

## Chapter 17

A Volkswagen van skidded to a stop in the gravel parking lot. “Are you okay?” the driver called out in French, bounding from his seat. “I say, Paul, are you okay?” he asked, this time in British-accented English.

“Not really,” Paul replied, motioning toward Steven who was rising from his resting place in a tree’s deep shade. “This is my brother Steven.”

“Bernard Rochelle,” the driver presented himself, his bespectacled eyes still fixed on Paul. “Pleased to meet you.”

Steven reached out to shake hands but caught only the other man’s fingertips. “They wouldn’t let us in the hotel,” Steven declared.

“Oh, no?” Bernard replied, glancing into the van’s side-view mirror and realigning his thinning, longish hair. “Into the car, please, both of you.” He used a monogrammed handkerchief to wipe clean the lenses in his eyeglass’ narrow, tortoiseshell frames. “In, in, in!”

Paul stashed his cardboard portfolio behind the front bench and then took the passenger seat; Steven settled in the lone bucket seat in the rear interior, which was equipped with a platform for sleeping, a fold-up table for dining, a mini-fridge, a stove top, and a commode.

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“We were treated like common criminals,” Steven blurted out.

“You relax now,” Bernard stated. “Tell your brother to relax,” he added, leaning in Paul’s direction and removing a silver cigarette case from his pebble-grained leather vest while twisting around to offer Steven one of the filter-tips. “You prefer we speak French or English, guy?”

“Either,” Steven answered, waving off the cigarettes. He was confused by the joviality of their self-assured host and distraught over his own appearance, which his cold-water wash-up in the campground’s bathhouse had done little to improve. “French or English. No, English, I guess,” he stammered. “Either or.”

“English it is,” Bernard declared, swiveling back about and directing the butane flame off his pencil-thin lighter toward the end of his cigarette. “You seem to have forgotten how to speak at all,” he said, lowering his voice while darting sideways glances toward Paul. “Where the devil have you been? I thought I’d never hear from you.”

Steven waited to hear what might be whispered up front but, in the absence of any response from his younger brother, Steven spoke up: “The staff at the resort, the security guards and all, they wouldn’t let us in. We could have checked in and cleaned up. We could have paid for our meals and a room, but they didn’t give us a chance.”

“No?” Bernard grinned. “Let’s see if we can’t get into El Maghrebi for a little drink, okay? I know how to treat these people. You’ll get that meal,” he concluded and switched on the ignition.

Steven was puzzled by the excessive energy with which the

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driver revved the engine and worked the disengaged stick shift on the floor. He checked the front windshield's rearview mirror and, momentarily undetected, studied the fox-like features of Bernard's face: a fall of light brown hair from a slightly balding scalp framed a hooked nose and high cheekbones. Bernard's gaze met his. "You mean you're taking us back up there?" Steven inquired, apologetically averting his eyes.

"That's what I mean, guy. On one condition," he added, double-clutching as he steered the van out of the dead-end lot. "You stay at Bernard's house tonight."

Annoyed by his younger brother's absolute silence, Steven cleared his throat: "Sounds good to me."

"Very good," Bernard summarized. "Very, very good."

Returning to the resort seemed inopportune to Steven, yet within minutes the doorman was guiding the three of them through the lobby. Afternoon drinks in hand, from their chairs set round an unlit, open-sided fire pit centered in an underpopulated lounge, half a dozen guests stared as the trio was ushered through a pair of upholstered swinging doors and invited to sit at a card table from which the doorman cleared newspapers and other debris. "That's all," Bernard declared, dismissing the man with a large bill from his silver money clip; the man nodded and left the employee break area. He was instantly replaced by the bartender bringing in three tumblers and a bottle of Scotch. Bernard took hold of the bottle and broke the seal. "That's all," he said. "No, wait. Mineral water for him," he added, nodding toward Paul.

"Excuse me," Steven interjected. "Water for me, too, please."

"This one, too," Bernard said.

