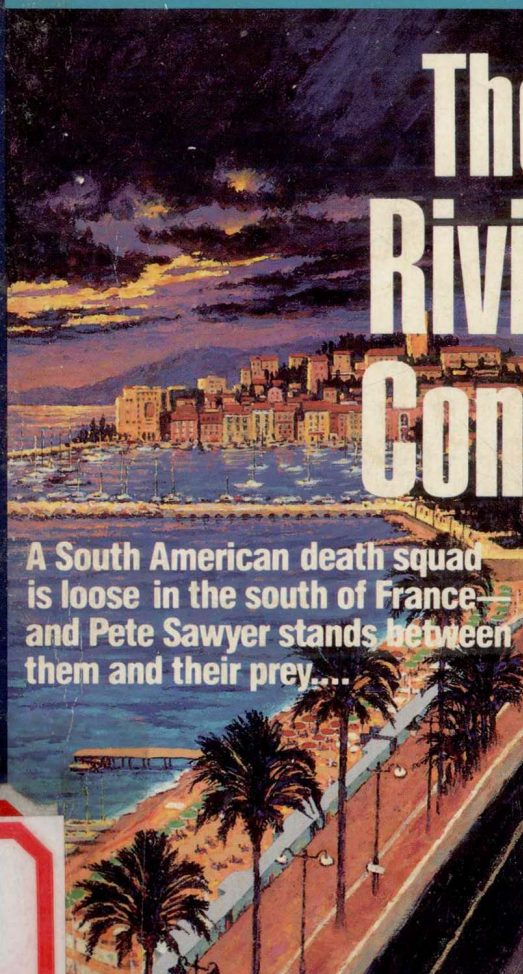


A STONE ANGEL Novel by MARVIN ALBERT



The Riviera Contract

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is loose in the south of France—
and Pete Sawyer stands between
them and their prey....

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THE
RIVERA
CONTRACT

Marvin Albert

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I was sure there'd been at least two of them. Because he wasn't gagged, and there was no gag in sight. Someone would have had to clamp two hands over his mouth while the other did the knife job. Otherwise his screams would have been heard outside the house.

They'd wanted something. Something more than his pain. They'd been after information. The hands would have lifted from his mouth now and then, to let him tell what they wanted to know. I had no idea what that was, but I had no doubt he'd told it.

I fought off a wave of dizziness.

I didn't want to think about it anymore.

I just wanted to get the hell out of there. . . .

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❁ 1 ❁

THE FIRST TIME I SAW MANON JABOT, SHE WAS GETTING beaten up under a palm tree in the back garden of a five-star hotel in Cannes during the annual hard-sell carnival of the international film festival.

As it does every May, the frenzied glamour of the festival was filling Cannes with crowds of people from the rest of the French Riviera. All hungering to mingle with or at least gape at the movie celebrities who'd flown in from other parts of the world to promote their wares. I usually give it a miss. I'm allergic to business cocktail parties, and that is essentially what the film festival is, on a very large and loud and hyperthyroid scale.

But that year a friend of mine, Libby Arlen, was in a picture competing for the prizes, and the word around Cannes was that she might win a *Palme d'Or* for her performance.

Libby had never considered herself a real actress. She'd been a star some years back—one of Hollywood's sex symbols for almost a decade—but she'd quit when makeup artists began having difficulty covering up the wrinkles. She hadn't done another film since marrying Egon Mulhausser, an Austrian Grand Prix champion whose own career as a racing driver had terminated spectacularly when he'd almost burned to death in the crash of his Formula One car at Zandvoort. Libby and Egon now ran a chic restaurant up in Eze Village, a ten-minute drive from my house down along the coast, and both liked their lives just fine that way. But then a high-voltage producer had persuaded Libby that it might be fun

for her to do a small character role in a film being shot in France.

The producer's interest, of course, was solely in the residual pull Libby Arlen's name might have for older moviegoers. Her part wasn't intended to be much more than a cameo, requiring only a few days' work. But the film's director and writer discovered an unexpected on-screen flair for warm, knowing humor, and they kept adding scenes for her. By the time the shooting finished, Libby's role had turned into a juicy one.

The possibility that she might have somehow become a real actress after all, in her middle age, put Libby into such a nervous high that she needed some steadying support when she showed up at the festival hall that afternoon. The three of us walked into the theater close together: with Libby's fingers digging into my arm on one side of her and Egon's on her other side.

