

The Final Bet

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AMONG THE DOZENS OF RESTAURANTS spread out on the Ain Diab coast, Sofia's was the only one with an air of simple elegance, as if it reflected the personality of its namesake. Most of the restaurant's customers were summer tourists or French people who lived in Morocco year-round. It was rare for locals to come and enjoy its coq au vin, soufflés, and escargots.

The last customers of the night left the restaurant around ten o'clock. Business was slow in the fall, except on weekends. Sofia switched off the neon sign outside and locked the door early so she could spend a little more time with her son Jacques, who was on his last night of a weeklong visit.

Besides Jacques, at the dinner table was Michel, a dear family friend who was an advisor at the French Cultural Center. Next to him was his slender wife Catharine, who had a freckled face and short hair. There was Claude, who worked at the embassy, and his Moroccan wife, who had brown skin and blue eyes. Her name was Fatima, but friends called her Fati. As for Othman, Sofia's husband, he was adding up the receipts at his desk in the corner, as he did at the end of every night. He was very uncomfortable sitting there, not because he was tired, but because he had been trying to make a phone call for more than an hour. Whenever he reached out to pick up the receiver, he felt his wife's gaze cut across the room at him. He was terrified of her catching him.

“Chéri, who are you talking to?” she’d inevitably ask.

Othman was tall and thin; he had a body exuding masculinity. His dark eyebrows increased the firmness of his eyes. He had a thick mustache, which he brushed often, and an artificially contemplative air. The impression he left on others—and especially women—was that he was a man who symbolized virility and could overwhelm any rival.

Five years ago, poverty was the biggest problem in Othman’s life. But now, he wore expensive Italian clothes and drove the latest model BMW. He ran a fine restaurant in the chic Ain Diab district and lived in a magnificent villa in Anfa, the most exclusive neighborhood in Casablanca. All this comfort was thanks to his French wife Sofia, who was also the source of his misery. The main reason was their age difference: Othman was thirty-two years old and bursting with strength and vigor, while Sofia was seventy-three. The obvious disparity shocked everyone, especially when they found out this old lady was the wife of such a vibrant young man.

Othman’s frustration at not being able to make the call caused his hand to shake on the adding machine. He was taking a long time with the receipts, hoping Sofia wouldn’t ask him to join them yet again. He looked at his watch and saw it was midnight. Sofia and her friends danced, sang, and exchanged jokes, as they did all night long. As far as Othman was concerned, they were just making noise. Their loud, horrible laughter pounded his ears as he sat at the desk. His only solace was pretending their outbursts were nails being hammered into his wife’s coffin. For an hour now he used his work as an excuse to stay behind the counter, hoping to make the time pass faster. But here was Sofia, opening another bottle of Beaujolais, filling their glasses, and singing old songs from the days of her distant youth.

She was happy. No one could see any trace of suffering on her face, despite her advanced age. Also, her figure was deceptive: from a distance, it gave her the appearance of a

young woman, especially when she was wearing tight pants, as she was tonight. Her blond hair hung down on her bare shoulders.

Sofia was only afraid of two things in life: the first was death, which made her do everything she could to stay healthy and fit, and the second was Othman cheating on her. Because of this, she'd keep a close eye on him everywhere he went, scrutinize the features of his face, and listen closely to the inflection of his voice. Maybe she'd catch the trace of another woman on him. She knew Othman was a terrible liar. Whenever she caught him in some white lie, he turned into a shy boy who confessed in no time.

Through his half-closed eyes, he saw her coming toward him, dancing and holding two glasses of wine. She normally didn't drink more than a glass a day, but tonight she was having more fun than usual. Sofia was acting like a young girl, letting herself get carried away. Her face was full of joy.

Othman took a deep breath trying to get a hold of himself. He smiled at her, pretending to be annoyed at all the work he had to do. She pushed one of the glasses toward him and caressed his fingers.

"Chéri, have you finished yet?" she asked gently.

"And you?" replied Othman tensely.

Looking him in the eyes, she took a sip from her glass and put it on the counter. She then ran her fingers through her shiny hair, provoking him with a look full of desire.

