

# CASABLANCA BLUES

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One

The windowless walls at Acme Telesales were painted slate grey.

A sea of uniform desks filled the central hall, each one the same drab shade. The chairs were grey as well, and the telephonic headsets, and the complexions of the sales' staff who wore them, and even the plastic plants.

The only splash of colour in the entire place was the baseball cap pulled down tight over Blaine Williams' blond mop of hair.

It was fire engine red, and had the word 'CASABLANCA' written in large letters across the front.

'Good morning to you, ma'am,' said Blaine into the headset microphone. 'No, no, I didn't call last week. No, not even the week before. Why am I calling? Well, ma'am, I've got an offer... an offer for the silver generation...'

*Click.*

Blaine dialled again.

'Hello, ma'am. Let me be blunt: Do you have trouble with your drains?'

*Click.*

'Good morning to you, sir! Could I interest you in a case of Drain-o-Sure?'

*Click.*

A miniature buzzer mounted on the left of Blaine's desk, number 52, emitted a muffled warning sound. Beside it was a black and white studio shot of Humphrey Bogart - with signature cigarette, fedora, and sullen stare. And next to it was an empty mug, Bogart and Bergman's cheeks pressed together on the side.

In a well-practiced movement, Blaine slipped off his headset, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

'For Christ's sake! Beam me up to the mother-ship!'

Two

On the dot of seven AM, an automatic sprinkler system turned itself on, and began watering the manicured lawn in front of the Benani Mansion. There was not a blade of grass over an inch and a half, nor a weed in sight.

A pair of imposing wrought iron gates threw long arabesque shadows over the grass. They rose thirty feet high into the pale blue sky, armoured CCTV cameras mounted above each one. Behind the grass and the gates, the mansion rose up like a magnificent frosted wedding cake. Gleaming ivory white, it was

adorned with Doric columns and Classical mouldings, and reeked of immense affluence, the kind of wealth that only a business empire, corruption - or both - can provide.

Inside, a handsome, well-groomed man of sixty was taking breakfast, squinting with half his attention at a pie chart on a laptop screen. He was stirring a porcelain cup of English breakfast tea clockwise when his daughter, Ghita, hurried in.

‘Papa, oh, Papa... What catastrophe! What misery!’

Hicham Benani glanced up, and smiled absently. He didn’t say a word, because he knew an explanation would be forthcoming, one that would begin in condemnation and end in a solicitation for funds.

‘How can a girl expect to get married with such imbeciles on the payroll?’ Ghita moaned, as a cluster of servants fussed around her. ‘I have had no choice but to fire the lot of them, every last one. We’ll have to start again from scratch. It will cost a little more, but I know you’ll agree to that, won’t you, dearest Papa?’

Her lips stretched wide in a taut smile, Ghita blew a kiss across the table in her father’s direction.

Mr. Benani’s gaze moved back to the graph and, in one continuous movement, out to the landscaped garden that extended far behind the house. The sprinklers were throwing rainbows over the lawns. He was about to ask for a figure, when his only daughter held up a finger, and exclaimed:

‘I blame the working class! Damn them! And damn them again!’

‘Excuse me?’ said Benani, frowning.

‘Well, it’s them who are driving up prices! Do you have any idea how much it costs to put on a wedding?’

‘I daren’t ask,’ Benani replied coldly. ‘But, after all, Ghita, it’s only an engagement. How over the top does it need to be?’

### Three

Blaine wrestled with the key to the front door of his building and, after an eternity, managed to get inside. The stairwell was gloomy and damp. It smelled of rotten eggs, and led up many flights, a dark, dingy Twilight Zone of urban squalor.

The sordidness increased the higher one went.

By the fifth floor, where Blaine’s one-room apartment was found, the filth was impressively vile, as if painted on thick like a theatrical backdrop.

Dressed in a grubby Macintosh, the belt tied in a knot at the waist, Blaine began the ascent in a slow trudge. In one hand he held an old fedora and, in the other, a TV-dinner furled up in a crumpled plastic bag.

As he approached the narrow landing of the third floor, the door to 3A jerked open. The mousey hunched figure of a woman could almost be seen in the grime and the shadows.

‘What you got up there, Blaine? A herd of frigging rhinos?!’

