

# Everlong Incense Blend:

## An Exotic Tale of Love and Mystery

A tall, dapper man - with a razor thin mustache crawling across the bottom of his upper lip - wearing a cream colored suit, and a 40s style fedora cocked jauntily over one eye, slinks apprehensively, and as incognito as he can muster, through the rich, musty alleys of Old Tangiers. Alleys that have supported the trading of silks and spices and oils since before the man's grandfather's grandfather was born.

The all-knowing sun has just set in a blazing display of celestial fireworks. The sepulchral flaming disc arced its familiar descent as it has for millions of years, snuffing out the light in stages, putting to bed the creatures of the day, and sounding the dusky, silent alarm for the prowlers and poachers of the night. The harsh white Arabian light of day is gone, but the ancient heat remains. The hard summer heat of the desert.

Strange sounds and smells permeate the air as the man navigates the maze of stalls and shops, following the crude map he holds in his right hand - carved ebony walking stick clenched firmly in his left. A map that had been hand-drawn on a cocktail napkin just half an hour prior. A map given to him by the bell captain at the Night Shade Hotel, where he is staying with his new Panamanian bride, Elise.

He picks up the beat of his cadence, cuts left, then right, then left again, and finally stops – particles of airborne sand finding their way

into the comfort of his patent leather loafers – in front of a shop that does not look open. Nor does it look like it has been open for many years. After a brief pause, and a quick mopping of his brow with a white cotton monogrammed handkerchief, he trepidatiously tries the handle on the door. It releases freely and instantly – as if the latch has been freshly oiled and was anxiously awaiting him to apply just the slightest pressure. It swings open wide with a slow moan that sounds as if the door is tired, and yearns to be replaced with a younger, more enthusiastic portal.

The man hesitates for just a quarter of a moment, then puts one sandy-shoed foot forward, and enters an establishment unlike any he has ever entered before.

The shop is thick with dust and floored with wide wooden planks that are worn and uneven. The man is careful not to trip over the edges. Odd antiquities are scattered about with seemingly no order. An eight-foot tall, carved wood, cigar store Indian presides haughtily over the bizarre scene from a vantage point on a raised platform in the corner, seemingly on the lookout for shoplifters.

Stuffed bears and bobcats and falcons loom and leer ferociously, frozen forever in aggressive poses they may or may not have ever struck in life. Mechanical contraptions comprised of all manner of gears and levers – whose purposes are unknown and unknowable – squat atop intricately inlaid dressers of teak and mahogany, drawers overflowing with rare and unusual fabrics, some laced with gold and beaded with gemstones.

Sealed glass jars in a variety of sizes line a wall of shelves. Jars filled with what were once living things. Things that are living no

more, preserved in stasis for reasons the man cannot fathom, but suspects are related to black magic.

As the man in the cream colored suit struggles to comprehend the contents of the odd and eerie shop, a very old and majestically wrinkled gentleman, who could not be more than an inch over five feet tall, and who has assuredly seen no less than one hundred summers come and go, suddenly appears out of thin air, fully formed, behind a glass-topped counter in the rear of the shop. He is clad, somewhat remarkably, in a bright red silk kimono that has been emblazoned with embroidered golden dragons. He stands perfectly erect, as if there is a long, straight, metal rod running through his spine. He is bald as a stone, and on top of his head, inked into his scalp, resides a black and white tattoo of the Chinese yin-yang symbol.

His appearance startles the man in the cream colored suit, and he takes half a step back, instinctively tightening the grip on his walking stick. Once he overcomes his initial surprise, he loosens his grip and approaches the counter, which doubles as a display case full of Turkish cigarettes.

“I’m on my honeymoon,” the man in the suit blurts out, wasting no time in getting straight down to business, not wanting to spend any more minutes than he has to in this mysterious place that has an unmistakable air of birth. And death. His voice cracks with nervousness, and he clears his throat before resuming. “I want our first night together to be... special.”

The wizened old merchant behind the counter nods wordlessly, expressionless. He slides open a panel at the back and reaches blindly into the display case – that the man in the cream colored suit

now realizes houses more than just cigarettes – and pulls out a fairly new-looking, rectangular metal tin with an artistically designed, golden label on it. He places the tin gingerly on top of the glass counter, as if it were an item of great value, and fragility.

“Place a pinch of this in a bowl made of rock, and light it on fire, when it is time,” he says, in a voice remarkably clear and free of accent. A voice that belies his innumerable years, and seems full of vigor. And virility.

“What is it?” The man in the cream colored suit, with the hat, and the walking stick, and the razor thin mustache, asks.

“Matters not what it is,” the wizened old merchant - a well-preserved antique in his own right - replies. “Only what it does.” The man looks down at the tin. “Everlong,” he whispers quietly under his breath.

“Yes, Everlong,” the merchant replies. The faintest hint of a smile steals like a shadow across the crags and scars of his well-weathered face, then instantly retreats back to whence it came, as if it never happened at all.

The man picks up the tin, opens it, lifts it up toward his mustache. It appears to be an incense blend of dried herbs and flowers. But the man can tell immediately that this is no ordinary blend. Its aroma is unlike any he has ever sensed before.

He picks up notes of rose petals, daimiana, cardamom, and ginger – scents he recognizes from his time roaming about the open air markets, and dining in the plush tents of the sultans – but he has

never experienced them in this way, nor could he tell what other magical herbs and spices were included in the blend.

The scent is so soft and gentle, yet powerful – so alluring, so arousing, so sensual, that the man quickly closes the tin and hopes the wizened old merchant hasn't noticed that he has embarrassingly begun to blush.

“What do I owe you?” The man in the cream colored suit asks. He looks up.

The wizened old merchant is gone.