

# The Lady of Zamalek

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# 1

“WHY DID LOVE COURSE THROUGH my veins and restore me to life only to stab me in the heart?”—Nadia

I tiptoed toward the basement, looking behind me for the third time to make sure everyone was asleep, especially that new servant with her prying eyes. I crept down the wooden stairs, eased the key into the lock, opened the door, and slipped inside. I inched my way forward in near darkness to avoid colliding into the junk and bric-a-brac piled here and there with no rhyme or reason. I'd bruised my legs quite a bit down here when I was a child. I passed wooden crates labeled in various European languages. The letters had faded and altered in shape over time. There were building tools, garden implements, cans of paint as old as the place itself, and metal frames and wooden posts of strange shapes and sizes. I spotted an old brass trumpet with corroded buttons and a rust-covered Belgian bicycle that had once been white. Its front wheel had gone missing—heaven knows where—so the bike leaned forward, propped on its front fork, mourning its loss. I nearly bumped into the ancient gilded bed. As always, I stopped to stare at it in awe. It was over three yards wide and pitched slightly to one side since it had only three of its original legs. A stout column of bricks stood in for the fourth. I smiled and felt my face flush with embarrassment when I recalled how he'd tried to coax me to that bed yesterday. Hundreds of old

medicine containers were stacked near the wall and covered in a layer of dust thick enough to warp their shapes. I stroked my father's antique wooden desk on which were stacked thick files and folders, with the contents spilling out of some, all covered with dust. I could make out some yellowed envelopes bearing the emblem of a green palm tree and the name Solomon Cicurel in an ornate script. My father had discarded countless other objects down here over the years with no care for order. They seemed poised to ambush all who strayed into this treacherous landscape and force them to retrace their steps.

I whispered his name once, then once again, peering anxiously into the darkness. He blinked his tiny flashlight on and off to help me locate him. He had changed his hiding place. He looked rather haggard this morning and some blood had seeped through the bandaging I had affixed over his wound. He'd probably gotten out of bed and moved around in the middle of the night in order to alleviate his boredom.

He seemed different today. He still had the mischievous gleam in his eyes that I'd noticed the night I hid him down here. He was as attractive and beguiling as ever. His urges radiated from him. Taking care not to move too much, he made slight feints with his torso, thrust his head forward to steal a kiss, flung out an arm to reach for my waist. I deftly parried his movements, trying not to laugh at the contortions of his face, which at one moment spoke of spasms of pain from the wound, and at another of a deep yearning that bedeviled his mind and fired his lust. Yet something in his eyes seemed lost and confused, as though tormented by thoughts that had kept him awake all night.

He grabbed hold of my arm and yanked me toward that expansive bed. Something in his eyes made me resist. They weren't looking at me, but through me to the need that had preceded us to the mattress and held out its arms to both of us. When I wrenched my arm free, my hand struck his wound. I quickly gathered my wits and cast about for the items to

stanch the bleeding. He was strangely resistant to my attempt to treat him. He reproached me for reopening his wound, as though I had done it on purpose, and he backed away as though I meant to hurt him again. I persisted, smiling to reassure him as I drew closer. At last he yielded, reluctantly, when he realized he had backed up into a wall. He remained still for a few minutes, a cunning smile playing on his lips, while I tended to the injury. Fortunately, the flesh had begun to pull together over the past few days. He didn't make it easy for me to concentrate. I had to jerk my head away a couple of times when his lips made stabs toward my cheek. At last they managed to hit their mark and plant a kiss while I was busy fixing the bandage in place on his shoulder. I pretended to be on guard in case he tried again, though I had no intention of evading him if he did. In fact, I hoped my perfume and my proximity would entice him. I longed to melt into his embrace as I had done when we were much younger. His warm, panting breaths brushed my cheeks and whispered his manly arousal. My heart pounded and my body trembled. Both were ready to receive him warmly and passionately as I dipped my cup into the well of the distant past and tasted its still-fresh waters.

Yet he had changed, though I couldn't put my finger on how exactly. I sensed that he was feigning something. Perhaps his feelings for me had died, and instinct alone was driving him. I tried to push that dismal thought from my mind. Or maybe he had an open wound in his heart like the wound from the bullet that had almost killed him. He came here that night, several days ago, panting, blood oozing from his shoulder, whispering my name as though in harmony with an exquisite melody, laying his life on the altar of his first love, and certainly his last. I was intoxicated by his arrival. Yes, his mere appearance at my door moved me in a way I could never have anticipated. There was no need for him to say more after he told me he still loved me. It was sufficient that he chose me again over all others. I was the only woman in this world

whom he trusted enough to place his life in her hands. I was the roots from which sprouted the blossoms of his love. He returned to me. It was my love that made him live, my feelings that made him breathe.