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With a bow, the man accepted several bills and exited through the swinging doors. Bernard unceremoniously swallowed down a dollop of whiskey and wasted no time pouring himself a second, which he likewise tossed back. “Walk on two legs, guys,” he said, lifting his empty glass toward the brothers before pouring himself a third serving.

After promptly delivering two bottles of mineral water, a junior waiter stayed on, standing at attention, notepad in hand.

“What would you like to eat, guys?” Bernard asked, leisurely crossing his wide-welt corduroy pant leg and lighting up a cigarette.

“Can I get some eggs and toast?” Steven essayed.

“That’s it, that’s it,” Bernard said. “An omelet?”

“Sure, an omelet. Say, do they have cold beer?”

“If you say so, guy,” Bernard said, smiling broadly and reaching out to pat the back of Steven’s hand. “Tell the boy what you like. Anything at all,” he added before leaning to share a private word with Paul, who had angled his chair away from the table.

After Steven had rattled off his wish list, Paul placed his order, and Bernard passed the waiter some bills. “Let’s hope they have everything he says they have,” Bernard commented, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Now what happened to you two? Let’s hear it all.”

Paul rose up without a word and walked away, disappearing into a bathroom located down a corridor lined with dry foodstuffs stacked from ceiling to floor. Bernard frowned, drank, smiled, and then used both pointer fingers to secure several locks of his wispy hair back behind his ears. “Paul’s big brother, what a surprise! You don’t know what this is for me,” he

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stated, blinking rapidly. “Why don’t you tell me what happened? Where the devil have you—oh, hello, *bouteilles!*” Bernard sang out, cheered by the sight of two flasks of lager ale and two chilled glass steins carried in by an evidently nervous busboy. The young teen flipped off the ceramic stoppers and started sloppily pouring the beer; Bernard stopped him, slipped some coins into his hand, and sent the boy off with a light pat on his hip. Once he had poured the beer, he slid a mug Steven’s way, clinked glasses, and lifted his own in a silent toast; after wiping the foam from his lips, he lit another cigarette. “Come on, come on, tell me.”

Between sips of beer, Steven first explained the grave premise of his rescue mission and then described the general conditions in and around Abdul’s mountainside compound. Elbows propped on the wobbly table and chin cupped in his palms, Bernard listened, alternately nipping at his whiskey and swigging at his beer. When Steven related the constant threat of physical harm at the hands the Shluh, Bernard exploded: “But these are animals!” he interrupted. “Animals to avoid!”

“We had no choice,” Steven protested. “They always seemed hostile. At least they never got a shot off, when they were really after us. But it seemed like the next thing on their minds.”

“They have no minds!’ Bernard exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “That’s just the way it is, guy.” He paused, his lips pursed, sucking on his cigarette. “But what about Paul? Please, tell me what he was doing when you found him? Was he ... alone?”

“I can’t say,” Steven replied, alarmed by Bernard’s intensity. “To tell you the truth, I don’t really know what he was doing up there.” Steven commented that his half brother’s sojourn on the mountainside had at least resulted in a portfolio of work produced fresh in the field: hopefully, there were artistic

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developments worth saving.

“His work is genius! No question about it,” Bernard declaimed, gesticulating as if he were addressing a larger audience. “Just genius! But this we know. *Artistes* like Paul, vagabonding about with the Berbers? No, no, his work is brilliant. Brilliant!” he insisted. Dropping the names of a French art dealer and a Parisian gallery owner with whom he seemed conversant, Bernard expressed his eagerness to get a look at Paul’s latest material.

Steven did not feel comfortable enough—given Bernard’s excessive enthusiasm about Paul’s art—to confide that, in all truth, he hoped that Paul’s talent could be channeled into the sort of illustration capable of being free-lanced on the magazine and art book market in North America and abroad.

“But he does not look well,” Bernard brooded aloud. “How is he? Paul is ... how is Paul?” Bernard sputtered and then downed the last of his ale.