"Chéri, we're celebrating. This is Jacques's last night. Come join us. We didn't have enough customers tonight for all this bookkeeping."

Othman didn't have the strength to look at her. A loud crashing sound coming from the kitchen saved him. As soon as Sofia stepped away to see what happened, he seized his opportunity. He quickly picked up the phone and dialed. After the first ring, he heard Naema's voice on the other end, full of anxiety.

“Othman? How could you leave me outside all alone like this?”

“I haven’t had a second to call,” he said quickly, whispering as softly as he could. “I’ve tried for an hour to tell you not to wait for me. They’re taking much longer than I thought.”

He hung up without hearing Naeema’s response. Sofia suddenly came back from the kitchen.

“Something wrong?” asked Othman quickly, trying to preempt any questions.

“This Abdelkader, chéri, we’ve got to do something about him. Or get rid of Rahma.”

She stopped herself, not wanting to ruin her mood.

“Come, my love, let’s dance,” she continued softly.

She swallowed what was left in her glass and put on her favorite song, “To All the Men I’ve Loved Before.” Othman felt much better now that he told Naeema not to wait for him. With the skill of a professional actor, he passionately wrapped his arm around Sofia’s waist, showing her the vigor of a real man. He drew her close to him, spun her around, squeezed her tightly, and then pushed her away before yanking her back to him again.

“Let me go, please let me go!” she yelled out, giggling like a child on a seesaw.

Her son Jacques got up, staggering a bit. He was fat; he had a strong face and a short frame. Jacques was twenty-three years older than his mother’s husband.

“For God’s sake, get away from my mother!” he said jokingly.

The others broke out laughing until Fati began coughing after she got a piece of olive caught in her throat. Jacques approached Othman, imitating a knight with a sword in his hand. He dismissed Othman with a light shove on the chest.

“Madame wants to dance with me,” he said grandiosely. “Calm yourself and retreat.”

Othman lifted his hands as if afraid of a duel. He stepped back, while Fati continued coughing.

“What a night!” she said a few times as she tried to clear her throat.

At Mohammed V Airport in Casablanca, most of the arriving passengers were coming from Europe. As soon as they got off their plane, they realized they didn’t need their jackets. The hot weather no doubt surprised them; even though it was the end of November, the daytime temperature was in the upper seventies, though at night, the dazzling sun disappeared and a chill set in. During the week he spent in Casablanca, Jacques got a light tan, which would no doubt be a source of pride once he got back to the miserable Parisian weather.

They were standing near the border police and for several minutes Jacques embraced his mother like a child not wanting to let go.

“Poor Jacques,” said Michel, the close family friend who insisted on going with them to the airport. “He’s so delicate and sensitive.”

Othman looked impatiently at his watch without bothering to respond. The way Jacques held onto his mother seemed shameless. Even after she stepped away from him, Jacques kept holding her by the shoulders, treating her like a lover.

“I don’t want to leave you, Mama.”

Sofia laughed and turned to the others as if trying to lighten Jacques’s farewell.

“We’ll see you next summer, right?”

“Of course, Mama.”

“Oh, chéri,” she replied.

Finally letting go of Sofia, Jacques gave Othman a firm handshake.

“Watch after my mother,” he said, smiling.

“Of course, my son,” said Othman.

Michel laughed so hard he caught the attention of some travelers. Othman's response was ridiculous. Jacques was old enough to be his father.

There were about five people waiting in front of the border post. Sofia didn't want to leave until she saw her son cross through passport control. After ten minutes, which Othman and Michel endured resentfully, Jacques's turn came. But, in a gallant gesture, he gave his place to a pregnant woman and waved to his mother and the others, telling them not to wait for him any more. His mother blew him a kiss, took her husband's arm, and turned around to leave.

As he did every night after he got home from the restaurant, Othman took their dog Yuki out for a long walk. He smoked a cigarette as he strolled in the middle of the road among the grand villas. The neighborhood was calm. There was a line of tall palm trees on either side of the street, the base of each tree ringed by a patch of trimmed grass. The air was so crisp and cool that Othman zipped up his jacket.