The picture wasn't bad. The male star played a young widower with two small kids and too many girlfriends eager to become their new mommy. Libby played his mother, who took over with the kids when he was too broke to pay babysitters. She was old enough to be a grandmother and looked it—but she was also proof that a growing number of grandmothers these days are beautiful and full of sexy charm. And the relaxed, slightly salty wit was pure Libby Arlen, not something taught her for the role. By halfway through the picture it was obvious, from the sounds around us every time she showed up in a scene, that the audience was falling in love with her.

When the film ended Libby walked out of the theater to a standing ovation. And in no further need of close support from her husband and me. Two other men, an agent and a studio head, flanked her on the walk to the hotel where the company that had made the film was throwing a late afternoon party in the lounge bar. Egon and I trailed behind, overhearing snippets of fervent sales pitch from both men.

The agent was assuring Libby she was a shoo-in for the *Palme d'Or*, and swearing his agency could practically guarantee her an Oscar for best supporting actress, based on a

combination of its powerful connections and Hollywood's sentimental feelings about old stars who made comebacks. The studio head was talking up a TV series starring Libby—what it would be about, he didn't know yet, that wasn't his department—and reminding her of how much dough Lucille Ball had raked in with "I Love Lucy."

The hotel was packed with people and noise. Power brokers flexing their leverage. Star performers and directors exuding fine-tuned charisma. Agents maneuvering through the crush with sleek purposefulness, armed with deals sharper than a shark's teeth. Producers accepting kudos and shrugging off fiascos, pushing new projects and arguing percentages of gross and net. Journalists scrambling for interviews, sniffing for gossip, praying for scandals, snatching free drinks. Coke merchants quietly peddling that trusty little cure-all for mental chaos, shredded nerves, and shaky confidence.

One of Hollywood's top star jocks surged ahead of his three bodyguards to hug Libby, confessing that he'd been in lust with her since he was sixteen and was eager and able to prove he still was. Egon strolled off to the bar with a small, indulgent smile. He would be the one in the limelight the following day, when they went to the Grand Prix race in Monte Carlo. Then it would be Libby's turn to stand aside and watch, while TV cameras moved in on his famous burn-scarred face, and pretty racing groupies begged for his autograph, brushed him with their precocious curves, and tucked their phone numbers into his pocket.

He isolated himself at the far end of the bar and gestured for me to join him. I shook my head and waved good-bye. Libby was coping with her reborn celebrity just fine all by herself, and the fusion of glittering smiles and burning ulcers in that lounge was reaching critical level. I extricated myself and slipped away through a rear corridor.

My car was in a garage four short blocks from the beach-front. I was angling in that direction across the garden behind the hotel when I was stopped by an angry snarl and a yelp of pain.

Two different voices. Both female. Off to my right, quite

close. I detoured through the semitropical shrubbery in that direction.

They were under a large palm tree. The girl on the ground was small and slender, about seventeen years old, and extremely pretty. She had that combination of very dark complexion and exquisitely sculpted features you see on some Ethiopians and Yemenites. Her white lace dress had been ripped down to the waist, and her delicately curved lower lip was starting to bleed a little. She looked dazed as she shoved herself up to a sitting position on the recently mowed grass, her back against the tree trunk.

The woman standing over her was a decade older. A leggy redhead with enough of what it takes to give an outfit of designer jeans, cowboy boots, and blue linen shirt a look of casual chic. An impression spoiled, right then, by her frosty expression and clenched fists.

I didn't know yet that the girl she'd knocked down was named Manon Jabot—nor anything else about her except that she'd tangled with more trouble than she could handle. But I did know the woman she'd tangled with.

Sandrine Tally.

World-class courtesans gravitate to every Cannes Festival. Because that's when the town bulges with their kind of quarry. Businessmen away from home base and used to the best money can buy. Bulling their way through a couple of weeks of intense pressure, and in need of an expert's administration of total relaxation at any spare minute's notice, round the clock. And all of them able to bury the extravagant prices charged for that kind of quality servicing in their tax-deductible festival expenses. Usually under "business entertainment."

So the courtesans jet in each year—from hot money cities like Paris, Tokyo, and Los Angeles. Places where a world-class reputation guarantees the merchandise is something very special. I didn't know where Sandrine Tally had jetted in from this year, but she was originally a home-grown Riviera product.