I stared with yearning at his lips and sighed. A faint tremor passed through my lips and coursed slowly through my body, nudging it toward his broad chest. I stepped closer. We closed our eyes as though succumbing to a delicious stupor induced by a heady wine. Our rapid breathing betrayed our burning passion. Moving simultaneously, we thrust out our arms to clasp each other and locked in a secret vow of eternal love. Suddenly we heard a knocking, faint but harsh and rhythmic, like military footsteps. The sound wrenched me from my euphoria and rendered our kiss forever incomplete.

I listened more intently. I heard a cane rapping on the floor and approaching from afar. I held my breath until my ribs ached. The chill of fear set my limbs on edge. The knocking persisted, but it slowed as it approached the door, which was at the opposite end of the basement from where we stood. A few beads of sweat formed between the strands of my hair. I felt them roll in quick succession down my forehead, as though on a reconnaissance mission to let others know it was safe to follow as the heat soared in my head, which was about to explode. I exchanged a quick glance with him, to reassure him. To my amazement, he already seemed assured—too much so. I signaled him to remain silent, to stop breathing if he could. Then I turned my attention back to the rapping cane.

## 2

“I WAS SHACKLED BY MY ambitions, like a statue in the middle of a deserted square with the sun drumming on its head every morning.”—Abbas Mahalawi

The boat lurched and pitched, and I awoke. One of the other kids must have gone ashore. I looked at the space between the five remaining boys to figure out who had skipped off at this early hour. I turned toward the wharf. There was no one on it as far as I could see. A few fishermen on some boats were preparing to set sail. It was six in the morning and still dark, despite some streaks of light. The cold stung my cheeks. I wrapped myself in my blanket and tried to go back to sleep. I tried for three hours and failed. With a long yawn, I got up from my sleeping spot in the hull and stretched my limbs. Then I leaned over the side and splashed some seawater in my face. That perked me up. Grabbing my wooden vendor's case, I hopped ashore and hurried into the streets around the Dekheila port. I paused at a long row of King Fuad posters someone had hastily pasted across the walls in the middle of the night. Someone else must have followed to slap on crude stripes of black paint to blot out the eyes. Smirking, I continued on my way. I went from coffeehouse to coffeehouse to sell cigarettes, but mostly to hunt for a new job. I was hoping to come across Fuad Iskandrani, a frequent subject of gossip, but rarely seen.

Some months before coming to Alexandria, I'd managed to graduate from secondary school in my native village in the Tanta governorate. Since my grades weren't good enough to get into university, I decided to come here with my elder uncle and enroll in Don Bosco, a vocational training school run by Italians. That was another experience I didn't like to recall, which hadn't stopped it from forcing itself on my memory from time to time. I skipped school so often I was expelled after my first year. Still, I'd learned a smattering of French and a lot of Italian, which I picked up easily. I didn't tell my uncle that I had been expelled for fear he'd cut off my allowance or, worse, send me back to the village.

Don Bosco was a boarding school. So, once a month, I'd drop by my uncle's place to let him know I was still alive and pick up my allowance. He lived in the Manshiya neighborhood, not far from the Dekheila port, though I let him continue to think that I was still at school, which was in another part of town altogether, and slogging away at my studies. But school bored me to death, while skipping classes and peddling cigarettes was a good way to look for a lucrative job to compensate for my academic failure.

I'd heard about Fuad Iskandrani so often that I felt drawn to him. I'd been doing the rounds of the coffeehouses and bars near the port for over a month, and at last I found him in one of them. He was in a dapper white suit, with a white hat and white shoes to match. He was playing odds or evens with an itinerant pistachio vendor and winning round after round. He'd reach his large hand into the vendor's box, scoop out a fistful of nuts, and toss them onto his table, shouting something to encourage Lady Luck. Everyone's attention was riveted on him. Each time he bet that the nuts would come out odds and each time he won his bet. Yet, in the end, he tipped the pistachio vendor a whole pound note. I gasped louder than the vendor.

