

AN ECHO OF
SCANDAL

Laura Madeleine



BLACK SWAN

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*I will mix me a drink of stars,—
Large stars with polychrome needles,
Small stars jetting maroon and crimson,
Cool, quiet, green stars.
I will tear them out of the sky,
And squeeze them over an old silver cup,
And I will pour the cold scorn of my Beloved into it,
So that my drink shall be bubbled with ice.*

—‘Vintage’, Amy Lowell, 1914

BLOOD AND SAND

Take a pony of fresh blood orange juice and another of good Scotch whisky. Add into this the same of Cherry Heering and sweet Italian vermouth. Shake violently enough to break a sweat and strain into a coupe glass. An experience rarely repeated.

Blood and Sand.

It's the name that haunts me. It takes me straight back to that night. Every time I read the recipe, I can't help but imagine another one, written in its place:

Take one girl as ripe as fruit and one man as hard as liquor. Throw them together with sweet words turned rotten and fill them with alcohol until the result is inescapable.

It's the Scotch that does it. After that night, whenever I opened a bottle – however expensive – all I could ever smell was blood.

The Señor was the source of it. The blood had run down the sides of his neck on to the pink flowered rug that had been his gift from Madrid, glistening on the creamy roses before sinking into the pile, as if into sand. His gaze was fixed on the corner of the room. That's where she stood, with her pretty dress spattered and the broken neck of the bottle still clutched in her hand, the jagged edge dark

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with his blood. Droplets of it fell into the Scotch that had pooled around her feet, like vinegar into oil.

I should have spun on my heel and screamed, should have bellowed murder down into the courtyard below. But I didn't. And that was the start of all the trouble for me. It's what brought me here.

I've always suffered because of blood. Right from the start, I was told that the two bloods that made me, rich and poor, shouldn't have been mixed: that they had no business being shaken together and even less business resulting in a child. Some of our customers – like the Señor Ramón Vélez del Olmo who bled out on the rug – called me a mongrel. Most of the girls called me that too, though never to my face.

It was all right for them. They were *of* somewhere. I was of nowhere, except for the inn. Which is why, I suppose, I eventually named myself for the place. *Del Potro*.

The Hostería del Potro stood on one side of a small plaza, where the city had once held horse fairs, back before anyone could remember. It was the centre of my world, the plaza, with its fountain topped by a crumbling stone horse, and its tiled rooftops that butted and jostled one another, a cat's highway down to the river. I knew those roofs and streets as well as my own body, and nowhere better than the hostería, the oldest inn in Córdoba.

I believe I was born there, or at least, was left there soon after. The hostería's flaking plaster walls absorbed the sound of my first cries. The draught through its cracked windows was the breath that soothed my fevers, the groan of its floorboards was a grandmother's voice murmuring a

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lullaby, the clanking of bedposts and the snores of countless men were the familiar sounds of my childhood years.

I had been at the inn longer than anyone, except for Mama Morales. Once, I made the mistake of asking whether *she* was my mama. She had looked at me with such contempt that I knew the truth immediately: I did not belong to people, to mother or father or family. I belonged to the inn, like the cats born in the stable that lived and died too soon amongst the hay.

I sometimes worry it could still get me into trouble, this talk about the inn. But it seems so small now, so distant, after everything else. I'll never go back to Córdoba, and anyway, you already know that *I* didn't kill the man.

It's the rest of it that could be dangerous for me; what came after. The only other person who knew it all is dead and gone. Perhaps – at last – I have kept his secret for long enough. I drowned it at the bottom of cocktail glasses and buried it beneath the scrapings left on silver platters. I tied it with white silk and hid it in plain sight. I held my tongue, kept fifty years of silence. Even he could not have asked me for more.

Of course, if he had, I might have given it. But he is not here, is he?

Perhaps silence is no longer the answer. Perhaps this is a story that should finally be told.

And after all, I have already begun.

Tangier

July 1978

‘Are you sure there’s nothing else? There’s rien? Pour Hackett. H – A – C –’

Metronome steady, the man shook his head.

‘Non.’

‘You’re certain? Vous êtes sur?’

‘Oui, monsieur.’