When he reached the square, he was overwhelmed by anxiety. He looked at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. She broke her promise, he thought; she's not here like she said. She waited for him here inside her car almost every night. While Yuki ran and played, they'd sit together, talking and embracing each other. He remembered her sweet lips on his and felt crushed that he wouldn't see her tonight. The thought of returning to the villa without the rejuvenation Naeema gave him was unbearable. He could already feel the torture he'd face once he got home. Where would he get the strength to deal with Sofia without seeing Naeema?

He took out his cell phone and looked around to see if anyone was watching. As he dialed the number, Yuki was running around happily.

"Hello, Naeema?" he said anxiously, almost holding his breath. "I managed to get out here early. . . . I'm at our usual

place. . . . No, Naeema, this isn't the time to fight. I'm sorry about yesterday. . . . I can't tomorrow afternoon. I need you now. . . . Please In the morning I have to run errands and work at the restaurant. . . . Fine, tomorrow at the same time. Good night."

He then turned toward Yuki.

"Come here, you dog!" he yelled out bitterly.

When he got back to the villa, Othman let Yuki loose into the garden and then went in the house. He walked straight to a small bar in the corner of the living room, took out a bottle of whiskey, and filled a glass. He emptied it in two gulps, making his eyes tear up. He then filled his glass up again.

From the bedroom above, Sofia's voice came down to him softly, full of desire.

"Chéri. . . ."

Without these glasses of whiskey, he'd never be able to bear having sex with her. He thought she was intent on torturing him. He had to hide his resentment and disgust and approach her with excitement and burning desire. He'd embrace her with tenderness, pampering her and whispering sweet words of love in her ear. He had to force himself to get used to her favorite positions, pretending to love them while praising her body, which was full of splotches like leopard skin and made him sick. After she'd finally climax, his disgust would last for hours as she lay there in bliss. He'd have to keep holding her and repeating words of love and gratitude.

"Chéri, come lie next to me," she cooed as he walked up to her.

When he entered the room, she slowly pulled the blanket off her. He could see her dried-up breasts emerge from the opening of her silk kimono. The features of her face seemed fixed, almost artificial. He turned his back to her as he took off his clothes, not wanting her to watch him. He had to get himself ready, feverishly thinking of Naeema's naked body. If Sofia saw he couldn't get it up, it would turn into a double

torture session. She'd keep asking him what was wrong and wouldn't let him go to sleep until he revealed his deepest feelings. He had no choice but to endure it all, doing whatever he could to dispel any suspicion of the utter loathing she inspired in him.

There were only eight people in the restaurant tonight. Most of them drank a lot of wine but ordered just a few appetizers. This annoyed Sofia and she complained that they thought she ran a bar and not an upscale restaurant. As for Othman, this lull in business made him happy. At ten thirty, he told everyone they were getting ready to close and tried to hurry them out. His wife didn't seem to notice that her husband was in such a rush.

Sofia opened the kitchen door and inadvertently caught her cook with his hands on Rahma's full hips. She was in the middle of washing dishes. Instead of yelling at Abdelkader, Sofia went straight to the dirty plates, picking them up and inspecting them angrily. She stared at the two disdainfully and slammed the dishes down in the sink.

"Everything's dirty!" she screamed at Rahma. "Why do I have to yell to get you to do things right!"

Her eyes lit up with anger as she looked over at Abdelkader. He happened to be gripping a butcher knife and seemed hesitant to put it back with the other knives.

"Don't get so angry, Madame," he said faintly. "Everything's fine."

She hated him and knew he was jealous of Othman. At the same time, she couldn't fire him since he was such a good cook. Before Rahma, she had to get rid of two female workers because of Abdelkader. He was a ladies' man. He had been married twice and was responsible for five children, not all of them born in wedlock.

After the restaurant closed, Sofia sat in the car near the front entrance waiting for Othman. She was smoking a cigarette and

listening to Mozart as she usually did when she was angry. She saw all the workers leave from the side door and pile into an old Renault 4 parked nearby. After a bit, Othman left too. He locked the front door and hurried over, getting into the driver's seat next to Sofia. He turned on the ignition, but as soon as the car started, he got out without saying a word, as if he just realized he had forgotten something. He went back in the restaurant as the Renault 4 drove off.