‘Hello Mrs. Cohen.’

‘All that banging and crashing. Every day it’s worse. Any more of it, and I’ll get the Super up there!’

‘I’ve been at work all day, Mrs. Cohen.’

‘Sure you have. And I’m frigging Marta Hari!’

‘Good night to you, Mrs. Cohen,’ said Blaine, as he trudged upwards.

On the fourth floor landing he came across a clean cut young couple standing outside a particularly battered door. They seemed uneasy, as if instinct were telling them to flee. Turning both at once, they smiled at anxiously Blaine. Such was their fear they might have screamed.

‘Are you here to rent 3D?’

The couple nodded.

‘Oh,’ Blaine replied. ‘I see.’

‘Whhhhhat’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing, nothing much at all... except...’

‘Except?’

‘Except for the rats, and the roaches... and...’

‘And...’

‘And?’

‘Well, surely Mr. Rogers told you...’

‘Told us what?’

‘About what happened to Mr. Wilson and the shotgun.’

Blaine paused, leaned back on his heels. ‘Made a helluva mess and...’

Before he could finish, there was the sound of city shoes and by cheap pumps taking the stairs two at a time. And, after much scurrying, came the echo of the front door slamming shut far below.

A minute later, Blaine was sitting on the expansive furry couch that dominated his living-room: a beer in one hand, a remote in the other, the Hungry Hombre platter balanced between his knees.

A few feet away was a large screen TV.

The apartment was a shrine to *Casablanca*, every inch filled with posters and memorabilia. There were cabinets packed with *Casablanca* knickknacks - mugs, albums, and snow-globes, miniature figurines of the leading cast, medallions and cheap plastic giveaways. There was Humphrey Bogart soap - still boxed, a stack of *Casablanca* playing cards, and a large scale model of Rick's Café.

The walls were covered in framed posters, each one emblazoned with the movie's title and its cast. And, on the far side of the room, to the left of the couch, was an enormous neon sign in vivid scarlet. Every few seconds the cursive script came alive, bathing the dark room in a comforting warm glow.

Without thinking, Blaine clicked a fingertip to the remote, took a swig of his beer, and sat back as he did each night to munch his way through the Hungry Hombre meal for one.

The neon flickered on, and then off, and on the TV the opening credits rolled.

And, as Blaine moved on to the Hungry Hombre desert, came the title of that inimitable desert destination - *CASABLANCA*.

Four

An army of liveried caddies was lined up and ready at the Royal Casablanca Golf Club, each one more neatly turned out than the last.

There was a sense of utopia, as if the pristine buildings, the caddies, and the course, were somehow set apart from the urban sprawl that lay just beyond the perimeter of the club. It was a mystery how the management achieved it, but the noise and pollution from the churning, seething Casablanca gridlock, never broke the serenity of it all.

Three men were standing in conversation at the Tee.

The first, Hicham Benani, was a media mogul and the father of society's most demanding debutant. The second was the Walter Schwartzkopf, American Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco. And, the third was Driss Senbel, a leading lawyer, and the kind of man who had made a career from making sure the A-list oligarchs remained firmly above the law.

Stepping forward, Senbel glanced at his Patek Philippe.

'Let's get going. Shall we toss?'

‘Better wait five more minutes, until it’s eight o’clock,’ said Benani. ‘You know how the club is with its rules.’

Senbel waved a hand easily through the air.

‘It’s all taken care of. I tipped the greenskeeper. We can Tee off whenever we like.’

Benani frowned for the second time that morning.

‘But that’s against club rules,’ he said curtly.

‘Nonsense. It’s just oiling the wheels of the economy.’

‘You mean you were rotting the foundations of society.’

The Ambassador slipped on his glove and swivelled to face Senbel.

‘I’m with Hicham on this one,’ he said. ‘Every bribe you give cripples Morocco a little more, turning good people into bad. You’re scorching the roots of honest society.’

Driss Senbel tossed a ten-dirham coin, and waited for it to fall onto the perfectly-clipped green. Squinting at the king’s head, he smiled smugly, stepped up to the Tee. His caddie passed him a driver.

‘Are you crazy,’ he said. ‘If I sop oiling the wheels the countr will grind to a halt. I’d give it a week, possibly two. Then...’

