting with its dark silky cover in this room imbued with a kind of woody incense, rather like liquorice. She craved sleep but checked her watch and saw it was nearly time for lunch, so she hurriedly picked out a purple kaftan and slipped it on.

As she returned along the corridor to the main house, she passed a room that looked like a library or an office – with leather chairs, bookcases and a coffee table inlaid with mother of pearl and ivory – before finding Clemence in the main room. Her grandmother was standing and gazing out of the window, two large black and tan dogs sitting obediently by her side.

‘Lovely view,’ Vicky said, eyeing the dogs nervously.

Clemence swivelled round and smiled. The smile seemed a bit more genuine than it had been before, as if some weight had been lifted from her in the intervening hours.

‘So, you like it? My home.’

‘It’s wonderful. I’ve never been anywhere like this before.’

‘It was a crumbling fortress when I bought it decades ago, possibly dating back to the fourteenth century. There was no sanitation. No electricity. It’s taken years to rebuild.’

Vicky studied her, a thousand questions on the tip of her tongue, but where could she begin?

‘The organic forms reflect Morocco’s traditional architecture I feel and, wherever possible, I’ve used the geometric patterns and floral motifs typical of Islamic art. So, now you’re settled, come and meet my boys, Coco and Voltaire.’

She laughed. ‘Voltaire? The French revolutionary writer?’

Clemence shrugged. ‘Why not? The dogs are Beaucerons, getting on a bit but still powerful. Fabulous guards but

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with a sensitive side too *and* minds of their own.’ She smiled as she patted them.

Vicky edged gingerly towards the handsome black and tan ‘boys’, as her grandmother referred to them, but stopped a short distance away.

‘What’s that gorgeous smell?’ she asked.

‘Cedar, eucalyptus, and frankincense. Ambrosial, don’t you think?’

‘Ambrosial?’

‘Especially delicious or fragrant. Worthy of the gods. I have it everywhere. Do you like it?’

‘I love it.’

‘The garden is full of bougainvillea, climbing roses, palms, plus jasmine of course. A garden is such an important place. I grow lemon thyme and rosemary, but there’s wild sage, juniper and so much more around the place.’

Vicky felt in awe of this sophisticated woman, her gorgeous gardens, and the wild beauty of the harsh mountain landscape. As for the incredible aromatic air, she felt almost as lightheaded as if she were breathing a soothing, soporific tonic.

‘Gardens teach us about the impermanence of life,’ Clemence was saying. ‘I’ll show you later. Now . . . we will be having Maghrebi dishes with Moroccan drinks for lunch. I hope that suits you.’

Vicky smiled politely.

‘For many centuries the Arab world referred to North Africa as Maghrib or the land of the setting sun,’ her grandmother added.

The dogs followed as they wandered to the dining room where the tang of exotic spices made Vicky's mouth water, though she couldn't help feeling a little apprehensive. She'd never eaten African food before.

As they sat down Clemence said, almost too lightly, 'So, are you going to tell me why you've come here?'

Vicky thought for a moment. The day she had revealed she was thinking of going to Marrakech to meet Yves Saint Laurent, Jacques, white-haired and hunched into himself, had asked the same question. 'I want to be his apprentice,' she'd said. 'I'll even crawl around picking up pins from his floor if that's what it takes.'

He'd looked disturbed at her news and she hadn't known why, but he had stroked her cheek and called her *mon chou*, which always made her smile.

She took a long slow breath then glanced at her grandmother before saying, 'I've come to meet Yves St Laurent. And you, of course.'

Clemence's look was searching, as if trying to work something out. 'And that's all? Jacques did not send you?'

Puzzled, Vicky shook her head and no more was said. But she found it hard to picture her gruff grandfather being involved with a sophisticated woman like Clemence. But then, as Jacques used to say, *There's no accounting for folk*. She wondered how he was. How he felt about Clemence now. Surely he must be longing to see her, or maybe he still felt angry that she hadn't come to France with him all those years ago. She couldn't tell.

The meal was a Moroccan chicken stew cooked in a tagine, a round and shallow clay casserole with a tall

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pointy, conical lid. It was served with tender grains of couscous; Vicky found it absolutely delicious.

‘So, you went to art college in London?’ her grandmother was asking.

‘Yes. I’ve got a diploma in fashion from St Martin’s School of Art – a Dip AD they call it – and an offer of a postgraduate place at *L’Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*.’

