

When the Siren Calls

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Praise for “When the Siren Calls”

*“A very well-conceived story with interesting
characters and a tantalizing pace. I couldn’t ask for
more than that.” - Jennifer Custer, Literary Agent,
A.M. Heath*

*“...A story that promises to titilate the senses. A
sexually-unfulfilled wife in a tricky situation and a
handsome stranger coming to her rescue in exotic,
dangerous Marrakech.” - Alana Woods, author,
Imbroglia*

*“Wow- Lady Chatterley meets Christian Grey.” -
Stephanie J Hale, author, ‘Millionaire Women,
Millionaire You.’*

*“ A pacy, racy, romance novel that simultaneously
feels like a critique of a particular social scene.” -
Tom Fletcher, author, ‘The Leaping’*

*“If ‘humourotica’ is a genre then Tom Barry is its
king; if it does not yet exist then he is its creator.” -
Book Connoisseur.*

"I thoroughly enjoyed the way the strands come together as the novel pushes towards climax. -

Matthew Branton, author, 'The Love Parade'.

"I loved this book! I am recommending it to all my friends who love smart, sensual stories with twists that keep you guessing." - Erin Potter, Shamrock Editing.

"This story grabs you by the throat from the start. The opening scene is every woman's nightmare."

Kathleen Patel, Amazon Books.

Chapter One

Grasping hands tore at Isobel's clothing and scraped her skin as she forced her way forward. She swung round to face the seething pack, the speed of her movement causing her handbag – too oversized, too glittering for these dusty lanes- to sweep with her in a defensive arc.

"Go away, allez, allez!" she shouted, trying to sound authoritative as the street urchins began to melt away into the corners.

Her limbs freed from the pressing bodies, she wove deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of endless, identical alleyways, slipping between the sacks and the stalls with an almost serpentine ease that masked her increasing panic. It felt that every eye were upon her, eyes shrouded by swathes of headgear or set within sun-dried faces, all disapproving, some accusing. And every turn revealed idle and cocky gangs of youths who straddled their cycles, observing her distress with knowing smirks.

Isobel looked for an opening, any way out that might lead her back to the square and return her to some kind of safety and normality. But every likely exit from this terrible maze was blocked with the knee-high beggars that had followed the scent of her like sharks, ever since she had taken pity on a tiny girl who, with swimming eyes, had pleaded her for a dirham. But as they closed in to encircle her, there were no more pleas, only orders–

'You give dirhams!' they called at her, chanting their certainty like a mantra.

'Yes dirhams!' she cried in a sudden and reckless change of tack. 'Dirhams for whoever can show me the way back to the square.'

She pulled a single note from her purse and waved it before the outstretched hands. But the sight of money only fed the frenzy and the chorus of orphaned voices grew louder and more demanding, as ragged forms crashed against her legs like waves hitting a rock and threatened to topple her with their combined force.

A barking voice cut through the air and her pursuers leapt back as if scalded. The sound of a wicker cane smacking against flesh was followed by

shrieks of pain and the startled waifs scattered like stray cats. Isobel turned towards her saviour, overwhelmed by gratitude and close to tears. She guessed he was in his mid-forties, unmistakably Arabic, clean-shaven, and smartly dressed in Western clothes, his polo sporting one of the many designer labels that seemed to adorn even the cheapest t-shirts.

"They mean no harm, the children," said the man. "Do not think badly of them, perhaps they already saw you were a kind woman? The children, they see it in the face, if you are kind. So you must be very kind to attract so many children."

"Thank you," said Isobel, her breathing easing, "but I think it was the few coins I gave a little girl for sweets that was my mistake."

"A mistake perhaps, but also the sign of a good heart, no?"

Isobel smiled at the compliment.

"You wish to go to the square I think?" asked the man.

"Yes, yes, I do. Is it near?"

"If you know where it is, it is near, if not..." the man shrugged, "if not it can be very, very far. Perhaps you will let me show you the way. No one will bother you if you are not alone."