‘Then what?’

‘Then there’d be a revolution.’

When the lawyer had swung, Hicham Benani stepped forward. His mind wasn’t on golf. It had been on curbing the extravagances of his wayward daughter. And now it had shifted to the subject of corruption. But, despite utopian aspirations, Benani knew there was nothing even he could do to change an age-old order of things.

‘I have to admit it, but I agree with Driss on this,’ he said apologetically. ‘It’s the system, and the system’s not going to change whatever we say or do.’

The Ambassador nodded to his caddie, who passed him a wood.

‘What if you were both to refuse to pay any more bribes?’ he asked. ‘No more *baksheesh* for the cops, the government officials, and all the other social detritus who demand it?’

Senbel took in the crystal dial of his wristwatch again. He sighed.

‘I’m telling you,’ he said, ‘there’d be a revolution!’

Humphrey Bogart was carousing with his clientele, the smoke-filled Rick's Café Americain in full swing, when Bergman strolled in. His head nestled into the beige fur of the couch, Blaine mumbled each line just before it was delivered. He knew every one.

All of a sudden his cell phone bleeped. Taking in the display, he moved it in an arc to his ear.

'Hey sweetie, how was your day? Got some painting done? Oh, that's great. *Mine?* Nothing sexy. Just a thousand calls to geriatric serial killers, psychopaths and the suicidal. Long live Drain-O-Sure!' Blaine paused, grinned, his attention fading. 'OK. Great,' he mumbled, 'See you in a bit.'

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at the door. A pretty redhead kissed Blaine on the lips as she moved through the doorway and into the sitting-room. She was panting lightly, not from lust but from the climb. Behind her back was a square object the size of a bathmat. It was covered in a paint-splattered cloth.

'I've got something for you, sweetie,' Laurie said. 'A surprise.'

'A surprise? You know how I have trouble with surprises!'

'Go on... guess.'

'I give up.'

Blaine grinned his trademark grin. As he did so, Laurie whipped away the cloth, smudging the monstrous purple painting beneath. Blaine didn't react. Not for a long time.

'D'you like it, hon?'

'Um.'

'You hate it, don't you?'

'Er.'

Tell me... tell me the truth...

Blaine laid the artwork against the far wall, and realised his hands were purple.

'I thought you could move Bogey and put it up there - you know, in pride of place.'

Blaine froze.

'*Move Bogey?*' he mouthed incredulously.

'Yeah.'

'Sweetie...'

'Yeah?'

'Bogey's not going anywhere.'

Straightening her slender body to seem taller than she was, Laurie scowled.

‘It’s damn well time you got over this whole *Casablanca* baloney! She hissed. ‘It was just a Hollywood picture for God’s sake!’

His cheeks flushed, Blaine paused the movie, as if not wanting to subject the cast to a domestic squabble. Then, holding his purple hands into the light, he glowered towards the far wall.

‘And that... that *thing*... that swirly purple gunk... You’re meaning to tell me that you’re passing it off as *art*?!’

In a flood of tears, Laurie snatched her creation to her chest. Unsure of whether to attack or retreat in pain, she chose the first option.

‘At least it’s alive and it’s... it’s... it’s spontaneous!’ she snarled. ‘Two things you could never be accused of being! I wouldn’t give it to you if you were the last man on earth! You don’t know how to appreciate art... you don’t know how to appreciate a woman!’

Six

Hicham Benani fed the beige calfskin steering wheel of his limited edition Jaguar through his fingers in a turn.

His concentration was not on the road, but on the conversation that had dominated the morning’s game, the subject of corruption. Halfway between the golf club and his home, a distance of a mile, he was flagged down by a uniformed police officer. Rolling his eyes, he eased the car to a halt, and lowered the window.

‘Good morning sir, you made an infraction back there,’ said the officer.

Benani fumbled in his pocket for a hundred-dirham note. Expertly, he used his left hand to fold it once and then again. And, in a much-practiced movement, he leaned sideways so as to insert the square of paper into the policeman’s cuff - thereby avoiding his hand.

But, just before the bribe was delivered, Benani froze. The officer winced. He hadn’t yet received the money.

‘Look at me,’ said Benani out loud. ‘I’m as guilty as everyone else.’