I'd run into her a couple times, and what she hadn't told me about herself, I'd heard from others. The Côte d'Azur is

a strung-out series of interrelated communities. People at one end of it know people at the other end, and gossip is the favorite sport of the native population. I have a professional interest in that sport. A private investigator has to know his territory and what goes on in it. You are constantly adding to your fund of gossip, rumor, and inside information—and to your sources for all three. Even if I had never met Sandrine Tally, I would have known a lot about her.

She had begun sharpening her skills as an erotic companion locally when she was sixteen. By the time she was eighteen, she'd gained enough confidence to head north and pit herself against the world's most accomplished call girls. Her confidence hadn't been misplaced.

She had a good figure, but her face was more interesting than pretty. Very strong nose, too much mouth. Her voice made up for that. It was husky-thick, its sultry promise unforced. It just came out that way, and turned a lot of men to jelly. A number of women, too. And she delivered enough of what the voice promised to have established an extremely select—meaning very wealthy—clientele, in Paris, Geneva, and London.

But Sandrine Tally always returned to the Côte d'Azur for the Cannes Festival.

I watched her unclench her fists and look down at the cringing girl with the beginning of an amused half smile. Neither of them had seen me as yet.

"If you want to break into the business, *petite*," Sandrine told the girl, "don't try doing it by grabbing for another whore's property. When Gavin comes to the festival, he belongs to me."

It required no effort to figure out who "Gavin" was. Gavin Cooke. The forty-five-year-old son of a British movie and stage star. He had parlayed his father's contacts and his own sharp brain into becoming England's most successful producer of theatrical and television films. Back in London he had a reputation for being all business: stiff and square. But when he came to Cannes he liked to unwind, very privately but very intensely. And for the last three festivals in a row, the room he had reserved next to his suite had been for San-

drine Tally. It didn't surprise anyone too much. People who had reason to know said Sandrine was a habit easy to acquire and hard to break.

The girl cringing against the base of the palm tree looked up at her tearfully. "I wasn't trying to take him away from you. I just wanted to meet him."

"Sure," Sandrine Tally said cynically. "But go meet somebody else. If I see you anywhere in sight of Gavin again, I'll get *really* angry at you. And you wouldn't want that to happen, because so far I've only been mildly annoyed."

The girl surprised both of us. She suddenly uncringed and rammed one of her high-heeled shoes into Sandrine's ankle. Sandrine let out a pained squeal, jerked up her hurt leg, lost her balance on the other leg, and fell down on her hands and knees. The girl shoved herself away from the palm trunk and cocked her small-boned fist to throw a *haymaker*.

She had the speed and strength of youth. But she lacked Sandrine Tally's combat experience, honed by regular sessions at martial arts classes. A hooker who hopes to survive has to be able to deal with the occasional guy who gets out of hand. Sandrine blocked the girl's punch with her left hand and clouted her across the side of her face with her right forearm.

The blow knocked the girl rolling away over the manicured grass. Sandrine jumped to her feet and got set to *stomp* her.

I stepped in fast behind her, closed a hand around her arm, and yanked her back against me. She twisted around in my grip, her free hand instinctively coming up like a claw, ready to stab at my eyes. She stopped herself when she recognized me. She took a deep breath, and then slowly dropped the threatening hand. But her arm remained tensed in my grip.

"If that kid is a friend of yours . . ." she said tightly.

"She's not," I told her. "But if you do any more damage and somebody else comes by and sees her, they're going to call the cops. You don't want that."

Sandrine Tally took another deep breath. "True," she said, her voice back to normal. I felt her arm relax, and I let go of it.

The girl was sitting up, looking groggy. The flesh over one cheekbone and around the eye above it was beginning to swell, balancing the cut lip on the other side of her face. With her dark skin, the discoloration of the bruise didn't show through yet. But it would, and it would be pretty spectacular.

Sandrine looked down at her again and got a faintly regretful expression. "I'm sorry I had to hurt you," she said. "But I'm getting too old to take competition from babies. Sometimes a guy can get out of control when something as young as you throws herself at him."

"Go fuck yourself," the girl snarled, the English words accented all wrong. French teenagers keep picking up phrases from American records and movies. With a preference for the nastier ones, naturally.

Sandrine Tally sighed, and looked at me with a shrug. "Maybe you can straighten the kid out. I have to get back to work." She strode off toward the hotel.