Isobel hesitated. "If you are sure you don't mind. I said I would meet my husband there."

The man motioned toward the space behind the open shutters. "Please, wait inside for a few moments. I must get my son for he will mind the store. Please, this way, just a few moments."

Isobel idly perused the wares as she waited. Her appetite for shopping, if she ever had one, was exhausted. The glimmering trinkets in her bags were useless trifles, bought to justify her headstrong decision to come to the souk alone, a means to make her point to Peter when she returned. She checked her watch. It was clear that "a few moments" meant something other than what the words implied. Still, this was Marrakech, where life still seemed to follow the movement of the sun rather than the hands of the clock. She brushed her fingers along the reams of intricately adorned fabric with their brilliant shades of orange and blue, savouring the space around her and revelling in the silence broken only by the whining of mosquitoes around the turquoise lamp that was suspended from the ceiling like a pale moon.

Isobel noticed the lengthening shadows, and looked again at her wrist. There was a limit to how long a good deed could be considered a debt. She put aside the cloth she was admiring; she would just have to make her own way to the square. She was confident that her journey from the square had been upward, so the way back must be downward. As she pulled down her sunglasses like a visor to signal that no eye contact would be entertained, the silence was ruptured by the man's voice; he had returned – a twenty-year-old version of himself in tow.

"I am sorry to keep you, kind lady, but my son, he must close his shop, and before he can close it he must put away his fruit. This is my son, Sharif, and I am Ali."

Isobel turned to the young man. Putting away his fruit must also have involved boiling the kettle, as he carried a silver tray with a long, curve-spouted silver pot and three glasses hardly bigger than egg cups.

"Please let me offer you a refreshment," said the older man, "it is our tradition and you are an honored guest."

Sharif was dressed similarly to his father, except where the older man's shirt bore the emblem of a crocodile, his son's bore that of a prancing horse.

"You are in Marrakech for holiday?" asked Ali, who was clearly the talker of the two.

"Just the weekend."

"So short, so little time. You must not think that all of Marrakech is like the souk, that everyone is like the hungry children. You must return soon. We have much history, beautiful architecture, white, sandy beaches. And you will find the Moroccan people very friendly, very welcoming. It is our tradition. I must give you something, a present, to remind you of Morocco."

"Really," said Isobel, keen to bring matters to a close, "you have been too kind already."

"Sharif, a little gift for the lovely lady."

Sharif seemed to have anticipated his father's command. He stepped forward, a ring-sized jewellery box between thumb and forefinger.

"It is only a trinket, of no real value to some, but precious to others."

Sharif opened the box to reveal a blue ceramic pendant on a silver chain. Isobel smiled and began to say thank you but was cut short by arms encircling her neck.

"Sharif will put it on for you, it is tradition," proclaimed the older man.

The young man's hands travelled swiftly behind Isobel's neck. For what seemed a long time, he stood in front of her, their bodies less than a foot apart, his forearms brushing her shoulders as his fingers worked behind her neck to secure the clasp. Isobel felt the cool stone resting in her cleavage, visible at the opened top of her blouse. She fingered the pendant as she tried to ensure it rested on closed linen.

"I wish that my gift keeps you safe from the evil eye, and that it brings you back to Marrakech," said Ali, as Sharif retreated to the doorway. "But you must also choose something from my shop that you wish to have, something to wear perhaps. I have beautiful cotton and silk blouses. Kaftans also. You choose."

Isobel wanted to say that the rescue, the tea, the pendant, and the promised escort to the square were more than enough to bring her back to Morocco, but the need to repay a kindness weighed heavier than the need to get away.

"This way," said Ali, seizing on her hesitation and taking her arm, "you must see my special cloth, the cloth I must keep out of the sun and the dust." And with that she was whisked behind a draping curtain and her head then guided down through a low opening more like a metal cat-flap than a door, to surface into a dimly lit and cluttered stockroom.