‘You made an infraction, sir,’ the officer repeated.

‘So give me a ticket.’

‘But...’

‘But, what?’

‘But, sir, there’s another way to remedy the situation.’

‘And how would that be?’

The official glowered. He fumbled for his pen. No one ever agreed to pay the fine, as the standard bribe was a quarter of the price and was executed in a fraction of the time. The last thing any policeman wanted to do was paperwork. In the time it took to fill out a single form for an infraction he could bring in ten times as much in bribes - bribes that he got to keep.

Benani held out his wrists.

‘Let’s go to the police station,’ he said. ‘I’m all yours!’

Seven

Another bright Brooklyn morning, the blue sky masked by the slate grey walls of Acme Telesales. Seated at desk 52, Blaine slipped on his headset and got down to coaxing the general public into taking advantage of Drain-O-Sure.

‘Good morning, sir. I’m calling about your drains.’

*Click.*

‘Hello, ma’am... do you have a smell in the kitchen that won’t go away?’

*Click.*

‘This is your lucky day - a Drain-O-Sure day!’

*Click.*

Just as Blaine was about to make the next call, the supervisor strode up, clipboard in hand.

‘I want to see you in my office right away, Williams.’

‘I’ve got five more calls to make before my break. That OK?’

‘No, not OK! You’ve been suspended.’

‘Suspended? What for?’

‘You know what for... for that email to the shareholders... for damn well claiming that Drain-O-Sure’s a scam!’

Tugging off his headset, Blaine wiped a hand hard over his face.

‘But Mr. Seldon, we’re preying on the elderly and the vulnerable. We’re touting a product that’s nothing but watered down bleach... It’s shameful and it’s probably illegal as well.’

The superintendent whispered into a miniature microphone on his lapel.

‘What’s going on?’

‘You’re being terminated. Right now. That’s what’s going on.’

‘Huh?’

‘Clear out your stuff. Security’s on their way up. I want you out of the building in ten minutes!’

An hour later, Blaine was seated in a booth in Rick’s Diner. A hamburger joint at Brooklyn Heights, it only managed to avoid being shut down because the owner’s daughter was dating a low level official at the Department of Health. The walls were peppered with posters of Bogart and Bergman, an atmosphere that Blaine found calming to his nerves.

Sitting across from him in the booth was Charlie, his best friend since high school.

‘So why all the rush? Couldn’t it have waited till the weekend?’

Blaine took a bite of his burger and grimaced.

‘Had to talk. I’m in the grinder,’ he said, chewing.

‘What grinder’s that?’

‘The grinder of life. Getting all minced up like...’ he peered at the beef, oozing with ketchup. ‘I’m ground beef sandwiched in a bun.’

Eight

A pair of size six Jimmy Choo black crocodile stilettos crossed the lawn, the heels sinking down into the grass as they went.

Strapped tight into them, Ghita Benani struggled to stay upright, as she reeled towards a group of caterers at the far end of the garden.

‘No, no, no! You idiots!’ she screamed, her arms flailing up and down for balance. ‘What are you doing with those lights? They’re not supposed to be there. And change those tablecloths at once! Where did you get them - from a prison?! I don’t want cotton. I want the finest silk!’

The caterers stood to attention sheepishly. They were surrounded by fallen stacks of chairs, piles of trestle tables yet to be assembled, and by miles of crumpled fabrics. One of the men, the bravest and also the most senseless, wagged a finger towards Ghita.

‘We’re just following orders, Miss,’ he said.

The next thing he knew, his chest had been pierced with a Jimmy Choo in black crocodile.

In one slick movement, Ghita withdrew her bloodied weapon, slipped it back on her foot, and turned to greet her father, whose Jaguar was purring into the drive.

‘Baba! Sorry, but you can’t park there,’ she called loudly. ‘The Champagne delivery is about to arrive.’

Hicham Benani would have protested, but he was used to being dealt orders by his daughter. Parking beside the kitchen door, he closed his eyes and found himself in a simple bare-walled apartment in an old Art Deco walk-up downtown. For a moment there was silence, and simplicity.

Ghita opened the car door, and Benani’s memory vanished.