He walked straight over to a box under the desk and took some money from it. All of a sudden, he heard several metal pans crash to the ground in the kitchen. Othman then heard another noise he couldn't quite make out. Surprised and a little scared, he carefully approached the kitchen door and noticed it was ajar. He heard a cat meow, a sound that seemed odd to him, almost eerie. He stood frozen for a moment, deciding whether to go in the kitchen or not, and all of a sudden, he heard the car horn outside. Othman let out a sigh, chuckled, and quickly left the restaurant.

In the bedroom, Sofia sat in front of the vanity, taking off her make-up with pieces of cotton. She then put a special cream on her face, looking closely at the wrinkles no cosmetic surgery could fix. She was paying special attention to her appearance tonight; she had on a silk nightgown and a beautiful cloth wrapped around her head. The mirror didn't reflect her youthful spirit, but a body in need of some help. Sofia wasn't the kind of person to torture herself, however. For her, the body was independent of the spirit and her spirit was youthful, even if the mirror said something entirely different.

She slipped under the covers like a small child. It annoyed her that she was always the first to bed and that she had to call out to Othman several times to get him to join her.

Finally, Othman stood at the bedroom door and smiled at her cheerfully. It didn't take her long to realize he wasn't coming to bed. Her mood took a turn for the worse.

“Coming to sleep, chéri?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“I have to take the dog out,” he muttered without looking at her.

“But I already walked him today.”

Did she know why he left the house every night?

“I like taking him for a walk after work.”

After a moment of silence, she smiled indulgently.

“Don’t be late, chéri.”

He knew under this calm demeanor, she hid her displeasure. Once he got out on to the empty street, he let Yuki off the leash. He lit a cigarette and walked quickly, almost working up a sweat. If she breaks her promise tonight, he thought, he’d go crazy. He had never felt as lonely as he did right now.

As he approached the square, he saw her simple Renault 5 parked in the usual place, under the tallest palm tree. He was overwhelmed with happiness and relief. He looked around to make sure no one was watching and slipped into the front seat next to Naeema. Besides the huge age difference between her and his wife, Naeema looked more European than Sofia. She was fair-skinned and had honey-colored eyes. Her hair was fine and long; she pulled it back in a ponytail like a twenty-year-old Moroccan college girl, even though she was twenty-seven. Naeema had a magnificent body, especially her legs. Othman met her at the sports club where his wife worked out. Sofia was actually the one who introduced them. Naeema was Sofia’s aerobics instructor.

Othman leaned close to give her a passionate kiss, but Naeema didn’t respond. She pushed him away, and all he could do was give her a quick peck on the cheek.

Was she crying while waiting for him? He understood how difficult her situation was. A single girl in an empty street at such a late hour. Not only was it dangerous, it was a matter of respect and honor. She looked like a prostitute sitting in her car like that.

They sat there without looking at each other, silent for some time, melancholic. He knew she didn't want to be the one to start talking.

"Was I . . . late?" he stammered.

"No, but I almost died waiting here for you all alone," she replied in a soft voice, trying to hide her emotions.

He reached out and put his arm around the edge of her seat.

"No one would touch you in this neighborhood."

"Is the old lady asleep?" she asked, raising her voice a bit.

"Can she fall asleep without me next to her?" Othman said with a slight smile.

She suddenly smacked her hand on the steering wheel in rage.

"Sorry," she said insincerely.

Othman knew how tense she was. He laughed cheerfully, hoping to melt her icy demeanor.

"I didn't come to joke with you," she said. "I'm here to resolve this situation. My patience has run out."

Othman pulled his arm away.

"How long have you been waiting?" he said, trying hard to speak calmly. "Two years? I'm the one who's had to endure it for more than five."

"I wasn't in your life five years ago," she said, looking at him resolutely. "I'd bet everything I have that old lady won't die until she's a hundred. You've got to see her at the club. She's got the health of a mule. The young girls can barely finish my class but when she's done, she goes straight on to the next one. If you're counting on her dying soon, God help us!"

Othman smiled coldly and turned away from her. He watched Yuki for a few seconds as he chased a torn ball around. He knew what was on Naeema's mind. He was usually lucky enough to make her forget the details. He hadn't ever felt the possibility of a breakup like he did right now. He was blind with love for Naeema. She was incredibly beautiful. And she loved him too.