“I don’t know,” Steven answered vaguely and drank his beer, wondering what their self-assigned protector was about.

Paul reappeared and resumed his place at the table. Exasperated by his younger brother’s silent withdrawal, Steven allotted himself half an ounce of whiskey and bolted it down, savoring the rough shudder of the alcohol’s heat rippling down his throat and into his empty stomach. Uneasy with the ambiguous connection between Paul and the over-excitabile Bernard, he finally broke the silence: “What about you?” he asked Bernard. “I don’t know anything about you, except that you speak French and English and probably Arabic, too. And you’re driving a rather specialized 1966 Volkswagen van.”

“That belongs to the past,” Bernard replied. “I don’t know

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even if it is mine.”

“Oh? Well, it’s nice anyway,” Steven countered. “Is it for trekking out in the desert or something?”

“It was for traveling, on the road, on the circuit. But you really don’t want to know the rest, guy. Listen,” he said, changing subjects. “Tonight the Langdon boys will bathe and sleep in complete comfort at my place in Modagar.

Steven tried getting Paul’s attention; he wanted help positioning them for a gracious yet timely exit from such an open-ended invitation. Paul did not notice or take the cue and remained angled away from the table in utter stillness.

“Thank you,” Steven said, overlooking the surname Bernard had mistakenly applied.

“And you will stay chez Bernard as long as you like.”

“Thanks.”

“The pleasure will be mine,” Bernard replied.

The waiter served Steven’s breakfast plate—complete with an assortment of condiments, olives, spices, and fresh herbs—and Paul’s simpler fare: a baguette, cheese, sliced white onions, and diced tomatoes smothered in oil.

“Thanks a lot, Bernard,” Steven declared, picking up his silverware. “This looks great!”

“Listen, guys,” Bernard announced, upending his whiskey glass. “There is room for everyone. We’ll buy clothes! We’ll have fun! Stay with me, please. The pleasure will be mine. You will see.”

“But we do have family business back in New York,” Steven asserted. “And just as soon as possible. Right, Paul?”

Steven hoped that his brother would now, of his own accord, at least say something in response to their host’s overly-

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expansive proposal; Paul sat focused on his food and didn't flinch when Bernard reached across to spread a linen napkin over the two badly-skinned kneecaps showing through Paul's torn pants.

"The pleasure will be mine," Bernard repeated, holding an empty, water-beaded stein against his hollow cheek and watching them eat. "You're going to see."

Steven feigned a smile, but he was wrestling with the inexact nature of Paul's relationship with this strange man acting as if he owned El Maghrebi if not the whole of Sidi-Quali.

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Gloved hands on the steering wheel, Bernard pulled the van's tail end out of yet another curve on the twisting, two-lane coastal road.

"Bernard! Take it a little slower, come on," Steven suggested from his position up front; Paul now occupied the rear bucket seat, where he used his knees to keep his cardboard portfolio secured against the back of the front bench.

Bernard decelerated, yet when the van entered the next S-curve, the rear end slid into a skid so severe that, as the vehicle threatened to weave out of control, he opted to abandon the paved roadway altogether and momentarily cut across the dirt before easing the bouncing chassis back onto the pavement.

"Bernard!" Steven shouted. "That was crazy!"

A whitewashed wall rose up on the passenger side and a roadside restaurant-inn immediately came into view. Popping pedals, sliding to a halt on the pebbled surface, Bernard parked, killed the ignition, and yanked on the emergency brake.

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“What are you trying to prove?” Steven exclaimed, releasing the dashboard’s grip bar.

“Come on, guy!” Bernard snickered, tossing off his gloves. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” Steven whispered to Paul as they got out of the van. “Do you?”