When Iskandrani turned toward me, I instantly felt a magnetic pull. His eyes fixed on me and, from time to time,

the corners of his mouth curved up in a brief flicker of a smile. Catching what I believed was a wink with his left eye, I smiled back. When he invited me to his table, I accepted willingly. I spoke to him about myself and my ambition to find a job where I could make lots of money. He appraised me with an avid stare and gave my leg an affectionate pat. I started work with him that very day.

As I had told him that I had no home and slept on an old boat in Dekheila, he promised me accommodation. He took me to a large house in the middle of some fields and immediately led me to the backyard and dozens of ditches dug randomly here and there. They were the length of an adult male, wide enough for two people to lie side by side comfortably, and cushioned with a bedding of sand and dirt. Flabby naked women as old as my mother lay in those pits on old sheets that had turned gray and had dark stains in the middle. The women covered their private parts with scraps of old rags as they waited for their next customer: the second-class sort who was always in a hurry, or sex-starved students. This is where I had my first assignment in the Iskandrani establishment.

Of course, I realized immediately that this was a *kerhane*, the type of bordello where women service one john after the other, where half-men in striped *gallabiyas* furtively slip in and out, where lights in the halls and rooms are dim, where even a blind man can tell where he is by the way the women speak and laugh. As I would soon learn, the younger whores were quartered inside the house, into which only the more “respectable” clients were admitted. There were maybe ten rooms for them. But my job was to take care of the pits, and my duties were straightforward.

Once the women’s shift ended, they’d climb out using a short wooden ladder, hair matted with dirt, body drained of strength after servicing sometimes up to five johns an hour. They assembled in a ragged line in order to receive from me two

bunches of green onions, a piece of cheese, and three pieces of bread. I was the rations manager. I jotted down everything I dispensed to them in a large ledger.

I was given boarding on the same premises, which was located among some farms in the Mandara Qibliya district, on the outskirts of the city. Seven of us slept in a single room that was separate from the main house. A look in the eyes of one my roommates made me sleep with my backside facing the wall.

We weren't allowed to live in Alexandria proper, or even to roam the streets there. A police officer only had to take one look our ID cards to know that we were Fuad Iskandrani's pimps and panders, and send us packing, after some gruff questioning about what business we had in town. Fuad had insisted on getting me an ID card that stated my occupation. I tried to wriggle out of it, but to no avail. When he handed it to me, he deliberately raised his voice for all the officers in the Laban police station to hear: "This is so people will see you're one of Iskandrani's men and you'll get respect."

I didn't like my job with Iskandrani. But I couldn't say I hated it either. I was promoted quickly: from rations officer to procurer in only a few weeks. He gave me a big tip that soon doubled for every girl I brought him. After two months in his employ, "Uncle Fuad," as we called him, summoned me to his office. I was nervous and baffled as I made my way upstairs. The only reason he ever summoned a staff member was to give him a dressing down. I found him on the terrace, where he liked to spend the late afternoon, smoking a water pipe and going over the accounts with the whorehouse madam. Suddenly the noise of an angry scuffle wafted up from below. Iskandrani grinned. He stood up, leaned over the railing, and watched his staff teaching a lesson to a pimp who, as I would learn, had threatened to strike out on his own. I peered down from behind Uncle Fuad's back. The men were punching and kicking the life out of the kid. Before long, he toppled into one

of the pits in the backyard. After casting a last look down on him, bleeding, groaning, and half unconscious, they pulled up the wooden ladder and started to shovel dirt onto him. My insides froze, but I managed to keep my face under control.

Fuad returned to his seat, took a puff from his water pipe, and blew the smoke in my face. “That punk thought he was going to get away with setting up a business of his own. The ingrate! After we trained him, honed his skills, and turned him into the best pander in the whole of Alexandria!”

He took a puff from his pipe, then asked, “So, tell me, what do you like most about women?” He leaned forward to study my reactions. I answered in a word or two. He leaned back in his chair and told me to convince him about the charms of one of the girls at the *kerhane*. He chose the skinniest and least attractive of them all. After I gave him an explicit description, he turned to the madam and said, “That kid’s going to be our new pander, starting tomorrow. What good are the girls he brings us if they don’t have customers!”