“We have to embellish reality,” he said. “If you want, I’ll divorce her tomorrow, but then everything would be lost. You want an unemployed lawyer as a husband?”

“If this whore stays alive for another twenty years,” she said, “I’ll wind up waiting for you until I become an old hag like her!”

Even though Naeema always told him not to smoke in her car, he suddenly realized he had a cigarette in his hand.

“We’ve talked about this a thousand times. I thought we agreed to put it off.”

“My patience has run out!” she screamed in his face, tears welling up in her eyes. “I can’t bear it anymore.”

She began sobbing. Othman felt like he might lose her altogether. Looking at her crying like this, he thought she was about to end it. He wondered how he could sacrifice the love of his life for a shriveled up seventy-three-year-old woman who acted like a child. He felt sick to his stomach and suddenly lost his desire to hold and kiss Naeema.

“I’ve got to go,” he mumbled without looking to her.

“You want granny? Then go.”

She turned on the ignition before he got out of the car and took off with a screech as soon as he shut the door.

Othman lit a cigarette. He crushed the empty pack in his hand and tossed it away. His heart began beating sharply and his throat became dry. His lips quivered like he was about to break out in tears. He thought he’d go crazy as he asked himself over and over again why he had married Sofia. He remembered how she had saved him from miserable poverty. But wasn’t it his right to live with the woman he loved? Didn’t he deserve happiness? He felt his world being ripped apart. Sofia was old and worn-out; she’d been sucking his blood for over five years. She controlled everything about him and made him live in isolation. Because of the way he felt about being seen with her, he avoided his friends, family, and everyone else. Othman was terrified of

the ridicule in their eyes and their looks of pity. He hated Sofia. Every night, as he held her lying in bed, he imagined himself putting an end to it and killing her.

2

WHEN THE PHONE RANG, DETECTIVE Alwaar was on the verge of nodding off. He stayed in the other room studying horse betting numbers and chain-smoking until he slipped into bed next to his wife after midnight. He hadn't yet picked the numbers he'd bet on. He happened to be dreaming of his favorite horse losing the race when the phone rang.

Who's Alwaar? If he got the chance to introduce himself, he'd probably just say he's been a criminal detective for thirty years, but was never lucky enough to get promoted to commissioner. His real name was Allal ben Alawaam. The inspectors under his command called him Alwaar, "rough guy," but this nickname soon went beyond work and took on another meaning, one with a political connotation. That's because Alwaar and a group of cops like him rejected the recent reforms curbing police violence. Times were changing quickly in Morocco and the government was now calling for the end of torture-related deaths in police custody, opening up investigations into police misconduct, and arresting cops implicated in human rights violations.

The response of some on the force, at first, was to stop taking crime-fighting initiatives, show indifference, and watch things from a distance. This led to increased crime on the street and soon left its trace on public opinion. People were beginning to lose faith in the police reforms, linking the sharp rise in violence and continuing human rights

abuses to what they saw as the inability of Moroccans to respect the rule of law.

This difficult transitional period made Alwaar feel out of place. His work became confusing; it was hard for him to get confessions without slapping or kicking a suspect or sending them down to the torture room in the basement of the police station before interrogation. Alwaar didn't know how to do his job without brutality. He just couldn't get used to sitting in front of a suspect without being aggressive or insulting, talking to them like they were in some smoke-filled café. He had to crack the whip.

For a whole year he didn't do much of anything. He simply put in his time, dreaming of days past. It was in this difficult period that he discovered racehorse betting and got addicted to it. Yet little by little he started getting used to the new situation in Morocco, especially when he cracked a few cases. He had to obey the winds of change, even if with little faith or slack enthusiasm.

On this night, as he was finally about to fall asleep, the phone saved him from seeing his favorite horse lose the race. Alwaar waited to pick up, hoping it would stop ringing on its own. But when the phone kept at it, he knew the call was work-related. He leaned on his pillow and turned on the bedside lamp. He watched his wife as she turned to the other side of the bed, pulling the covers over her head so the light wouldn't bother her. Alwaar picked up the receiver but didn't say anything. The voice on the other end shook him awake as if he was facing some sudden danger.