Sam dropped his chin, staring at the scuffed wooden countertop. The room was dim and sweltering, a fug of cigarettes and the more pungent smoke from joints of kif. It made it hard to concentrate, hard to do the mental arithmetic required. He couldn’t afford a bribe, and anyway, shouldn’t need to give one. He never had before, not for a letter. He stared at his hands. They were not exactly clean, veins standing out from the heat. One of the cuffs was stained with tar from some boat or beach or railing.

‘S’il vous plaît,’ he said again to the man at the counter, ‘could you double-check? Hackett, Samuel? There should be something.’

The man gave him a look, between irritated and perplexed. He called over his shoulder into the main postal

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office, beyond the honeycomb of wooden pigeonholes. Sam waited. The official turned to the next customer, and was soon arguing over a handful of papers. The post office was full, as always. There never seemed to be enough time during opening hours for the workers to be anything other than harassed. He leaned on the counter, feeling sweat trickle down his neck. An electric fan whirred above, doing nothing to cool the air. On the other side of him, a man wearing a long striped djellaba began to roll a cigarette.

‘Aquete?’

The word was repeated several times until he realized it was his name, the consonants strange and full of angles. A postal worker was holding something small and pale blue.

‘Yes.’ He moved so quickly the man in the djellaba flinched. ‘Yes, Hackett, over here.’

The letter was thin, flimsy as carbon paper. A miracle it had made it across a vast ocean in one piece. He moved aside and tore at the red-and-blue chevron edges, opening it carefully to catch . . .

Nothing. Just one sheet of airmail paper and his mother’s handwriting in thick ballpoint.

‘Monsieur,’ he called. ‘Are you sure there is not . . .?’

His eyes caught a word, the shape of an *s* followed by a tightness of *r*’s and a blunt-tailed *y*.

Sorry.

He closed his mouth. No one had heard him anyway.

The post office was in the new town, all dust and fumes from motorbikes and restaurant kitchens, the light coming

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off the buildings in a flat slap. He ducked into the shade of a doorway.

Your father and I have agreed. Your return fare will be covered. We will pay for a one-way ticket home and arrange for you to collect it from a reputable travel bureau. But there will be no more money. I'm sorry, Sam, this is for the best. We've been more than fair.

He didn't take in the rest of the letter. Something about a vacation in Cape Cod and Steven moving to a new office, and the prospect of a job for him in a local printing firm. He could see his mother now, sitting at her dressing table, slippered feet neatly crossed, pressing each letter deliberately into the thin paper, while the TV warbled distantly through the rug, and his father sucked and sucked at his pipe. He crumpled the letter carelessly and shoved it into his shirt pocket, alongside the empty packet of cigarettes.

When he stepped out on to the pavement, the sun hit him like a sheet of aluminium. Not eleven a.m. and already baking. He kept his head down. The shades he'd bought in London were gone, pawned to Abdelhamid to help pay last week's rent. He squinted, feeling a headache coming. Probably dehydration and heat and noise and the knowledge he was one hundred per cent screwed.

He swore and kicked at an empty can. It spewed out something sticky as it clattered away, soaking the toe of his espadrille. He swore again, only for a passing woman to give him a faintly disgusted look and pull her scarf a little higher over her face.

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He turned and headed up the Avenue Pasteur. It was a main artery of the city, where life teemed hot, pushing itself up from the docks, hurtling around the Grand Socco before breaking off and draining through the thread veins of the casbah, back into the bay. There, ships floated, like torn white paper on a poster of livid blue.

His headache would only grow worse in the sun. At the top of the avenue, he made a dash between vehicles, leaping the last few feet to avoid a taxi that was pulling away from the kerb. He stepped beneath the awning of Gran Café de Paris with relief.

Something soothing about the Gran Café. Perhaps because it looked as though it hadn't changed for fifty years, with its cork-tiled walls and vinyl banquettes, all in shades of brown. Sam slid into a seat opposite the mirrored wall, where he could watch the café come and go. It was cooler inside, a little, the air soft with the hum of talk and coffee and cigarettes. He breathed deeply, trying to pull some of the nicotine into his own lungs. The waiters moved from table to table, wearing their old burgundy jackets, despite the heat.