My new assignment was to work the bars, coffeehouses, and streets to lure clients to the bordello. A piece of cake compared to procuring. Men are child’s play when you play on their lust, whereas it takes time to breach the ramparts of a woman’s mind to convince her to spread her legs for money. My job relied primarily on my powers of persuasion and imagination. I’d concoct a story about a raunchy night I had with a bevy of sexy dames, adding plenty of juicy details about their velvety thighs as white as marble, breasts like pomegranates, and luscious backsides the likes of which were hard to find in any other brothel. I was quite successful. But despite how often Fuad and his men said they appreciated my work, I couldn’t shake my fear of them. There was always someone watching me and trailing me. It was enough to make even the shadow of a daydream of escape to take flight.

They were as merciless with the girls as they were with my mutinous predecessor. Some of them had been abducted

and forced into prostitution. Others were beaten frequently for refusing to service certain clientele. The more defiant they were, the greater the risk of having their faces slashed with a jackknife or marred with nitric acid.

One form of punishment was one of Uncle Fuad's occasional sources of entertainment. He'd turn the backyard into a kind of wrestling ring. When he gave the signal, a group of the girls would close in on a wayward girl, blocking all avenues of escape. Then they'd shove her into one of the pits and keep her pinned down until the madam arrived. After climbing down into the pit, the madam would tear off the girl's panties and apply chili pepper to her "bread and butter," as the girls here called it. Fuad roared with laughter as he watched from his terrace above. His laughs were drowned out by the screams of the girl writhing and clawing at the walls of the pit like a slaughtered duck. She'd repent for good after that.

Salvation came at last following Fuad Iskandrani's arrest for inflicting bodily injury on some of the girls, one of whom he'd blinded. As one girl after another plucked up the courage to report him to the police, the affair blew up into a sensational scandal. He was tried and sentenced to five years in prison, of which he could endure only one. He died a year later. Afterward, we learned from his prison mates that he was a homosexual. That would probably explain his instant admiration for me and the eyes he had always given me, though he'd never made advances. Afterward, I tried to guess which of the men he did it with, but never could figure it out. They were all real men—though I did have my doubts about that one who looked at me in a way the others didn't.

Following Iskandrani's arrest, the police searched his house and confiscated bags of money in bills and coins. In the storeroom, they found tons of green onions, dozens of wheels of old cheese, and, to my surprise, sacks full of coarse salt. They destroyed the food we fed the girls year in, year out. The girls themselves never grumbled or griped, even though

their health was always ailing due to the poor diet and lack of hygiene, and they would often die after only a few years of service. But then, Fuad could replace them easily thanks to his procurers, such as I had been at one point.

My first plan of action was to marry the madam so I could inherit Fuad's position, and his land and assets. I came within an inch or two of winning her heart and soul. But suddenly she pushed me away. I plotted theft, but she surrounded herself with more thugs. Eventually, as the police harassment and raids increased, especially after they discovered his hidden fortune, I abandoned all plans to acquire that establishment.

The madam, who now ran the place alone, was more generous with the food and pay, if only to keep the police from accusing us of maltreating the prostitutes. But she didn't have Uncle Fuad's business acumen and his strictness. So, what with the confiscations and dwindling revenues, she was soon forced to let in "street trade": your ordinary freelance pimp with a street girl and some johns in tow. Eventually, due to poor management and growing laxness, our girls stopped staying at the *kerhane*, and instead took up quarters with guys who'd rent them by the month. The madam had to summon the girls when clients turned up, and in some cases the girls refused to come.

The moment I'd been waiting for came two months later when the madam had to renew the girls' permits. All officially registered prostitutes had to have a physical checkup every three months at al-Hod al-Marsoud Hospital in Cairo. If not, they'd face a fine, which generally had to be paid by their pimp or madam mistress. We took them down by train, then proceeded in a long convoy of carriages flanked by police to protect us from hecklers and rowdies. As soon as our procession came to a halt near the hospital entrance, squads of thugs and toughs formed a protective ring around the walls. Once the physicals were over, each pimp resumed charge of his particular group of whores. Some of the poor girls, especially the

older ones who were diagnosed with a disease, emerged from the ordeal wailing bitterly, both because of the maltreatment they'd experienced in the hospital and because of the loss of their livelihood.

