

Stamping Butterflies

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Beijing outraged . . .

Someone had taken the fate of the world and tossed it onto a chair and somebody else had dumped it under a table, where it remained until a thin, grey-haired tramp picked up the paper, wiped off the worst of the grime and spread it out.

Forty-one degrees in Cairo. Snow in Cape Town. Russia's president-for-life had just re-invaded Chechnya, the Chinese navy was blockading Taiwan and the current occupant of the White House had announced his intention to become the first president since Truman to visit North Africa.

It was five years since the tramp had read a newspaper and within three paragraphs he remembered why. His life was messy enough without adding complications from the rest of the world.

'Monsieur?'

This was his cue to order a coffee or leave. Counting his coins without taking his hand from his coat pocket, the *clochard* nodded. 'Espresso,' he said. He didn't blame the boy. There'd been that summer he arrived as the shutters were opening and stayed until the old woman, the one who was now dead, shooed him out on to Rue du Temple so she could finish mopping up for the night.

Leaving a handful of coppers, mostly to prove he could, the tramp began to fold his paper. That was when he first noticed two young men going from table to table, both dressed in the default cool of New York or London, black T-shirts hanging loose outside black chinos, expensive shades and simple shoes.

It was the dress of urban anonymity. One that spoke of hurried lives

and the need to blend into a certain strata of city life. In Paris, where T-shirts got tucked over even the proudest bellies and dressing alike was the preserve of *banlieue* dwellers or *bon chic/bon gen* couples with five-button blazers and Rue St Honoré frocks, such foreignness shouted trouble.

At least it did to the tramp in the tweed coat. And shouted it loud enough for him to push back his chair, stand up and squeeze past a German tourist, who promptly checked her pockets, then frowned, wondering if she'd just been perved.

The men caught up with him later, probably by accident, at a Moroccan stall in the Marché des Enfants Rouge, where he sat scraping chicken tagine from a pot while he watched a Sudanese boy argue with a thickset girl who looked half Arab, half something else.

Both the girl and boy knew he was watching, neither minded.

A triangle, made up of Rues St Paul and de Turenne to the east, des Archives to the west and the river to the south defined the edges of his world, within which the tramp was known and obscurely famous.

No one talked of the heroin, the cheap brandy, the nights he never quite made it back to a derelict, fifth-floor room overlooking Passage St Jacques. The Marais was a very private place. So private that many of the tourists who now roamed its narrow streets barely noticed it was there.

'I'm looking for Jake Razor,' one of the men said, no introduction and no politeness, just the bald statement and the expectation that this would be enough.

The man in the old tweed coat looked blank.

'Jake Razor.'

'*Pardonnez-moi?*'

They stared at each other and there it might have ended, except that the first of the Gap-clad men signalled to the second, who pulled up a chair. '*Nous cherchons pour Jake Razor. Le mathématicien et guitariste punk . . .*' From his jacket he retrieved a press card and a letter from some editor at *Rolling Stone*, dumping these beside an old photograph of a bare-chested, snarling boy in black jeans.

'*Avez-vous* seen him?'

'He's dead,' said the tramp. 'Years back. There was a fire. It was on the radio.'

Bill Hagsteen sighed. 'That was his lover,' he said. 'The Arab kid.'

Marzaq al-Turq had been born half German and half Turkish, as his

name suggested, but the tramp didn't bother to point this out. 'Even if he's alive,' said the tramp, 'What makes you think he moved to Paris?'

'We have information,' said Bill Hagsteen.

'There's a family trust,' the other said. 'It bought an apartment in Rue St Paul, roughly fifteen years ago.'

'But no one from the family uses it. In fact none of them have been anywhere near this city in all that time.' They were like an old married couple, finishing each other's sentences without even noticing.

'No problem,' said the tramp. 'Give me the number and I'll take you there.'

'If we had that we could find it ourselves.'

'We shouldn't even know about the apartment,' added Bill Hagsteen. 'The trust doesn't take kindly to enquiries from the press.'

The man in the tweed coat thought about this and then thought about it some more. Pulling a final sliver of flesh from his tagine bone, he pushed away the empty cooking pot. 'Maybe I can help,' he said.

The *hamman* was at the southern end of Rue St Paul, and the tramp enjoyed seeing his new friends strip to their towels and sit sweating on tiled benches as they watched every man who entered for signs that he might once have been lead guitarist with Razor's Edge.

'Where now?' Bill Hagsteen asked, which the tramp took as an indication that he'd had enough of watching locals shift uneasily under his gaze or glare right back. They ate brunch at the Cajun place next to the Arts, less than a minute from the steam bath. And then Bill had the idea of checking if Jake had ever rented a room at the hotel. So their guide went in by himself and came out again seconds later.

'Fifty euros,' he said.

'Twenty-five,' said the other.

Bill Hagsteen pulled fifty from a crocodile skin wallet and handed it over without comment.

Folding the euros into his hand and pocketing them before he even reached reception, the tramp smiled at the woman behind the desk. He was smarter today. Still wearing his tweed coat, but with a pair of trousers which looked almost clean.