I switched my gaze from her buttocks to the girl on the ground. She was making no effort to get up. Too busy hurting and feeling sorry for herself. I couldn't blame her. She was a pitiful sight. Her eye was getting hard to see inside that swollen bruise. Her lip had stopped bleeding, but the trickle from the cut had smeared her chin.

I stepped over to an ornamental fountain and took off my silk bandanna. The bandanna was my concession to the formality of Libby Arlen's comeback film. I do own one necktie, but it would take something more than the Cannes Festival to make me wear it. Soaking the bandanna in the cold water, I carried it back to the girl and crouched down before her.

She looked at me, slightly puzzled, and winced when I first touched the wet bandanna to her lip. Then she held herself still while I gently cleaned the dried blood from her lip and chin.

"Thank you," she said softly when I finished.

"The cut isn't bad enough to need stitching," I told her. "But you'd better go home now and put some ice on your face."

"How in the world can I get home? I came down by bus.

I can't take a bus or even a taxi looking like . . ." She glanced down at herself and suddenly registered how much of her was exposed by the ripped-open dress. She wasn't wearing a bra, and her breasts were like her face had been before Sandrine Tally had happened to it: very young and pretty.

She clutched at the dress with both hands and pulled it as closed as she could. If she was blushing, the darkness of her skin prevented me from detecting it.

"Where do you live?" I asked her.

"Up in the hills not far from Grasse. Between Saint-Cézaire and Saint-Vallier."

That would be a thirty- to forty-minute drive. I said, "I'll take you."

She gave me another quiet "Thank you," appreciating my offer but not surprised by it. Pretty as she was, she'd become used to men wanting to do her favors.

I stood up and reached down a hand. She gripped it with one of hers, while her other hand did its best to keep her torn dress together. When she was up on her feet she let go of my hand and took the wet bandanna from me, pressing it against her bruised face. She winced, and then nodded at a small purse near the base of the palm tree: "Can you take that for me?" It fitted into the side pocket of my jacket.

I led the way out of the hotel garden, and we walked the few short blocks to the garage. Clutching her torn dress and covering half her face with the bandanna, she kept her head down to avoid meeting all the stares she got along the way. She settled into the relative privacy of my car with obvious relief. Even relaxing her grip on the torn dress, just a bit. Just enough to afford a pleasant glimpse; something she was not unaware of. Her good eye turned my way, and she smiled a tiny smile. After that I kept my eyes determinedly on the road ahead.

I took Route 85 out of Cannes and headed up into the hills to her home.

And that's how I came to meet the dictator.

Along with the hard-boiled remnants of his *gardes du corps*.

❁ 2 ❁

ROUTE 85 IS ALSO CALLED THE ROUTE NAPOLÉON, BECAUSE that's the road he took—after his escape from Elba—on his triumphal march from the south coast of France to Paris. Followed by his less triumphal Battle of Waterloo. I stuck with his road up past Grasse and on toward Saint-Vallier. Along the way I told her my name, and she told me hers was Manon Jabot.

“A name,” she added, “that is about as French as you can get—but I’m not really French.”

“You sound French.”

“Well, I’m not. First, because I wasn’t born here. I was born in Central America. While my father was . . . employed there. Second, I’m a half-breed. Or maybe an eighth-or tenth-breed. My father is French, but my mother was Argentine—with a fantastic combination of bloodlines. Indian, black African, Yemenite, Portuguese, you name it.”

So my guess had been partially correct.

“We have something in common,” I told her. “Being a half-breed. It’s my mother who is French. My father—he died before I was born—was American.”

Manon Jabot made a sympathetic sound. “That must be hard—never having known one of your parents. I was twelve when my mother got sick and died. But at least I got to know her. She was very beautiful. She was a model in Brussels when my father met her. Were you raised here in France?”

“Partly. But more in Chicago. That’s where my father’s parents lived. I got most of my education there.”

"I went to schools in Switzerland," Manon Jabot told me. "The French part, naturally. That's where I was when my mother died. My father flew over, to tell me about it in person. He took it so hard, I thought for a while that he—"

The sentence broke abruptly. She made a distressed sound, deep in her slender throat.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "*My father*—if he sees me like this—what can I tell him?"

"You can tell him a thief tried to snatch your handbag, and you had to fight him off. If you don't want to tell him you got hurt trying to join the festival's whore brigade."

"I wasn't!" She tried to glare at me, but that hurt her face too much and she gave it up. "I want to be an actress, get into movies. With all those film people in Cannes, I thought I might get a chance to ask some of them for advice about it. I hung around the front of that hotel because so many of the really important ones seem to gather there."

