

SAND ROSES

PROPER BOOKS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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MASOBE

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PROLOGUE

March 9, 1935

The French officer couldn't remember how he got to the house from Mouloud's café.

The drinking and smoking from earlier in the evening caused the walls around him to sway and twist, but the officer wasn't going to miss this opportunity. Colonel Dupont was going to be proud. A promotion would be in order, even. Through fogged eyes, he made out the dancer's slender silhouette; hips sending faint ripples through her beige robe, hand softly holding his as she went up the dark, narrow stairs.

The officer followed her onto the unlit balcony. Four buildings surrounded the courtyard, three of which had two floors with an arched wooden balcony upstairs. Across the yard was a one-storey building with a roof deck. Probably a stable. *Quite the grand house for a dancer who doesn't do any prostitution.* There was a well in the centre of the yard covered by a concrete lid decorated with pots of cheerful flowers that he couldn't have named even if he'd been sober.

When the dancer let go of his hand to open a door, he leaned against the balcony's wooden railing. There was a sharp crack. The railing swung out from one loose end, and the officer almost found himself falling to the concrete yard below. His heart raced. And he

felt even more lightheaded as the dancer, thankfully, pulled him through the door.

Inside the room, he was suffocated by the smell of ambergris and jasmine. The dancer disappeared into the darkness. He heard a metallic scratch, then the room was lit up by a candle affixed to a drop of wax on a window ledge, filling the already dense air with the scent of roses. She sat him on a large sheepskin rug and began to make tea.

The officer went over the plan in his head again. He knew how these girls operated: she would offer him tea and seduce him until he could not resist, and only then would she set the price. Colonel Dupont had instructed them to wait until the girl produced a condom before making an arrest. They needed the proof. But the officer wasn't sure he could hold himself. The robe hugged her thighs so tantalisingly. He looked away.

The room wasn't large; its furniture was spare, small and humble. A mirror sat on a low dresser, a wooden chest tucked beneath it. A low table leaned against the wall, and a wool carpet was spread across the floor. Was it black, or was it just too dark to tell?

When the Nailiya dancer picked up the teapot from the clay stove, the charcoal hissed with a cloud of sparks as if protesting its separation from the pot. She filled two glasses and handed him one. As her finger brushed his, he could barely restrain himself from dragging her body down to him.

But he had to follow the plan.

"Danse?"

The dancer spoke with a rusty voice, the Arab accent clear even in that one French word.

Before he had the chance to say no, she stood up and started dancing. She swirled a veil across her face, and her hips swayed

right and left, then in circles. Waves erupted from her waist and coursed through her robe in rhythm with her hips. That was it. The officer couldn't resist anymore.

"Viens," he muttered as he struggled to stand up. He reached towards the window ledge for support, but instead a piercing pain shot through his palm. It was the candle. He cursed it, then lost his footing and almost stumbled over a second time. The dancer gave up her moves. She rushed over to put her hands under his arms, allowing him to rest his heavy head on her shoulder.

His left cheekbone hurt where he had gotten a bruise earlier that evening; he had fought another Frenchman because of this whore and remembering that made him more determined to arrest her. But the sweet smell of jasmine filled his nose as it brushed her naked neck. *Hold it*, he told himself, kissing her neck. *Focus*. She wasn't going to offer herself unless he followed the procedure: tea first, dance, conversation, then sex. He slid his hand down her lower back, but she grabbed it. She tried to pull herself away, but he held her harder.

"Arrête," she begged as she tried to sit him down on the floor. "Arrête."

The officer felt weak against the woman's bewitching strength. She pushed him down easily, which made him furious. She was treating him like a child. It took all his power to pull her down with him. He shoved at her shoulders, forcing her to the floor. He put his weight on her so he could kiss her on the lips this time. Her pleas turned into shouts and curses.

"Salaud," she kept repeating as she scratched at his face, moving her head to evade his kisses. "Connard."

He twisted her hands above her head and pinned them to the floor with one large hand. That made the scratching stop. But

her entire body writhed under his. The shouting and cursing—with a mix of French and Derja—continued, as did the constant movement of her head. He covered her mouth with his other hand, but it couldn't muffle the screams.

