

Chapter One

The baker scratched his black moustache with a floury finger, turning the hairs grey and unintentionally making himself look ten years older. Around him the shelves and counters were full of long loaves of fresh, crusty bread, and the familiar smell filled his nostrils and swelled his chest with a quietly satisfied pride. The bread was a new batch, the second that morning: business was good because the weather was fine. He could always rely on a little sunshine to bring the housewives of Paris out into the streets to shop for his good bread.

He looked out of the shop window, narrowing his eyes against the brightness outside. A pretty girl was crossing the street. The baker listened, and heard the sound of his wife's voice, out in the back, arguing shrilly with an employee. The row would go on for several minutes – they always did. Satisfied that he was safe, the baker permitted himself to gaze at the girl lustfully.

Her summer dress was thin and sleeveless, and the baker thought it looked rather expensive, although he was no expert in such things. The flared skirt swung gracefully at mid-thigh, emphasizing her slim bare legs, promising – but never quite delivering – delightful glimpses of feminine underwear.

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She was too slender for his taste, he decided as she came closer. Her breasts were very small – they did not even jiggle with her long, confident stride. Twenty years of marriage to Jeanne-Marie had not made the baker tire of plump, pendulous breasts.

The girl came into the shop, and the baker realized she was no beauty. Her face was long and thin, her mouth small and ungenerous, with slightly protruding upper teeth. Her hair was brown under a layer of sun-bleached blonde.

She selected a loaf from the counter, testing its crust with her long hands, and nodding in satisfaction. No beauty, but definitely desirable, the baker thought.

Her complexion was red-and-white, and her skin looked soft and smooth. But it was her carriage that turned heads. It was confident, self-possessed; it told the world that this girl did precisely what she wanted to do, and nothing else. The baker told himself to stop playing with words: she was sexy, and that was that.

He flexed his shoulders, to loosen the shirt which was sticking to his perspiring back. ‘*Chaud, hein?*’ he said.

The girl took coins from her purse and paid for her bread. She smiled at his remark, and suddenly she *was* beautiful. ‘*Le soleil? Je l’aime,*’ she said. She closed her purse and opened the shop door. ‘*Merci!*’ she flung over her shoulder as she left.

There had been a trace of accent in her French – an English accent, the baker fancied. But perhaps he had just imagined it to go with her complexion. He stared at her bottom as she crossed the street, mesmerized by

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the shift of the muscles under the cotton. She was probably returning to the flat of some young, hairy musician, who would still be in bed after a night of debauchery.

The shrill voice of Jeanne-Marie approached, shattering the baker's fantasy. He sighed heavily, and threw the girl's coins into the till.

Dee Sleign smiled to herself as she walked along the pavement away from the shop. The myth was true: Frenchmen were more sensual than Englishmen. The baker's gaze had been candidly lascivious, and his eyes had homed in accurately on her pelvis. An English baker would have looked furtively at her breasts from behind his spectacles.

She slanted her head back and brushed her hair behind her ears to let the hot sun shine on her face. It was wonderful, this life, this summer in Paris. No work, no exams, no essays, no lectures. Sleeping with Mike, getting up late; good coffee and fresh bread for breakfast; days spent with the books she had always wanted to read and the pictures she liked to see; evenings with interesting, eccentric people.

Soon it would be over. Before long she would have to decide what to do with the rest of her life. But for now she was in a personal limbo, simply enjoying the things she liked, with no rigid purpose dictating the way she spent every minute.

She turned a corner and entered a small, unpretentious apartment block. As she passed the booth with

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its tiny window, there was a high-pitched cry from the concierge.

'Mademoiselle!'

The grey-haired woman pronounced each syllable of the word, and managed to give it an accusatory inflection, emphasizing the scandalous fact that Dee was not married to the man who rented the apartment. Dee smiled again; an affair in Paris would hardly be complete without a disapproving concierge.

'Télégramme,' the woman said. She laid the envelope on the sill and retired into the cat-smelling gloom of her booth, as if to dissociate herself entirely from loose-moralled young girls and their telegrams.

Dee picked it up and ran up the stairs. It was addressed to her, and she knew what it was.

She entered the apartment, and laid the bread and the telegram on the table in the small kitchen. She poured coffee beans into a grinder and pressed the button; the machine growled harshly as it pulverized the brown-black nuts.

Mike's electric shaver whined as if in answer. Sometimes the promise of coffee was the only thing that got him out of bed. Dee made a whole pot and sliced the new bread.

Mike's flat was small, and furnished with elderly stuff of undistinguished taste. He had wanted something more grand, and he could certainly afford better. But Dee had insisted they stay out of hotels and classy districts. She had wanted to spend summer with the French, not the international jet set; and she had got her way.

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The buzz of his shaver died, and Dee poured two cups of coffee.

He came in just as she placed the cups on the round wooden table. He wore his faded, patched Levis, and his blue cotton shirt was open at the neck, revealing a tuft of black hair and a medallion on a short silver chain.

‘Good morning, darling,’ he said. He came round the table and kissed her. She wound her arms around his waist and hugged his body against her own, and kissed him passionately.