'Sorry about that,' he said, 'forgot something.'

The receptionist gave him the rate card he asked for, explained about weekend deals and then looked at him more closely.

'I'm babysitting Americans,' he explained. They'd nodded to each other in *Le Celtic* a few times though never spoken.

'You're American.' She said this as a fact.

'I've been many things.'

Outside, on the pavement, the tramp regretted that no one resembling Jake now rented a room at the Arts Hotel, although a New York poet had lived there for years. Unfortunately he'd died.

'Did you get a description?'

The tramp shook his head. 'Before her time.'

They stopped to look at the opium pipes in the window of the Buddha shop, crossed the road to cut down Rue Charlemagne, with its blue plaque naming Charles as 'Emperor of the West' and rejoined Rue St Paul via a *passage*, old buildings rising six storeys on either side of the narrow walk-through.

A black woman at the only free till in Monoprix looked briefly at Bill Hagsteen's old photograph and shook her head, her attention already on a man waiting impatiently behind them. Visits to the *tabac* and the English bookshop produced much the same result.

'Tell me,' said their guide, 'how good is your information?'

'Sixty per cent,' said Bill Hagsteen. 'Maybe less.'

'I hope it didn't cost you too much.'

'It cost nothing,' the other said tartly.

'Could be,' said the tramp, as he pocketed their fee, 'that's why it's worthless.'

She was young and pretty and very scared. And 150 euros was what it took to get her delivered to Passage St Jacques in an uninsured taxi, driven by a boy without a licence. Her name was Zeinab and she was shocked to find that the tramp spoke her language and more shocked still that his bed turned out to be a mattress on a metal balcony.

He was, after all, paying a sum she could barely imagine.

'I like fresh air,' the man said. And watched Zeinab smile doubtfully as she glanced around his filthy attic room, with its torn leather chair facing an untuned TV, which she imagined to be broken but he knew replayed proof of the Big Bang, dancing snow from the birth of the universe.

'Three years,' he told her. That was how long he'd been clean.

Another smile twisted the teenager's lips without ever reaching her eyes. Ahmed had made it very clear about what would happen if the tramp had been lying about having money. About what would happen if he got Zeinab back damaged. She'd been there when her pimp took

the man's call, so it was small wonder that her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Ahmed had been the tramp's dealer in the early days, before he sweated out the darkness and his addiction on a mattress, dragged on to the balcony and never returned, an endless reminder not to go back.

'Until midnight,' Zeinab said.

The tramp sighed. He'd told Ahmed that for 150 euros he wanted a girl until sunrise. 'I'm not walking you back at midnight,' he said.

Zeinab shook her head. 'No,' she said, voice firmer. 'Mr Ahmed's coming to collect me.' And then she lay on her front, as the man instructed, though first she folded her clothes.

Sometime between the tears and midnight, darkness attempted to take over, announcing its arrival with a sudden pressure at the back of the tramp's skull. He heard the girl gasp as his fingers tightened on her shoulders and then she was crying, with those blind unconscious sobs of the truly afraid.

'Okay,' he said, 'it's okay.' Not knowing if he was talking to her or to himself. And withdrawing from the tightness of her body, he rolled off and sat with his face to the night wind, listening to his breath steady and the sounds of the city reappear.

'Monsieur . . .'

She knelt behind him, apologising for her terror. Alternating between broken French and a stream of Arabic that trailed into silence as he turned to face her.

'No,' he said firmly. 'Not you, me . . .' And he helped Zeinab to her feet and indicated that she should dress, but she shook her head, eyes huge. It was Ahmed, he realised; the kid was terrified that he might complain to her owner.

'It's okay,' the man insisted, but he didn't stop Zeinab when she sunk to her knees in front of him, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. After a few minutes he lifted her up again and kissed her on her forehead, smelling unwashed hair and panic.

The darkness and he had a clear agreement on what was and wasn't allowed. Reading a paper had been pushing it. The young whore with her olive skin, dark nipples and fear-enhanced eyes was so far outside the rules that the man knew whatever happened next would be bad.

'You know,' he said, as he watched Zeinab eye her clothes. 'You should leave now.' Her breasts were too small to need a bra and the

tramp wondered if her slip was Ahmed's idea or something she'd owned before she became the sadness she now was. It was only when Zeinab climbed into her jeans and pulled on a jacket that he realised the slip was not a slip at all but some kind of transparent shirt.

They waited for Ahmed under the arch where the *passage* met Rue St Paul, five floors of other people's lives stacked over their heads. And when her pimp finally arrived it was in the taxi which had dropped Zeinab at the apartment.

'Jake.'

The tramp shook his head. 'We've been through this,' he said. 'I'm not Jake.'

'Whatever . . .' Checking Zeinab with a quick glance, the pimp appeared satisfied. 'Behave herself?'

'Yeah,' said the tramp, watching the young girl climb in beside Ahmed's driver. 'Good as gold.' The pimp looked pleasantly surprised.