No, he wasn't following the procedure, but was this not an exaggerated reaction coming from a slut whose profession was pleasuring men? He slapped her across the face. That stunned her for a moment, so he began pulling up her skirts. The dancer squealed, and before he could slap her again, something seared his eyes. His whole body shivered with pain. The whore had wriggled a hand free and thrown charcoal in his face. He instinctively rubbed his eyes, rasping them bloody red. He could feel her trying to slip away underneath him.

She was going to pay for what she did. Dearly.

The more she wrestled, the more strength he mustered. He grabbed her arm. She pulled free. He reached blindly, clasping her small ankle, and she nearly escaped his grip entirely, but her attempt gained him enough time to brush the charcoal off his face. He had just managed to open his eyes through the burning pain when he saw a foot rising to meet him. It connected with his face. He didn't let go. She kicked a second time. A third. His face was on fire, and, despite his best efforts, his grip on her ankle loosened. She pulled away, staggered to her feet, and ran for the door, whimpering.

The bitch opened the door and had almost made it out when he yanked her back by the braid and pulled her back inside the wretched room. He slammed her against the wall so roughly he heard the thud of her skull. She let out a scream. He smiled. He could almost see his grin in her eyes in the orange light of the candle by the window ledge. This whole situation—her fear and their panting—it all felt so familiar. He could taste the adrenaline

he got out of killing on the battlefield, but he was going to enjoy this even more.

He put his face against hers. Their eyes locked as he reached one hand between her thighs. Her hands were stuck between their bodies, and he felt them wriggle against his stomach, but he paid them no mind. She squinted with pain from his pawing and shrieked again.

Her eyes bored into him. He realised her hands were no longer between their bodies, but it was too late. She held him behind his neck with one hand, and something stung him from the other side, just under his jaw. The pain was hot, like it could cleave his head apart. It took his breath away. He touched the wound and felt warm blood streaming out. He could taste it in his throat. Had she stabbed him? The officer bared his teeth. She'd fucking stabbed him.

The dancer had freed herself again. She staggered out of the room. Holding his neck, he stalked her to the balcony. He grabbed her robe and slammed her against the wooden column. He checked her hands for the knife, but she wasn't carrying any. In the moon's silver light, he noticed the blood on her hands and bracelet and saw the thorns there.

"What are you going to do now?" He used the weight of his body to press hers against the wooden column. "You fucking whore. Tell me, what will you do?" Holding down her braceleted wrist, the officer clasped his other hand around her neck in a tight grip.

He suddenly felt dizzy, which he didn't understand since the rush of the moment had shaken him nearly back to sobriety. Maybe he had lost more blood than he thought. His neck was warm and wet with it. Or had the whore poisoned him? He needed to finish her off quickly. The French officer added his other hand to his grip

on the dancer's neck. He freed her of her weapon, but watched her in case she made any sudden movements. She tried to scratch his face but with their positions on the column, she couldn't reach it. She tried to move his hands off her neck; all she managed were a few scratches around his wrists.

Something hard hit the back of his head and clumps of dirt dotted the air. The officer turned to see what had hit him. There she was, panting and watching for his reaction.

The balcony spun until he lost his footing. He stepped back to lean against the wooden railing. He heard a loud creak. The wood snapped. The balcony retreated from him until his head crashed into something solid. *A wall? The floor?*

The French officer felt the vessels in his brain pulsate and a wave of pain sliced through him. As the sensation of hot blood flooded his head, threatening to spill into his nostrils, it finally came together. All the answers. Here, in the filthy abode of a worthless dancer.

He knew how she did it. How *they* did it. Colonel Dupont was going to be very proud of him, but first, he was proud of himself. A surge of resentment and resignation were the last things the French officer felt as life slipped away from his body.

1.

DUPONT

January 7, 1935

Colonel Joseph Dupont was a man of principle. What he loved, he cherished and guarded with unequivocal diligence. What he hated, he detested and spurned with assured fervour. Of the things he found most detestable, three stood out: being disturbed at his family residence, being disrespected, and being deceived.

The dancer across the table was doing everything within her power to ridicule his intelligence, which made Dupont keenly upset. He was so close to dislodging every tooth in her accursed mouth and severing the tongue with which she spewed lies at him—but patience. Patience would see him through this mission.

He had left her in the cold cell overnight. He had tried intimidating her, reasoning with her, and then bribing her, yet she wouldn't confess. They were now interrogating her at the military circle, in a dimly lit room, and Dupont was exhausted.