‘I’m working with imbeciles, Baba!’ she exclaimed, dabbing a lace handkerchief melodramatically to her eye. ‘I don’t know what to do. One tiny mistake and tongues will wag. You know how they are - like vipers.’

‘Dearest Ghita, it’s only an engagement,’ he said with a sense of *déjà vu*.

‘*Only an engagement?*’ Ghita scoffed. ‘And we are just ordinary people, are we?’

Before Benani could reply, his daughter clapped her hands, the soft skin of her palms anointed twice daily with a moisturizer from the Savoy Alps.

‘I shall need a some cheques, Baba,’ she said, a tone of sternness in her voice.

‘How many is some?’

Ghita calculated. Maths was never her strong point. She lost count, then cursed.

‘Just sign me the entire book, and leave them blank... I have so many people to pay.’

Standing on tiptoes in her Jimmy Choo’s, she pecked her father on the cheek.

‘What would I ever do without you?’ she said.

Nine

A short stout man with a waxy face and a week’s growth of beard was standing in the shadows outside apartment 4B. The kind of figure you would never pick out in a police line-up, there was nothing memorable about him, except that he limped when he walked.

Blaine knew his landlord was waiting there in the darkness before he reached the landing. He could smell him, even against the stench of rotting eggs - he reeked of Turkish cigarettes.

‘Good evening to you, Mr. Rogers,’ he said, taking the last pair of steps in one. ‘And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?’

‘I’ve had enough!’ snarled the landlord. He limped backwards until resting a shoulder on the wall.

‘Enough of what?’

‘Of your chasing away my potential tenants! You make this place sound like *Silence of the Lambs!*’

Blaine untied his coat’s belt and fumbled for the key.

‘Was it wrong out me to point out the highlights? The abundance of free vermin, the rising damp, the curious case of Mr. Wilson in 3D.’

‘I want you out of here tomorrow, Williams!’

‘But...’

‘No buts! Just get the hell out!’

Ten

A line of black limousines stretched down the street, high society streaming out of them, and in through the wrought iron gates of the Benani Mansion. The ladies were mostly in woven silk jelabas, jewels glittering in their ears and around their necks; their husbands impeccable in tuxedos.

On either side of the entrance flambeau were burning, their flames licking the night air, the ground beneath them sprinkled with rose petals, picked that morning in the foothills of the Atlas. Inside the gates, a band of Jajouka musicians were playing, brought in by bus from the Riff. Armed with tambours, fiddles, and with simple wooden pipes, they had been the only choice that Hicham Benani had successfully made. Their music reminded him of his Berber ancestry, and of carefree summers cavorting in the hills in Morocco’s north.

The platinum light of a television team blinded the guests as they entered, running the gauntlet of welcome, before making their way through to the party within.

Against the scent of roasting lamb and of white lilies, Hicham Benani and his daughter, mingled. They spluttered superlatives and thanks, as an army of waiters moved between the guests, armed with trays laden with food, and with crystal flutes of vintage Champagne.

Eleven

The revolving door to the street slowed as it turned the last few inches. Blaine stumbled out, the final box filled with his possessions clutched in his hands. Balanced on the box, like a crown, was his precious fedora. Upon it his most prized trophy of all - the stub of a cinema ticket from premiere night.

With care, he placed the box beside all the others on the curb, slipped the ticket in his pocket, and did a count. There were fifteen boxes in all, packed tight with a lifetime's collection of *Casablanca* memorabilia. Beside them was a single vinyl suitcase a little the worse for wear and, beside that, half a dozen framed posters, each one an original of the same legendary film.

Blaine scanned the street for the van that the porter had ordered for him. With no sign of it, he picked up his satchel and went back inside to check.

'Hey, Al, he's still not out there.'

'OK. I'll give 'em a call.'

He dialled the number and was put on hold.

'I hate the Beach Boys,' he said.

Blaine tapped his watch.

'He should have been here half an hour ago.'

There was a grumbling sound outside, as if it were about to rain. The porter peered out at the sky just as the dispatcher came back on the line.

'Yeah this is Al at Atlantic Avenue. We ordered a van to go to...'

'To storage in Jackson Heights,' Blaine whispered.

'To Queens. Yeah. That's right.' Al hung up the phone. 'Any minute now,' he said.

Blaine gave a thumbs up and went out to the curb.