‘Wow! That was strong for so early in the morning,’ he said. He gave a wide California grin, and sat down.

Dee looked at the man as he sipped his coffee gratefully, and wondered whether she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Their affair had been going for a year now, and she was getting used to it. She liked his cynicism, his sense of humour, and his buccaneering style. They were both interested in art to the point of obsession, although his interest lay in the money to be made out of it, while she was absorbed by the whys and wherefores of the creative process. They stimulated each other, in bed and out: they were a good team.

He got up, poured more coffee, and lit cigarettes for both of them. ‘You’re quiet,’ he said, in his low, gravelly American accent. ‘Thinking about those results? It’s about time they came through.’

‘They came today,’ she replied. ‘I’ve been putting off opening the telegram.’

‘What? Hey, c’mon, I want to know how you did.’

‘All right.’ She fetched the envelope and sat down

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again before tearing it open with her thumb. She unfolded the single sheet of thin paper, glanced at it, then looked up at him with a broad smile.

‘My God, I got a First,’ she said.

He leaped to his feet excitedly. ‘Yippee!’ he yelled. ‘I knew it! You’re a genius!’ He broke into a whining, fast imitation of a country-and-western square dance, complete with calls of ‘Yee-hah’ and the sounds of a steel guitar; and hopped around the kitchen with an imaginary partner.

Dee laughed helplessly. ‘You’re the most juvenile thirty-nine-year-old I’ve ever met,’ she gasped. Mike bowed in acknowledgement of imaginary applause, and sat down again.

He said: ‘So. What does this mean, for your future?’

Dee became serious again. ‘It means I get to do my Ph.D.’

‘What, more degrees? You now have a B.A. in Art History, on top of some kind of Diploma in Fine Art. Isn’t it time you stopped being a professional student?’

‘Why should I? Learning is my kick – if they’re willing to pay me to study for the rest of my life, why shouldn’t I do it?’

‘They won’t pay you much.’

‘That’s true.’ Dee looked thoughtful. ‘And I would like to make a fortune, somehow. Still, there’s plenty of time. I’m only twenty-five.’

Mike reached across the table and held her hand. ‘Why don’t you come work for me? I’ll pay you a fortune – you’d be worth it.’

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She shook her head. 'I don't want to ride on your back. I'll make it myself.'

'You're quite happy to ride on my front,' he grinned.

She put on a leer. 'You betcha,' she said in imitation of his accent. Then she withdrew her hand. 'No, I'm going to write my thesis. If it gets published I could make some cash.'

'What's the topic?'

'Well, I've been toying with a couple of things. The most promising is the relationship between art and drugs.'

'Trendy.'

'And original. I think I could show that drug abuse tends to be good for art and bad for artists.'

'A nice paradox. Where will you start?'

'Here. In Paris. They used to smoke pot in the artistic community around the first couple of decades of the century. Only they called it hashish.'

Mike nodded. 'Will you take just a little help from me, right at the start?'

Dee reached for the cigarettes and took one. 'Sure,' she said.

He held his lighter across the table. 'There's an old guy you ought to talk to. He was a pal of half a dozen of the masters here before World War One. A couple of times he's put me on the track of pictures.'

'He was kind of a fringe criminal, but he used to get prostitutes to act as models – and other things sometimes – for the young painters. He's old now – he must be pushing ninety. But he remembers.'

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The tiny bedsitter smelled bad. The odour of the fish shop below pervaded everything, seeping up through the bare floorboards and settling in the battered furniture, the sheets on the single bed in the corner, the faded curtains at the one small window. Smoke from the old man's pipe failed to hide the fishy smell, and underlying it all was the atmosphere of a room that is rarely scrubbed.

And a fortune in post-Impressionist paintings hung on the walls.

'All given to me by the artists,' the old man explained airily. Dee had to concentrate to understand his thick Parisian French. 'Always, they were unable to pay their debts. I took the paintings because I knew they would never have the money. I never liked the pictures then. Now I see why they paint this way, and I like it. Besides, they bring back memories.'

The man was completely bald, and the skin of his face was loose and pale. He was short, and walked with difficulty; but his small black eyes flashed with occasional enthusiasm. He was rejuvenated by this pretty English girl, who spoke such good French and smiled at him as if he was a young man again.

'Don't you get pestered by people wanting to buy them?' Dee asked.

'Not any more. I am always willing to lend them out, at a fee.' His eyes twinkled. 'It pays for my tobacco,' he added, raising his pipe in a gesture like a toast.

Dee realized what the other element in the smell

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was: the tobacco in his pipe was mixed with cannabis. She nodded knowingly.

‘Would you like some? I have some papers,’ he offered.

‘Thank you.’

He passed her a tobacco tin, some cigarette papers, and a small block of resin, and she began rolling a joint.

‘Ah, you young girls,’ the man mused. ‘Drugs are bad for you, really. I should not corrupt the youth. There, I have been doing it all my life, and now I am too old to change.’

‘You’ve lived a long life on it,’ Dee said.

‘True, true. I will be eighty-nine this year, I think. For seventy years I have smoked my special tobacco every day, except in prison, of course.’