"Sir," the voice said without the usual greetings, "this is Inspector Assou from the nightshift. We just got news a foreign woman was murdered in her home."

Alwaar grimaced as he got out of the warm bed.

"Who reported the crime?" he snapped, almost chastising the inspector for what happened.

"Her husband."

"The address?" said Alwaar coldly.

“Villa Sofia, number twenty-three, Zuhour Street, Anfa.”

“Tell the DA,” he said in total resignation. “And tell Inspector Boukrisha to make sure no one touches the body until I get there.”

Alwaar put the receiver down, breathing heavily. He used to smoke more than two packs a day of cheap Moroccan cigarettes and now had problems breathing. He had a chest exam recently, and the doctor told him to quit smoking immediately. The only thing Alwaar could do was get by on a pack and a half a day instead of two or even more.

He walked, exhausted, across the bedroom and opened the closet. When he was undressed, Alwaar looked like a retired boxer. He had a puffy face and bags under his eyes. His features made him look feeble and his lifeless eyes never seemed to focus on much of anything.

As he put on his suit, his wife stirred in bed.

“What’s so important they had to wake you up?”

“A woman . . . foreign . . . was murdered,” he replied, out of breath, as he knotted his faded necktie.

With a mechanical movement, Fatima sat straight up as if she hadn’t just been deeply asleep. She was maternal, the mistress of the house in the strictest sense. She was skilled at cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning. Her favorite pastime, however, was gossiping with the other women in the building. For years she’d been the official spokesperson on everything concerning Casablanca’s security. Tomorrow morning, before even preparing breakfast, she’d spread the news of this shocking crime among the women of the building, promising them details on the next installment.

Alwaar finished putting on his suit and adjusting his pale red tie. He then took his gun from its hiding spot in the middle of the folded clothes in the closet and tucked it into his belt. Fatima looked at him closely with a hint of compassion.

“What happened to the commissioner’s promise of giving you a desk job until you retire?” she said, getting up.

Alwaar waved his hand in a motion of resignation.

“They always do this when something big happens. They make the rounds and call everyone. In the end, I’m the only guy they find. The young detectives don’t have enough experience for them.”

“All this trouble,” she grumbled, helping him put on his coat, “and they haven’t even promoted you to commissioner.”

Did she mean to strike at his most vulnerable spot? Alwaar took a few steps back, narrowly avoiding her foot. He just couldn’t hide his anger whenever the subject of his promotion came up. He seemed confused and irritable to her.

“What good would being commissioner do me?” he asked, searching for something in the pockets of his thick coat. “My days at work are numbered. At my age, people only ask for health and well-being.”

That was his way of easing his grief and hiding his bitterness. But, in truth, even the mention of not getting promoted incensed him and made him feel as though all his dreams had gone up in smoke. Old age seemed like a poisoned coldness slowly creeping toward him.

He continued rummaging in the bottom of his pockets.

“If you’re looking for your notebook, it’s in front of you on the table,” said Fatima, as if settling something obvious.

She followed him to the door and after he left, she turned the locks, reconciling herself to being alone.

She never guessed her children would grow up so fast, get married, and vanish into thin air. Their oldest son lived in France, while his brother was a cop—like his father—in Meknes. As for their daughter, Samiya, she had also gone into the same line of work as her father. Last year she passed the academy’s entrance exam on the first try and was now training at the police academy in Kenitra.

Alwaar stopped his Fiat Uno directly in front of the police car opposite the villa gate. He looked at his watch before heading

in. It was quarter after one in the morning. He stopped to breathe in the clean air of this high-class neighborhood and then walked toward the gate where a uniformed cop was standing. The cop greeted the detective with an official salute but Alwaar didn't even look at him.

The first thing that struck Alwaar was the vast size of the villa's garden, which was illuminated with powerful lights that made it look like the middle of the day. The grass was bright green and perfectly trimmed like the artificial turf on a sports field. The edges were lined with multicolored flowers and in the distance there was a deep blue swimming pool just like one in a luxury hotel. The non-stop barking put Alwaar on edge so he rushed toward the house. Once inside, he felt like he was in a castle. A magnificent crystal chandelier adorned with traditional designs hung from the ceiling. There was a marble fountain in the middle of the entryway, and the ground shone with polished marble that made you feel sorry for walking on it, no matter how expensive your shoes were. All the furniture was refined and revealed a foreign taste with Moroccan touches.