He did a double take.

All the boxes were gone.

The only thing left was a poster of Humphrey Bogart, with the word *Casablanca* emblazoned in red along the bottom edge. The glass had been shattered, and there was a boot-print across Bogart's face.

In the distance, slaloming down Atlantic Avenue, was a dump truck.

Blaine's hands gripped his cheeks. He couldn't move, couldn't make a sound. Then, slowly, the vacuum in his lungs filled with air.

‘Screw you, you bastards! And screw you Mr. Rogers! And you Mr. Wilson, and you too, Laurie! Screw the whole damned lot of you!’

Twelve

Poised on the marble steps that led down to the terrace, Ghita surveyed her guests with her best friend, Aicha. They were both dressed in couture gowns, every inch of visible skin laden with cut jewels and gold. Ghita’s neck was hidden beneath a splendid sapphire and diamond necklace, a matching tiara resting gently on her chestnut hair.

‘You’ve got the whole zoo here tonight,’ said Aicha, sipping her Champagne.

‘And to think that this is just the engagement,’ Ghita added.

‘Sweet of your father to roll out the red carpet.’

Ghita turned to face her friend, a look of annoyance in her eye.

‘And what’s wrong with that? As I’ve told him so often, he mustn’t be shy about blowing a little change if he wants to be respected by society.’

A waiter swanned up, a silver tray of canapés in hand. Aicha took one. Foie gras on a bed of Beluga from the Caspian.

‘This is divine. Where d’you get them?’

Ghita’s glance moved dreamily through the guests below.

‘I sent the jet to Paris this morning,’ she said. ‘We emptied half of Fauchon. But if you’re serving vintage Cristal, how can you have anything but the best caviar? Anyway, it’s just money. And Baba can always make some more of that.’

Thirteen

Huddled up at a corner table at Rick’s Diner, Blaine opened his satchel, and spilled its contents over the table. There was a *Casablanca* mug, a bound copy of the original screenplay, a passport, wallet, and the studio shot of Bogart that had decorated desk number 52. Propped up in the chair across from him was the glassless picture frame, the smudged boot-print across his screen hero’s face.

The waiter glided over, notepad in hand.

‘What’ll it be?’

‘What’s the Special?’

‘Couscous with prunes.’

‘I’ll take that... with fries, and a Bud Lite.’

The waiter scribbled, grinned robotically, and was gone.

Blaine sat quite still, his eyes locked on Humphrey’s, as he contemplated his loss. At first he felt terrible remorse, as he remembered each individual object that had been swallowed then pulverized by the mechanical monster. He half-wondered whether there was any hope of making an insurance claim. But even if he had grounds, how could he put a price on a collection that had taken his entire life to amass.

The couscous arrived, fries at the side. The waiter raised the clay pot’s conical lid and clenched his face in another smile. All he was thinking about was the tip.

Blaine dug a fork into the couscous, moved it to his mouth, swallowed, then grimaced. Across from him, it seemed as though Bogart was grimacing too.

‘Excuse me!’

The waiter gushed over, face wrapped with a taut grin.

‘Yes, sir, what can I do for you?’

‘I’m not gonna bore you with details, but I’m not having the greatest of weeks. So I came in here because couscous is the one thing I expect the universe to deliver without surprises.’

The waiter narrowed his eyes.

‘And?’

‘And, this couscous tastes like salty gravel. It’s barely even cooked.’

‘We haven’t had any other complaints, sir.’

‘Yeah, well maybe your other clients are cement mixers, but I’m not!’

The waiter’s cheerful demeanour evaporated. He loomed down over Blaine and Bogart, his fingers gnarled like talons.

‘Listen to me, you schmuck!’ he demanded. ‘I’ve had enough of you. If our couscous isn’t to your liking, you can get lost. Go up to some chichi Moroccan restaurant on the West Side. Or better still, get your royal ass down to Casablanca!’

Blaine was about to explode. But something stopped him, something deep inside. All of a sudden he was calm.

‘That’s it...’ he said in a whisper.

‘Huh?’

‘You’re a frigging genius. What’s your name.’

‘Carl.’

‘Thank you Carl. I don’t know how to thank you enough.’

‘Thank you for what?’

‘For saving my life.’