I got a distinct impression that, in spite of her battle wounds, little Manon Jabot was turned on by her adventure and getting a kick out of recounting it:

"When Gavin Cooke came out, I recognized him from seeing him on the television coverage of the festival. Well, I just took my courage in both hands and marched up to him. Introduced myself and told him about needing some advice about getting into films. He was very kind—not at all stand-offish. He even invited me to have a drink with him out on the front terrace, and he insisted on my calling him by his first name. Can you imagine that?"

I could imagine it. With no trouble at all. The girl was ripe for the plucking, and looked young enough to add some kinky spice to the plucking.

"The waiter wouldn't serve me a drink with alcohol," she went on, with relish. "He thought I was underage, legally. I started to argue, but Gavin said the waiter was quite right, that I was too young, and he ordered tea for me instead."

She surprised me with a giggle. "Gavin was very sweet about it, and I didn't really mind. If it made him feel good to act like he was my elderly uncle or guardian, it didn't hurt me to play along with it and act like I was his little niece."

I took my eyes off the road long enough for another quick look at her. It wasn't the first time she'd given me reason to figure there was a canny brain behind that bruised, pretty face.

Over their drinks—her tea and Gavin Cooke's gin and tonic—she had told him about acting in school plays. Cooke had told her honestly that that wasn't enough. But he'd added that a lot could depend on how her looks and personality came across on film; which was also pretty much the truth. He had gone on to explain, though, that for someone with no professional background to get a screen test would usually require forceful manipulation from a highly established talent agent.

At that point Sandrine Tally had come up on the terrace and joined them. According to Manon Jabot, Sandrine hadn't seemed upset to find the girl at Cooke's table. She'd been acting relaxed and friendly when two men arrived to talk business with Cooke. And he had suggested that Sandrine and Manon go off and wait for him in his suite.

"He said the three of us could have dinner together there later," the girl told me. "He said by then he would have time to give some thought to whether he might be able to recommend me to a good Paris agent."

Gavin Cooke's suite was in a different hotel, two blocks behind the Croisette. Manon Jabot had assumed Sandrine was taking her there: "And then, when we were all alone out in that garden, she suddenly went crazy on me—like you saw."

"Not so crazy," I said. "Not from her viewpoint. She was just being a tough businesswoman, protecting one of her regular sources of revenue."

"She didn't have any reason to worry about me endangering that."

"Sure she did. Gavin Cooke sometimes enjoys three in a bed, and Sandrine doesn't mind going along with that. As long as she gets to recruit the other girl. Which means one she knows she can control and get rid of afterwards. She didn't recruit you, so she had to worry she might not be able to keep Cooke's interest in your sweet body a brief one."

"I had no intention," Manon Jabot said firmly, "of going to bed with Gavin—with or without *her*."

"You can stop acting naive," I told her. "I know you're not stupid."

She was quiet for a bit after that, and then she said matter-of-factly: "No, I'm not. I am fairly bright. And yes, it did occur to me that Gavin might want to go to bed with me. So what? That is how many big actresses got their start."

That was true enough, so I dropped the subject. I have an allergy against preaching at people. The right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" includes the liberty to choose one's own life, and to decide for oneself what constitutes happiness, and how to pursue it. That often leads to terminal trouble, of course. But so can doing almost anything at all. Including minding one's own business. Only the dead are past making wrong choices.

The lowering sun was spreading a golden patina over the hills around us when we reached Saint-Vallier. I left Napoléon Bonaparte's road and took a narrower one that led toward Saint-Cézaire. It twisted through rugged terrain containing scattered reminders of a conquering general who made a name for himself long before Napoléon. Julius Caesar campaigned against Pompey in this area, during the century before Christ. Most of the medieval towns were built on the remnants of Roman military camps. "Saint-Cézaire" derives from *Greniers de César*, a fortified lookout post named after him that the Roman troops established there, on a steep hillside where it could observe everything that moved through the Siagne River valley below.

That village was still out of sight, ahead of us, when Manon Jabot told me to pull over to the side of the road. I stopped the car at a driveway entrance that was blocked by a rusting but still solid iron gate. The gate, and the stone wall stretching away from it to either side, were too high for me to see the extensive estate inside. What I could see was the estate's name, on a signpost next to the gate: Lost Horizons. And I suddenly realized exactly where I was.