Cloth was no longer the dominating commodity. Arranged around the walls and along parallel rows of shelves was a hypermarket-like selection of tourist ware; watches, jewellery, sunglasses, handbags, shoes, clothing, and the household contents of an entire village. All that was obviously missing was a live camel.

The absence of natural light, the more confined space, the silence, and

the realization that she was with two strangers, one ahead, one behind, suddenly pressed in on Isobel. She bit down hard on her lower lip.

"Please, you pick something, it is for the memory, no?"

Despite the ambiguity in Ali's offer, Isobel was now expected to shop; that was clear. The opening she'd come through was closed, and Sharif was standing like a praetorian guard in front of it, his legs apart and arms folded. And for all Ali's permanent geniality, the atmosphere changed as soon as the door closed behind her. Isobel's insides fluttered like caged birds. Did they want her money, or did they want more? In the dim light their eyes seemed red and never left her body.

"Do you have blouses?" she asked, desperate to reinforce the pretext of the situation.

"Many, many. What colour you like?"

"Green. Or, or, maybe blue," she stammered, thinking about the pendant. Ali handed her a selection of cotton tops, each in a clear plastic wrapper.

Isobel sought to give her most positive eager shopper look. "Yes, maybe these, but I need to see them in the light."

"Here is light," said Ali, gesturing all around.

"No, I mean natural light."

"Green is green and blue is blue. Always same."

"No, I need to see them in natural light." Isobel held the half dozen blouses, and price had yet to raise its ugly head. Ali looked off-balance.

"I can't buy without proper light," she repeated and with that, still clutching the blouses, she made for the door. "Hold these please." She thrust the merchandise toward Sharif. It was an order and he took them as Isobel pushed her way past and ducked through the opening.

She needed to get back into the front of the shop before the two men could recover from the shock of her assertiveness. She looked around but the exit was concealed somewhere behind the realms of hanging drapes. Where was the way out? She thrashed at a few of the curtains that were beginning to envelop her, but was finally through.

She resisted the urge to rush headlong to the street. She composed herself as the two men reappeared, their nostrils flaring in anger.

"My husband is waiting for me. I'm sorry, I need to go. I will come back tomorrow."

Ali held out his arm, stiff like a barrier. "Do you think you can rest from the heat of the day and drink tea in my shop for free? Can you drink tea in shop in London for free? Why you think you can do it here? You steal my time, you steal money. It is same. You buy now. No tomorrow."

It was the younger man that now grabbed her arm in a determined sandpaper grip.

"I'll come back tomorrow. Now let go of my arm."

"You must pay now."

"Let go of my arm, *now*."

The older man stepped in between Isobel and the opening to the street. She jerked her arm free and pushed past him, fear closing around her like the Marrakech night.

“You steal my time, you are thief!” Ali shouted again, but louder, thrusting the blouses at her. Others were closing in, drawn by the commotion and once more she found herself hemmed in. Stubbled faces with swarthy complexions were looking at her, joining in the melee. It felt like a hundred eyes were undressing her. She cursed her impetuosity in storming off from Peter, of not changing out of the revealing top and clinging slacks, both now wet from her own perspiration. A hand brushed the inside of her thigh and travelled upwards. She swung around and was met by a shriveled face and a leering grin, a single black and yellow tooth behind the thin, cracked lips. “Don’t you dare touch me!” she shouted. But as she said it she felt more tugging, this time on her bag.

She clasped the bag to her chest with both arms, but in doing so felt her body more exposed, more vulnerable. She steeled herself for a fight, but before she could swivel around again, she sensed the threat dissipating. The hand on her buttock was no longer there, bodies were backing off, parting like the Red Sea, and faces were turning away from her. The crowd shrank to the sides of the stalls and was disappearing; someone was pushing through from behind, shouting.

“Everything ok, darling?”

“Peter, thank god!”