Dee licked the gummed paper and completed the reefer. She lit it with a tiny gold lighter and inhaled. ‘Did the painters use hashish a great deal?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes. I made a fortune from the stuff. Some spent all their money on it.’ He looked at a pencil drawing on the wall, a hurried-looking sketch of the head of a woman; an oval face and a long, thin nose. ‘Dedo was the worst,’ he added with a faraway smile.

Dee made out the signature on the drawing. ‘Modigliani?’

‘Yes.’ The man’s eyes now saw only the past, and he talked as if to himself. ‘He always wore a brown corduroy jacket and a big, floppy felt hat. He used to say that art should be like hashish: it should show people the beauty in things, the beauty they could not

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normally see. He would drink, too, in order to see the ugliness in things. But he loved the hashish.

‘It was sad that he had such a conscience about it. I believe he was brought up quite strictly. Also, his health was a little delicate, so he worried about the drugs. He worried, but he still used them.’ The old man smiled and nodded, as if agreeing with his memories.

‘He lived at the Impasse Falguière. He was so poor; he grew haggard. I remember when he went to the Egyptian section in the Louvre – he came back saying it was the only section worth seeing!’ He laughed happily. ‘A melancholy man, though,’ he went on, his voice sobering. ‘He always had *Les Chants de Maldoror* in his pocket: he could recite many French verses. The Cubism arrived at the end of his life. It was alien to him. Perhaps it killed him.’

Dee spoke softly, to guide the old man’s memory without dislocating his train of thought. ‘Did Dedo ever paint while he was high?’

The man laughed lightly. ‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘While he was high he would paint very fast, shouting all the time that this would be his masterpiece, his *chef-d’œuvre*, that now all Paris would see what painting was all about. He would choose the brightest colours and throw them at the canvas. His friends would tell him the work was useless, terrible, and he would tell them to piss off, they were too ignorant to know that this was the painting of the twentieth century. Then, when he came down, he would agree with them, and throw the canvas in the corner.’ He sucked at his

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pipe, noticed it had gone out, and reached for matches. The spell was broken.

Dee leaned forward in her hard upright chair, the joint between her fingers forgotten. There was a low intensity in her voice.

She said: 'What happened to those paintings?'

He puffed his pipe into life and leaned back, drawing on it rhythmically. The regular suck, puff, suck, puff, drew him gradually back into his reverie. 'Poor Dedo,' he said. 'He could not pay the rent. He had nowhere to go. His landlord gave him twenty-four hours to get out. He tried to sell some paintings, but the few people who could see how good they were had no more money than he.

'He had to move in with one of the others – I forget who. There was hardly room for Dedo, let alone his paintings. The ones he liked, he loaned to close friends.

'The rest—' the old man grunted, as if the memory had given him a twinge of pain. 'I see him now, loading them into a wheelbarrow and pushing them down the street. He comes to a yard, piles them up in the centre, and sets fire to them. "What else is there to do?" he keeps saying. I could have lent him money, I suppose, but he owed too much already. Still, when I saw him watch his paintings burning, I wished I had. There, I was never a saint, in my youth any more than in my old age.'

'All the hashish paintings were on that bonfire?' Dee's voice was almost a whisper.

'Yes,' the old man said. 'Virtually all of them.'

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‘Virtually? He kept some?’

‘No, he kept none. But he had given some to somebody – I had forgotten, but talking to you brings it back. There was a priest, in his home town, who took an interest in Oriental drugs. I forget why – their medicinal value, their spiritual properties? Something like that. Dedo confessed his habits to the priest, and was granted absolution. Then the priest asked to see the work he did under the influence of hashish. Dedo sent him a painting – only one, I remember now.’

The reefer burned Dee’s fingers, and she dropped it in an ashtray. The old man lit his pipe again, and Dee stood up.

‘Thank you very much for talking to me,’ she said.

‘Mmm.’ Half of the man’s mind was still in the past. ‘I hope it helps you with your thesis,’ he said.

‘It certainly has,’ she said. On impulse she bent over the man’s chair and kissed his bald head. ‘You’ve been kind.’

His eyes twinkled. ‘It’s a long time since a pretty girl kissed me,’ he said.

‘Of all the things you’ve told me, that’s the only one I disbelieve,’ replied Dee. She smiled at him again, and went out through the door.

She controlled her jubilation as she walked along the street. What a break! And before she had even started the new term! She was bursting to tell someone about it. Then she remembered – Mike had gone: flown to London for a couple of days. Who could she tell?

On impulse, she bought a postcard at a café. She sat

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down with a glass of wine to write it. The picture showed the café itself, and a view of the street she was in.

She sipped her *vin ordinaire* and wondered who to write to. She ought to let the family know her results, too. Her mother would be pleased, in her vague kind of way, but she really wanted her daughter to be a member of the dying polite society of ball-goers and dressage-riders. She would not appreciate the triumph of a first-class degree. Who would?

Then she realized who would be most delighted for her.

She wrote:

Dear Uncle Charles,

Believe it or not, I got a First! ! ! Even more incredible, I am now on the track of a lost Modigliani! ! !

Love,
D.

She bought a stamp for the card and posted it on her way back to Mike's apartment.