Inside the lobby of the Relais Louis Gentil, they were greeted by a late middle-aged French proprietress who looked aghast at the two Americans until Bernard presented his money clip in full view and asked if she had a quiet table somewhere out of the way. Before she could resist, he was pressing bills into the interlaced fingers of her hands, which remained twisted at the wrists in her obvious dismay. Avoiding the main dining room, she sped them along a wall of sliding glass doors giving onto a terrace overlooking an inlet of rock and surf. She directed a kitchen worker to set a narrow table with three paper place mats, and she stopped wringing her hands long enough to light the candle inside a wicker-wrapped glass globe. Concealed from view, they occupied a secluded alcove from which the voices of the other parties could only faintly be heard. Along with the hostess, Bernard disappeared through the kitchen doors.

Steven squared his chair off opposite Paul’s. “Okay, start talking. Where did you meet this guy? He’s dangerous!”

“Hitchhiking.”

“Hitchhiking? In Morocco? That’s dangerous, too, but okay, so you met him hitchhiking. How did you get to know him?”

“He helped me out.”

“He helped you out,” Steven echoed.

“He set me up a studio at his beach house.”

“A studio?”

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“Yes, a studio, Steven!” Paul’s voice rose above its previous hush. “I lived and worked there free for a couple of months, okay? More than a couple of months.”

“Before you went up to the mountains?”

“Right. He supports my art completely, Steven.”

“Oh, right! Bernard Rochelle, refined patron of the arts!” Steven guffawed. “He’s a fucking maniac at the wheel, Paul! Bernie the benefactor!” He paused, took a breath, and muffled the volume of his voice. “So, how come he wants to help you so much?” Steven hesitated to voice aloud his own deduction: that his half brother’s experiment in international living had extended into sexual intimacies with this older man. “Well, how come?”

“He wanted to sleep with me,” Paul stated.

“I thought so, I thought so,” Steven said. “Well? Did you have sex with him?”

Paul got up, faced the glass wall, and turned his head from side to side, as if he were surveying the patio’s blue-and-gray flagstones, simply saying no, or was mesmerized by the rhythmic flapping of a canvas tarp coming loose from the stacked deck chairs toward which he stared.

“Okay, you don’t have to answer that,” Steven said. “Let’s not let this get out of control. Whether you had sex with him or not, I mean. I don’t have to know the details.”

“Don’t,” Paul said, cracking open the jamb between two sliding glass doors.

“Don’t what? I can barely hear you.”

“Don’t tell me and I won’t tell you.”

“What do you mean? Close that door. What are you saying, Paul?”

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“I’m saying, Steve,” Paul replied, turning to face his older brother. “Don’t tell me about your sex life, and I won’t tell you about mine. I’m not ready, and I don’t want to.” He spun around, slid open the doors, stepped outside, and brought the metal frames behind him to a close.

First, there had been Jean-Yves and now Bernard. What about Didier? Steven moaned, cradling his forehead in his open hands. Did he have to sort out whatever sense was to be made of this conclusive evidence of his half brother’s recklessness? Why did he have to carry the burden of these revelations of Paul’s radical coming-of-age? Hadn’t he, Steven thought, devoted his own young-adult life to tendering roots down into the soil of a stable marriage and a promising career? Weren’t his marriage and career both growing into a future as hopeful as the child swelling toward new life within Peggy’s womb? Yet all this time, Paul had been off pursuing his bliss, drowning himself in situations as far afield as possible from those prescribed by his own personal background and his class. Even Robert McGuire would never have imagined his disowned son capable of such behavior, which—if he were ever to find out—he would curse as depraved and perverse. But, Steven wondered, would anyone else in the family ever have to find out? What would he tell their mother, or Aunt Eleanor, or even his own wife? He vowed that Peggy’s parents would never find out. Certainly no one at the college had to know. For that matter, as far as he was concerned, he could let Paul act out his homosexual tendencies now and forever: if he kept them hidden from Audrey McGuire, she might die in peace, or at least without having to deal with this latest proof of her second son’s abnormal extremes. Aunt Eleanor’s response was of no consequence; she would forgive Paul any new twist