But it was not Peter. She turned to see a tall, well-built man forcing his way towards her with the confident assurance of a native. She felt a protective arm around her shoulder as he pulled her still shaking body close to his, her heartbeat slowing as he created a cordon of safety between her and the crowd. Only Ali the storekeeper remained in the confrontation.

“You pay now,” he repeated, pushing his bundle of blouses forward.

The man grabbed the top-most garment; he spoke in Arabic to the storekeeper. From Ali’s reaction, Isobel guessed it was something uncompromising. “How much,” asked the man; the shopkeeper gave his price in Arabic. The man pulled some crumpled notes from his pocket and pressed them into Ali’s hand. “Not the best time to bargain,” he quipped.

With the exchange done, the confrontational manner of the shopkeeper gave way to supplication. Ali returned to the smiling well-wisher that Isobel had first encountered.

Isobel let out a long, audible sigh, her breathing now easier, as the stranger led her towards the fading light. “Where did you come from?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said the man as they passed a stall of shining metal-ware, “someone must have made a wish, one minute I’m in this brass lamp and the next...”

She burst out laughing, the tension falling from her body. “So how do we leave this nightmare?” she asked.

“Come on, follow me, it’s this way – or at least I think it’s this way,” he said, smiling encouragement.

Was her rescuer all he seemed? It occurred to Isobel that she had already been deceived that afternoon by one smiling Samaritan. But she had little choice; the man took her by the hand and led her away with quick and purposeful strides, turning this way and that through the narrow alleys as if by

instinct, into the spice market with its endless sacks of red saffron, golden curry, and bronze cumin, the aromas of mint and rose filling her senses and soothing away her fears, before emerging into the square. The sky was darkening to a reddish brown, the orange veil that bathed the square now disappearing as the sun retreated beyond the horizon along with the tourists and those who traded among them. From distant minarets came the wailing sound of the faithful being called to prayer.

The tension and seeming danger in the souk, the heroic intervention, the rapid escape, all made for a strange sense of elation in Isobel. She tried not to think of Peter back at the hotel waiting, and no doubt worrying. Right now she wanted to enjoy the moment.

"Who do I have to thank for saving me from Ali and the forty thieves?" she asked, masking the strange importance she placed on knowing his name.

"Jay, Jay Brooke." He offered his hand and Isobel took it. His blue eyes bore into hers.

"Isobel," she offered in reply, unsure how to proceed.

"You were quite a fighter back there," he said.

"Fight or flight, I suppose. You must think me very foolish to have gotten myself into such a mess?"

"These things happen. Probably down to misunderstanding mostly. But a woman, an attractive Western woman, alone in the souk, maybe not the best idea."

Isobel blushed at the compliment but controlled her instinctive flirtatious response and settled for the simple statement of, "You must let me pay for the blouse."

"Don't be silly, you earned it," he replied before being cut short as a taxi broke from the rank, turned full circle, and pulled alongside them.

Jay opened the rear passenger door. "Where are you staying?"

"La Mamounia."

Jay grinned. "Great taste. That's where I'm staying. How long are you there for?"

Isobel felt compelled to break the dream, to make it clear she was accompanied.

"We're just here for the weekend."

She expected him to seek clarification on who the "we" was, but he didn't.

"Me too. Maybe I can save you from drowning in the pool or something next time?"

He made no move to close the door and, taking the hint, Isobel slid across so he could join her.

He lowered his head to follow her movement. "I just need to get a couple of things before everything closes, lovely to have met you. Take care."

And with that, he gave a final smile before pushing the door closed. Was their brief acquaintance to be confined to and immortalised in one fleeting moment of chivalry? He hit the roof of the cab, signaling it to leave with the same confidence that seemed to permeate all his actions. And as the taxi drove away all feelings of elation evaporated, turning to embarrassment at her rejection and shock at her own forwardness. She huddled into a corner

and willed herself home, and perhaps not herself at all.