“We know you've been practicing prostitution illegally,” Major Pierre Turrene said. He was standing behind Dupont.

The girl stared at Turrene with wide green eyes. She'd said her name was Djamila, but Dupont didn't believe anything that came out of her mouth.

“If you know that, why have you spent a whole day questioning me?” she said tartly.

Dupont cleared his throat and said, “We’re offering you a great deal here. Tell us who else is working illegally and we’ll let you go. With remuneration.”

Djamila leaned across the table until he could smell the smoke on her breath.

“Don’t you hear me? I. Only. Dance,” she spat out, her voice saddled with disdain.

Dupont’s eyes held hers, his blood boiling. Without breaking his gaze, he punched the metal table with both hands. To his disappointment, she didn’t flinch. Instead, she leaned away with a hint of a smile that made him want to shoot her.

There was a knock at the door, and Turrene went out while Dupont paced about the room. Turrene quickly came back with a smug look on his face.

“The doctor’s here,” he announced.

A curious expression replaced the mockery on Djamila’s face. If she was afraid, she was doing a great job of concealing it, and Dupont didn’t like that one bit. He needed to see raw fear. A reaction to his authority. A glimpse of submission.

“The doctor,” Dupont said, placing his open palms on the cold metal table, “is going to check if you’re telling the truth.” He was pleased to see her frown. “He’ll check you down there to see if you recently had sexual intercourse, and don’t you dare say it was with your husband. We have been watching you and know you don’t have one.”

Djamila’s large eyes widened, straining with the terror growing in her. Dupont’s blood cooled down. It seemed he had managed to suck the calmness out of her.

“You can’t do that,” she said, her voice faltering.

Dupont smiled, then he headed for the door. She yelled as he opened it.

“You can’t do that to a girl!”

There were two young men waiting in the corridor. They saluted Dupont.

“Brossolette,” Dupont said to the young man in white scrubs that made his blue eyes even more striking. “I need you to do a thorough check.”

Brossolette nodded and lowered his head. Dupont turned to the soldier. “You go in with him in case she needs restraining.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

Waiting outside with Turrene, Dupont lit a cigarette and paced up and down the hallway. The door did little to muffle the bellows of the girl inside the room. He needed a distraction while he waited for the doctor to complete the examination.

“Major Turrene,” he said, stopping next to his subordinate, “how was your trip?”

“It was nice, sir,” he said, warming up to the opportunity to chat. “We went skiing every day. Christmas in Marseilles. We saw *Tartarin de Tarascon*. It was hilarious.”

Tartarin de Tarascon was yet another movie that had been shot here in Bousaada last year, and Dupont’s wife, Delphine, had been dying to see it. It was impossible for him to take time off at the end of last year though, and Delphine hadn’t been happy about it. Not just because she’d missed the movie. She had wanted to visit their twenty-year-old son, Bernard, in Toulouse where he was studying law. But Dupont didn’t think they needed to visit him twice a year, especially not after the scandal that almost cost Dupont his entire career.

“That’s good,” he said. “Now that you’re back, we should focus our efforts on the taskforce, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Colonel,” Turrene said enthusiastically. “I’ve identified a small team of our finest men. Young, smart, and very competent. We can meet them whenever you want.”

Before leaving in December, Turrene had come up with the idea to put together a secret taskforce—a group of talented officers who would go undercover and solicit Ouled Nail dancers. The officers would arrest the dancers when they caught them in the act.

“Let’s gather them this afternoon,” Dupont said. “We’ll brief them on their mission, and they can start immediately.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Turrene nodded.

Dr Brossolette came out of the room with the other soldier and shook his head. “No signs of recent sexual intercourse.”

“Are you certain?” Dupont stepped forward, desperate. This couldn’t be. He knew the girl was working.

“And you checked everything? Thoroughly?” Turrene asked.

Brossolette nodded. “As far as I’m concerned, she’s telling the truth.” With that, he gave them a salute and left.

Dupont and Turrene exchanged a confused look. Dupont knew something was wrong. The doctor might have missed something, or maybe she offered him free sex in exchange for lying. But Dupont couldn’t prove any of that. He could go back in and check himself, but he wouldn’t know what to look for. He would only make a fool of himself.

“What do we do?” Turrene asked.

“Take her back to the cell. Release her in the middle of night.” Dupont strode up the stairs, heading for his office. “And let’s move faster on that taskforce, alright?”