'Café, shukran,' he ordered automatically, before immediately thinking better of it. The coffee would hit his empty stomach like acid, and wouldn't help his headache any. But the waiter was already gone. What he wouldn't give for a cold beer. Not likely. The bars that sold it wouldn't be open yet and anyway . . .

He pulled the remaining dirhams from his pockets and counted them out on to the table. Twenty-nine. And his rent for the week was twenty-five. It had seemed cheap when he first arrived. Now he could barely pay it and eat.

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The coffee arrived. Another dirham he didn't have any longer. He gulped down the glass of water that came with it, and began to stir sugar into the coffee. Three lumps, four. Might as well get his money's worth.

No more money. And twenty-nine dirhams. He'd have to avoid Madame Sarah, whatever happened. She was already suspicious of him, after last week. He stirred mechanically, running through an inventory of his belongings. Another shirt, in a worse state. Underpants, the jeans he was wearing. A couple of dog-eared pulp novels, too cheap to fetch anything. His boots: sturdy leather, a gift from his parents several years back, they could be pawned . . . No, one of them had been lost in Cádiz, in a scramble on the beach. He returned to stirring. There was only one thing of value left, and the idea of seeing it disappear into the depths of the medina was too painful to contemplate. Yet it was that, or home. And he was not ready for home.

He took a sip of the coffee. It was disgustingly sweet.

Across from him, two well-dressed elderly men were eating pastries. They unfolded the paper bags with care, exclaiming over the flaky, buttery goods. Sam couldn't help but smile. He'd seen them in here before. It was a daily ritual of theirs: coffee and pastries and talk of the old days at the Gran Café de Paris.

He stopped trying to drink the coffee and sat back. As far as he could tell, he was the only American. He stared into the mirror, taking in the occupied tables, the backs of people's heads, but apart from the two elderly ex-pats, everyone looked Moroccan, or at least was speaking French or Darija. When he'd imagined Tangier, he'd pictured

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groups of people like him, talking in the cafés by day, watching life hustle past, drinking by night and smoking kif on the rooftop of some riad, making love and art fuelled by cheap living and the distance from home. He'd heard stories of how it had been for others, not so many years ago: how they'd slept peacefully on the streets of the casbah wrapped in berber blankets, cooking tagines on gas stoves and washing in the fountains, all for free.

Not any more. Picking up the glass, he downed the rest of the coffee with a grimace, and rose to leave. Twenty-eight dirhams. Perhaps Madame Sarah would let him pay for half a week, until he could figure something out. He was almost out of the door and bracing himself for the heat when he heard a voice, the words snatching at his attention:

'Mais, look, c'est suffit, no? There!'

The speaker sounded British, with a terrible French accent. Looking back into the café, he saw one of the younger waiters standing over a man in the far corner, someone with a blur of reddish-blond hair. Sam couldn't help himself. He stepped back into the café, trying to look casual.

'...simply refuse to believe,' the agitated voice continued, 'that this is not enough money. I demand to see the manager!'

Rounding the central island of banquettes, Sam was able to see the person at last. Young and filmed with sweat, in a beige checked jacket and a tie. *New arrival*, the pale face and shiny leather shoes screamed. A moment later, the young man caught his eye.

'Oh,' he half rose out of his chair, 'excuse me, do you speak English?'

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Sam managed to keep most of a smile from his face. 'Sure do,' he said, glancing at the waiter. 'What's up?'

The two of them began speaking at once, the waiter pointing to the young man's empty coffee cup in frustration and exclaiming in Darija, and the young man holding up his wallet.

'It's not on!' he said loudly. 'I refuse to believe that a cup of coffee is more than fifty dirhams, he's trying to stiff me!'

Sam couldn't help but stare. The young man's wallet was stuffed with banknotes. And he was waving fifty dirhams around as if it were a handkerchief. No wonder the waiter was looking pained.

'He isn't trying to stiff you,' Sam said, holding a hand up to the waiter to show that he would explain. 'It's just that a coffee is *one* dirham.' He pointed to the note. 'He's telling you he doesn't have change for that. Haven't you got anything smaller?'

The young man flushed, right up to his eyes. 'Oh.' He stared at the note in his hand. 'Well then, why didn't he say? I know a bit of French. He could have told me. I thought they all spoke it here?'