Inspector Boukrisha hurried over to him with his round belly sticking out. He appeared older than his age, though he was twenty years younger than Alwaar. He had a brown face and curly hair, but it was difficult to pin down the exact color of his eyes. He constantly exaggerated his gestures to reinforce his naturally hoarse voice.

"The crime took place in the bedroom," he said excitedly.

The detective started walking toward the stairs, but was stopped in his tracks by the sight of a man hunched over on a leather couch with his face between his hands and his chest trembling.

"Who's that guy?" said Alwaar, winking at Boukrisha. The inspector cracked a smile that confused the detective.

"The victim's husband."

Down the second floor was a wide hallway with a number of doors, all of which were well-lit. On each side of them

were tables with antiques and vases, together with more decorative chairs than quite fit the space. The bedroom was at the end of the hallway. It was a wide room with two wardrobes and a vanity. There was another door inside leading to the ensuite bathroom. As for Sofia's body, it was lying on the bed drenched in blood. Her nightgown was open at the waist. Her right arm was extended as if she wanted to grab something. The left hung down to the ground. She was lying on the edge of the bed and looked like she was about to fall off, but death had frozen her in this position. Alwaar stared at her pale aged face and understood the meaning of the inspector's ambiguous smile. He looked for Boukrisha among the other cops in the room.

"The young guy downstairs, that's her husband?"

Boukrisha nodded his head with a stunned look on his face.

"He's the one who called in the crime?" asked Alwaar.

"Yeah, he's the one," said Boukrisha, trying to clear his voice.

The detective's eyes widened and he moved his head slowly. He asked one of the cops—an enthusiastic young man who'd joined the force only two years ago—to stop taking photos. Alwaar moved back and examined the body from the different corners of the bedroom.

His first step was to verify that the crime scene hadn't been tampered with. He especially wanted to make sure the murder weapon, a knife covered in blood next to the corpse, was in the same position they found it in. The detective had the forensics officer take a close-up of the knife. Alwaar then scanned the bedroom floor, which was covered with a beautiful Moroccan carpet. He saw a framed picture near the bedside table. He bent over and examined the photo without touching it, so as not to compromise any potential fingerprints.

When he straightened up, he felt a light dizziness. He pressed his hands on his temples and took a deep breath. The

room was swarming with men: Boukrisha, the forensics agent, three inspectors, and a team of ambulance men who were crowded at the door, ready to take the body away.

Alwaar moved to the window and opened it. He looked out onto the calm, beautiful street, trying to get a hold of himself. Whenever he carried out the initial stages of a murder investigation, he felt a strange heaviness, a kind of distraction impeding his determination.

For Alwaar, this was the most difficult stage of any investigation. He'd look for what the evidence was telling him and read it from every angle before moving to the next step. This made Alwaar move slowly, testing the patience of his assistants, who were always standing around, awaiting orders.

He finally got down to business. He walked toward the bedside table and, with a cloth wrapped around his hand, opened the top drawer, taking out a box lined with silk. He opened the lid and found it full of jewelry: gold earrings, a diamond necklace, and a ring with a sparkling jewel. He immediately ruled out theft as a motive for the murder. This sped things up. He then looked into the bathroom and was transfixed. He wasn't searching for clues, as much as he was dazzled by its splendor: there was a wide bathtub big enough for a giant, gleaming white towels in an elegant arrangement, a bunch of nightgowns hanging on hooks, and dozens of creams, combs, oils, perfumes, soaps, and shampoos.

Near the entryway downstairs, Othman was still sitting in shock. His eyes were red from weeping and his lips were taut. He was sighing deeply and having trouble breathing. Soon, he managed to get a hold of his trembling.

Alwaar walked down to Othman and sat in front of him, taking out his notebook. Alwaar gave him the once-over before introducing himself.