Her grandmother looked as if she was weighing up Vicky’s claim. ‘Then I find it hard to understand why you have come here instead?’

Vicky bristled. ‘No. It’s not instead. I’m not due in Paris until September. I wanted to spread my wings first and try to meet Yves Saint Laurent. I thought I’d have more chance here than in Paris.’

Clemence frowned.

‘I wrote my dissertation on Saint Laurent,’ Vicky continued, feeling she had to justify herself. ‘He’s such a brilliant designer and everyone in London says Marrakech is a hub of creativity and freedom.’

Clemence inclined her head but did not look as if she agreed and Vicky was still unable to work out what her grandmother was thinking.

The dessert arrived.

‘Wow! That looks amazing,’ Vicky said.

Her grandmother passed her a portion. ‘It is an almond snake pastry, dusted with powdered sugar.’

There were a few moments of silence while they ate.

‘They sometimes coat it with warm honey,’ Clemence added. ‘Do you like it?’

‘Delicious,’ Vicky said with her mouth still half full of the incredible almond sweetness. She had always been teased for her sweet tooth, and the way she could so easily put on weight because of it.

Clemence was looking at her unblinking.

Vicky shifted in her seat, feeling ill at ease under the scrutiny.

‘What did Jacques say about me?’ Clemence asked suddenly.

Vicky puffed out her cheeks at her grandmother’s blunt question but answered calmly. ‘Nothing really. Just that you were here.’

Clemence nodded slowly.

‘I only found out you existed very recently, and I had plenty of time before September to come, so I did.’

Vicky was surprised Clemence didn’t ask anything more about Jacques or say anything about her son, Victor. She tried to figure out the best way to bring up the subject herself and in the end she said, ‘I never met my father. I wish I had.’

Clemence still said nothing.

This wasn’t easy but Vicky tried again. ‘Victor and my mother were involved in the French Resistance. Did you know?’

Without warning, her grandmother stiffened and changed tack, saying, ‘Look, you need to be very careful in Morocco, child. Things are not what they seem here. And people are not who they seem either.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve lived in Morocco all my life. My family were senior civil servants as well as landowners and I know what I’m

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talking about. There is a great deal of unrest due to local politics. Hopefully things may change but for now no disagreement is tolerated. Anyone who openly opposes the regime puts themselves in danger.'

Vicky almost laughed. 'I'm not likely to be doing that am I?'

Clemence ignored her. 'Plus there is some understandable hostility towards all the European visitors who are flooding in. It would be far preferable if you returned to France.'

Taken aback, Vicky stared at her. 'No! I can't leave.'

'You are not listening to me.'

'But I've come all this way to meet Yves Saint Laurent. I want to work for him.' She thought, but didn't say, that she also couldn't leave before finding out everything about Clemence.

Her grandmother's voice was cold when she said, 'I'm not sure how I can be responsible for your safety.'

'I'm not political.'

'You don't know who you might encounter. You won't know who you're dealing with.'

'You want me to leave?' Vicky asked, dangerously close to tears.

'It would be preferable.'

'But I've only just arrived.'

Clemence seemed to soften. 'Look, my dear, I may at least be able to help you meet the designer. He's very relaxed. No fuss, no formality, and he has a little house in the medina. Dar el-Hanch, or the Snake House, it's called, although I hear he spends time at a studio in the Palmeraie,

an area about half an hour's drive north of Jemaa el-Fnaa square. There are some luxurious but mainly run-down French villas there and thousands of palm trees.'

'You really might help me?'

'Maybe. It could take a little while as he's not here all the time.'

'As I said, I don't have to be in Paris until September.'

Clemence sighed. 'Well, if I do manage to introduce you, please promise to go home the moment you've done what you came here to do.'

Ahmed came in and handed Clemence a package. She glanced up at him enquiringly and he told her it had been delivered by a young Moroccan man. She looked towards Vicky and then put the package down. Clemence clearly did not want to open it in front of her. What was she hiding? There was something, Vicky could sense it. She had, after all, grown up with a mother who was constantly keeping secrets, who would refuse to confide in her daughter even when Vicky had begged to know about the past. It was perhaps ironic, then, that it was Vicky who was now keeping secrets from both Clemence and Élise . . . Because she had not told her grandmother the whole truth. For neither her mother, nor her stepfather, had any inkling of her grandmother's existence, and Vicky was not going to tell them yet. Not until she had at least found out everything she wanted to know.