Sam shrugged. 'Spanish, more likely. Do you have anything smaller?'

'What? Oh. No, I don't. This is it. Just came from the bank, you see.' He stared down into the wallet, as if it would magically sprout small change. 'I don't suppose he'd accept pounds?'

Sam grimaced. He already regretted coming over, but then again, there was that wallet . . .

'Here,' he said, pulling a few santimat from his pocket. 'Let me.'

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‘I couldn’t possibly . . .’ the young man began to protest, but Sam had already dropped the coins on to the waiter’s tray. The waiter nodded to him before walking off, rolling his eyes and shouting to a co-worker near the kitchens.

‘That was very decent of you,’ the young man said, collecting a leather briefcase. It seemed he wanted to be out of the café as fast as possible. ‘I can pay you back.’

‘It’s only a dirham,’ Sam murmured. *Twenty-seven*, he thought bleakly.

‘Nonsense. I’ll pay you back right now, if you come with me to my hotel. It’s just down the road. Surely *they* will have change.’

Stepping out of the café was like diving into a pool of colour and smell and noise. Sam sometimes felt as if he was swimming, when he walked the streets during the day, coming up for air when he stepped into a café or a bar or up to a rooftop. It was different at night, of course. But in the day, the city seethed. He watched the young Englishman sweating in his suit as they walked. The man’s eyes kept darting everywhere, from the stray cat that washed itself at the edge of the kerb, to the old woman crouched in a doorway, her hands pushed out to them, her face creased by the world.

Did I look like him? Sam wondered. *That mix of panic and concentration, all out of rhythm with the street?* Probably, he thought. Amazing what a couple of months could do.

‘I’m Ellis, by the way.’ The young man was holding out a hand. ‘Ellis Norton.’

‘Sam Hackett.’ He shook quickly, conscious of the dirt beneath his nails. ‘You’re British?’

‘Yes.’ The man sounded breathless. ‘Arrived from London last night. You’re American?’

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‘Got it in one.’

‘You seem to know your way around,’ Norton said, ducking past a group of women laden with shopping. ‘How long have you been in this hellhole?’

‘Here? A few months. Two, nearly three, I guess. I’ve lost track.’

‘I hope I get used to it.’ Norton stopped on the street, where two potted palms flanked a recessed door. ‘Well, this is me. Come in and I’ll get you that change.’ He glanced inside. ‘Actually, there’s a bar here too. Let me buy you something stronger, to say thanks.’

Sam stared at him, then beyond into the dark lobby, where a uniformed bellhop waited. The El Minzah was one of the good hotels. He shifted in the sticky espadrilles.

‘I’m not exactly dressed for it.’

For the first time, Norton seemed to look at him properly, eyes roaming from the tangled hair brushing his shoulders, to his jeans. ‘I’m sure that won’t matter,’ he said uncertainly. Then his eyes brightened. ‘Here,’ he said, loosening his tie and passing it over. ‘They won’t say a thing if you’re wearing that.’

Sam dropped the loop of fabric over his head, feeling stupid, knowing that he looked it too. *The man must be desperate for company*, he thought. *About as desperate as I am for a proper drink.*

He followed Norton into the lobby, trying not to duck his head. Inside, it was quiet, marble-cool. A record was playing somewhere, soft jazz. For a second the lobby and the streets seemed to curdle around him, like milk and orange. Norton was sighing in what sounded like relief, walking up a short flight of steps, and Sam had to follow.

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He'd heard of the bar at the El Minzah, but had never been in. Too expensive. Not his scene. Ahead, he saw a cavernous space, where red carpets made the air drowsy with dust, barely disturbed by a breeze, despite the open windows. It was empty, except for a pair of older women who sat stiffly on a sofa, small glasses before them. It wasn't yet noon.

'God,' said Norton, dropping into a chair. 'What a day.'

Sam followed suit. He had the odd feeling that he had tripped, somewhere on his way up the Avenue Pasteur, and had fallen into a different reality. It was all too strange; Norton and his fat wallet, the stuffy bar with its promise of booze. What if the man was a fake and wanted something from him? He watched as Norton craned around to summon a waiter, and decided that he didn't have the energy to care, not for an hour. Perhaps in that time, he'd work up the courage to ask about borrowing a few dirhams.