While I was waiting with the other pimps for the girls to finish their physicals, angry shouting erupted nearby. A brawl was brewing between the pimps and gawkers. At first there were some stones and curses. Then some kids plucked up the nerve to rush forward, stick their tongues out, and put their fingers to their foreheads in the shape of horns. To our toughs, the old cuckold gesture was like red to a bull. They charged, the two sides clashed, the police moved in to break them apart, and I seized the opportunity of the distraction. "I'm just going to buy some cigarettes at the kiosk," I told the madam's boy servant, who acted as her vigilant eye outside the hospital wall. He'd been clinging to me like a shadow because I was carrying the money for the doctors' fees and travel expenses. The prostitutes' permits would be issued to me on the basis of a power of attorney the madam had given me so I could sign on her behalf.

As soon as I slipped around the corner, I broke into a run, bounded across an empty lot to the main street, and flagged down a hansom cab to the central train station. I found the train bound for Tanta and hopped aboard. I was going back to my village. As I stood near the door, panting, I counted my winnings. Thirty pounds plus a handful of silver riyals—not bad after three years of pimping. I could now purchase a cabriolet and an English horse to drive it, a dozen new Italian shirts, three woolen suits, and two pairs of lace-up shoes from the Sednaouis department store, and I'd still have ten pounds left over. No . . . no need to squander. I could spend a little, put aside two-thirds of the money, and still live in comfort for the next year without having to lift a finger.

The whistle screeched, the iron wheels rumbled on the tracks, and the train began to pick up speed. I looked behind to

see the madam's boy, the tail of his *gallabiya* clenched between his teeth to free his legs, racing like the wind in order to hop on the last car. I grabbed a few of the silver coins from my pocket and aimed them at the boy's head. One of them hit the mark. He slowed down as his eyes widened at the coins rolling zig-zags around him and his ears eagerly picked up their metallic ring. My train moved farther and farther away, and the boy grew smaller and smaller as he bent over to collect the coins, until he shrank to a distant dot that soon vanished.

The night of "the incident" would change my entire life. In fact, I would say that it was then that I was really born. Not much was worth remembering beforehand. My present was fretful and unsettled. My past was a mess. When I rummaged through the attic of childhood memories to feed on, I saw only our cramped and stifling house. Exit from the back door and you walked through an animal pen to a field. Exit from the front door and you hit the main road. Since keeping it open exposed our private lives to passersby, my father ordered it closed during the day.

Images of my sisters when we were young flickered before me. The eldest was a year younger than me, and I was three and a half years older than youngest of the bunch. Through the haze of my memory, I saw them bustling around the house in my mother's wake, like her duck's ducklings. They felt woozy from the humidity, but they obeyed my mother's every order. Except for Zeinab, the youngest. She grumbled, but never stepped beyond that line.

We lived in a village called Fuadiya, on the fringes of the Mahalla Marhoum district, which was near Tanta, the capital of the Tanta governorate. There was nothing to distinguish it from other villages in the Delta: an odd mixture of farmers and effendis, huddles of houses, and endless fields that ran right up to the walls, encircled the buildings, and sometimes snuck between them in narrow snakelike strips.

As my memory moved forward to when I was a bit older, I recalled the one *gallabiya* to my name. It was an exact copy of my father's and I hated it. My socks were full of holes, the smallest large enough for my big toe to peek through. My shirt, which my mother had picked up at the used-clothes market next to Sayyid al-Badawi mosque in Tanta, had faded over the years. I still wore it and had to wait for it to dry after washing. My shoes had come apart at the soles from kicking pebbles as I walked. It was pointless for me to complain because I wouldn't get another pair for another two years. So decreed my father.

At the time of the incident, I was a few months short of twenty. That was according to my mother's reckoning. My ID card disagreed. My father disagreed with both. He called me a useless donkey, as always, and insisted I was the same age as his donkey Hasawi. We were born within a month of each other, putting me at just over twenty-five at the time of the incident, which was after I made my escape from him and before he absconded from Mahalla Marhoum. I'm speaking of my father here, not the donkey, fortunately. Hasawi was useful. People tended to believe my father about my age, because they thought me much older than I really was. That was probably because of my height, build, and fair complexion. My mustache also played a part.

Once, as a child, I asked my father why I was the only white-skinned child in the family. "Go ask your mother. Maybe a British soldier knocked her up," he snarled, reeling from drink.

When I repeated the question, he whacked me in the face, grabbed the closest thing in reach, and hurled it at me. I never asked again. In fact, I lost interest in the reason for my complexion and my true age.

The second time I boarded a train for Cairo, I was on my own and had no responsibilities. Before setting off, I borrowed two and a half pounds from my mother, promising to pay her