"I'm the homicide detective in charge here and this is my assistant," he said, pointing to Inspector Boukrisha. "You're the victim's husband?"

Othman nodded without having the strength to look into Alwaar's eyes.

"Name?"

"Othman Latlabi."

"Your wife's name?"

"Sofia Beaumarché."

"Her nationality?"

"French."

The detective took his time writing down the information in his notebook. This gave him the chance to check out Othman again.

"Fine," said the detective in an irritated tone. "Tell us what happened."

Othman closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He stammered more than once before finally starting talking.

"We got home from the restaurant around eleven. Sofia went up to the bedroom ahead of me. I took the dog out for a walk. When I came back," he said, breaking out in a fit of tears, "I found her like that."

A feeling of weakness overwhelmed him and he started weeping out loud. The detective observed him in a cold, professional way. Othman got up, grabbed a box of tissues, took one out, and wiped his eyes. As he moved to sit down, he almost fell over.

"Calm down," said Inspector Boukrisha impatiently. "We know this is hard for you but we've got our job to do."

Othman stared at the inspector.

"You said you found her like that," Alwaar pressed him.

Othman was having a hard time talking. He gave the two men a miserable look.

"She was barely alive," he said, doing what he could to continue. "She was on her last breath and tried to speak. She opened her mouth but no sound came out. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I knew she was going to die. She motioned to a photo of her son she had in her hands, almost

like she wanted to say goodbye to him. She tried to hold onto it but it fell. I was shocked and confused. I screamed out and my entire body started shaking. I've never seen a murdered person before and I hate seeing blood. When I got hold of myself, I saw she was still moving and I immediately called for an ambulance and the police."

The detective looked up and exchanged a glance with the inspector, who was standing with his elbow on the edge of the large fireplace. Alwaar took something down in his notebook.

"Listen, Othman," he said in an official tone. "I'll be straight with you. You're the only one who knows what happened. You've got to remember all the details."

Othman grimaced as his eyes widened.

"That's it. I told you everything."

The detective felt Othman's story didn't check out. There was clearly something wrong with the knife. It wasn't normal for killers to leave the murder weapon behind at the crime scene, unless something forced them to. Also, the knife wasn't still in the victim's stomach; someone pulled it out and left it next to her on the bed.

The detective swallowed with difficulty. For him, the murder weapon was always the fundamental clue in discovering the killer. And this point was shrouded in obscurity.

The technicians finished their work. Alwaar ordered them to leave and had the ambulance men take the body to the morgue.

"I want to call one of her close friends," said Othman, stammering.

After thinking for a moment, the detective nodded in agreement. Othman went to the phone on top of the small bar in the corner of the living room, picked up the receiver, and dialed the number. The other end rang for a while. He almost put the receiver down when someone finally picked up.

"Hello? Michel? I'm sorry to wake you," he said in a rattled voice. "I have terrible news. Sofia was just murdered. I

was outside walking the dog and when I came home, I found her in the bedroom . . . stabbed to death. . . . Yes, the police are here with me now. Will you tell Jacques?”

Othman hung up. He then opened a nearby glass cupboard and took out a big copper lighter. He lit a cigarette and sat down again.

“Who’s Michel?” snapped Boukrisha.

“A close friend of Sofia’s who’s an advisor at the French Cultural Center.”

Alwaar took the information down in his notebook.

“And Jacques?” he asked without raising his head.

“Her son. He was here last week and went back to France.”

His eyes filled up with tears again. He put his hand on the back of his head and then stroked his mustache nervously. He gave the impression he was living a nightmare. The detective looked at him closely, trying to figure out what Othman was really feeling. Was his grief genuine or was he struggling to hide the truth?

“What time did you take the dog out?” Alwaar asked, starting up a second line of questioning.

“Around eleven-thirty.”

“When’d you get back?”

“About half an hour later.”

“Did you meet anyone while you were out? One of the neighbors or anyone else see you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Othman, hesitating. “I stayed in the square with the dog. I played with him for a bit and then came back. The street was completely empty.”

“Do you usually take the dog out?”

“Every day, except Saturday and Sunday.”

“When you came back, how’d you find the door of the house?”

“Just as I left it. Locked.”

“You forgot to close it when you went out?”

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