'What'll you have?' Norton said, shucking off his jacket.

'I don't know.' Sam's head felt light from the coffee and the sugar and the lack of nicotine. 'Are the beers cold here?'

'No idea, but I'm having a whisky soda. Want one of those?'

Sam nodded. He'd never have ordered one himself.

'Two whisky sodas,' Norton told the waiter.

The waiter nodded blandly, and went away. Sam was just beginning to feel uncomfortable when Norton took out a packet of cigarettes. He accepted one eagerly.

'So,' Norton asked, settling back in his chair. 'What brings you to Tangiers?'

His manner had changed entirely. Gone was the flustered youth, the anxiety. Here, he was at home. *Old money*, Sam thought. You could hear it in the way he said *Tangiers* the

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old-fashioned way, with an s, as if the city was more than itself, as if it was somehow plural. He took a drag on the cigarette, wondering how to answer Norton's question. To someone else he might have said: 'Just to be', or 'Just the road', but those kinds of answers would sound ridiculous, here.

'I'm a writer,' he said cautiously.

The man's eyes widened. 'No, really? But so am I.' He reached for his jacket, and pulled out a card.

ELLIS NORTON
JUNIOR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT
INTERPRESS

'This is my first job out,' he said, watching with obvious pride as Sam read the card. 'I wanted one of the bureaux in Paris or Rome, but then everybody does. A year in the trenches, they said, and I can move on to somewhere more civilized.'

Sam made a vague noise and offered the card back.

'Keep it –' Norton waved '– in case you want to get in touch.'

Sam pocketed it. He couldn't imagine a world where he and Norton were regular drinking buddies, but then, being an ex-pat did strange things to people.

The whiskies and sodas arrived. Norton took a sip of his, then downed it, almost before the waiter had finished laying a napkin before Sam. 'Bring another couple, would you?' he said.

Unperturbed, the waiter nodded. He was obviously used to such behaviour. Sam took a sip of the drink. The whisky was strong, almost shocking, softened by the mineral dash

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of soda. There was something illicit about it, drunk on an empty stomach. A shiver ran down the back of his neck. It felt wonderful.

‘What do you write then?’ Norton was asking. ‘Don’t say you’re a journo too.’

‘No, I was never quick enough for that.’ He spun the ashtray a few times. ‘I’m writing a novel,’ he admitted.

‘A novel! A Great American one?’

Sam laughed. ‘I doubt it.’

‘Are you published?’

‘A few short stories.’ He concentrated on his cigarette. He wasn’t about to confess that the last time he’d sold anything was more than a year ago, and for a pittance. ‘I’ve been travelling, mostly. France, Spain, England. As research.’

That got Norton talking about his travels in Italy and Switzerland, the summer he’d spent in the south of France. Sam nodded along, finishing the first drink and starting work on the second, which disappeared far too quickly. He was starting to feel quite drunk.

‘One more?’ Norton asked, checking his watch. ‘I’ve got to find my way to the damn office, but that can wait until this afternoon. I’m told everyone lunches like the French, here.’

‘All right,’ Sam said, accepting another cigarette. He was beginning to like Norton more. It was easy to let the chatter wash over him.

‘Must say, I’m glad I bumped into you,’ Norton said, when the third glasses were empty. ‘This has done me the world of good. I was feeling wretched in that café. But you can give me the lay of the land here, can’t you? Be my Dante through the inferno?’

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‘Sure,’ Sam said, feeling a warm glow of booze and superiority. ‘There’s a little bar where ex-pats meet, I can take you there.’

‘You’re a pal.’ Norton pushed back his chair and fished the wallet from his jacket. ‘Must use the gents. Here, pay the waiter if he comes by.’ He handed over the fifty dirhams. ‘Shouldn’t be a problem this time, eh?’

Sam held the note in front of him as Norton hurried off towards the lavatories. The man was crazy, he had to be. There was nothing to stop Sam from pocketing the money and walking nonchalantly out of the door, never to be seen again. That much money would buy him another two weeks. His hand twitched towards his shirt pocket. If he was careful . . .

His hand fell back to the table. Norton might be an idiot, but he was a generous idiot. And Tangier was a small place. He sighed, and called the waiter over.