'Okay, then,' he said. 'We're done.'

'Not really,' said the man. 'We agreed until morning.'

'No.' Ahmed shook his head. 'I agreed nothing. You asked, that's different. Still . . .' Dipping his hand into a suit pocket, he produced a small paper bag. 'Here,' he said, 'for old time's sake.' There were five of them, tiny tubes like doll's toothpaste, each with a short needle where the cap should be.

The ultimate painkiller. Battlefield heroin.

A full moon reflected off the river, inlaying its surface with jagged slivers of silver. A cat, hunting along the cobbles, detoured around the tramp in a long looping path when it saw him crouched at the water's edge. A cemetery owl from Père La Chaise swooped low overhead, skimming branches before returning the way it came.

The man who was not Jake Razor considered all of these things as he shucked off his tweed coat and rolled up his sleeve. The River Seine looked almost flat and yet it was not; the river was whatever shape the banks and bottom made it. And the moon, that too looked flat, but only if one thought in two dimensions. Or four, the tramp reminded himself. Sometimes the darkness made him think thoughts which were not entirely his own.

It was only on his way home, early next morning, with *American President Refuses to Sign Space Accord with China, Beijing Outraged* clutched almost forgotten beneath one arm, that the darkness finally told the tramp what he must do. He was passing Rue Charlemagne at

the time, with its blue sign, 'Roi de France, Empereur'. And maybe this was what nudged the darkness into naming its price.

The tramp must kill again. And the person he should kill was the occupant of the White House, Charlemagne's heir, the new Emperor of the West.

CHAPTER I
Marrakech, Saturday 12 May



President Gene Newman liked visiting new cities. In fact, he liked it so much he took the trouble to have one of his interns write up brief histories for each city he was about to visit. The note for Marrakech, named for *Marra Kouch* (meaning unknown), and peopled mainly by Berbers, being North Africans in direct descent from a prehistoric Ibero-Mauretanian culture, had run to five pages and been crammed full of similar facts.

When challenged, the intern informed the President that she hadn't been allowed enough time to make her essay shorter and he should try harder with the history. She was allowed to say things like that. Ally was his only daughter.

'Enjoying yourself?' the US ambassador asked.

The correct response was *Yes*. So Ally nodded, despite midday heat which had sweat running down her spine and was already making embarrassing stains under the arms of her T-shirt.

Most of Marrakech had turned out to watch the new American President, his daughter and their bodyguards trudge across the sticky expanse of Djemaa el Fna, North Africa's most famous square. They were accompanied on this walk by a very senior minister of the Moroccan government and the US ambassador, who was doing his best to look unruffled by the jellaba-clad crowds who pushed against hastily erected barriers.

Gene Newman was here against the advice of his own staff, mostly to prove that he was not the previous incumbent, a man given to calling up generals for advice when playing *Command and Conquer* on the PS2. So said Ally, who'd got it from another intern who had it from

a woman on the switchboard. It was a good story, but probably not true.

Marrakech was the reason Ally had joined him on the North African section of this trip. She'd seen the Medina featured in an old Bond film and wanted to experience the crowds and the chaos of the Old City for herself. He could tell from Ally's expression that she'd been expecting more. That was the big problem with being fifteen, emotions showed on your face. Hypocrisy came with age, at least it did in his experience.

'Maybe that stuff was just for the film . . .'

'Ally?' The President bent his head.

'There were monkeys,' Ally said. 'And bald men juggling knives. Someone had a camel to give rides.'

'We have snake charmers, medicine men and belly dancers.' The Moroccan minister had to lean across Gene Newman to explain this. 'And those people ringing bells in red with the huge hats are water sellers. But sometimes film companies want more.'

Ally nodded, yet still managed to look doubtful.

Her black jeans and long-sleeved purple T-shirt, tied-back blonde hair and huge dark glasses to protect her eyes from the sun, while simultaneously hiding the top half of her face, had been carefully chosen.

Demure enough to impress those behind the barriers grown used to seeing the daughters of *nasrani* tourists wear little more than tight shorts or low-cut vests, but not so much of a compromise that her outfit played badly with hard-core liberals and redneck critics back home.

A scarf had been suggested by the Moroccans and politely rejected. No one really expecting their proposal to be any more than that, a simple suggestion made for form rather than anything else.

The man speaking to Ally Newman was a first cousin of the King, or maybe it was second. Gene Newman knew his name, he just wasn't able to pronounce it, at least not with sufficient confidence to use it socially. So he called the minister 'my friend' and hoped he wasn't causing too much offence.

Although his very presence in Morocco had already caused offence to many, Gene Newman understood this. He'd read the digests and then demanded sight of the CIA originals on which the digests were based. It was touch and go whether this visit would cause more good than harm.

Gene Newman sighed.

‘You also wanted to see the Barbary apes?’

His Excellency looked anxious. As if he should have realised that a thousand years of history was not enough.

‘I’ve been here before,’ admitted President Newman. ‘After college. It’s every bit as impressive as I remember . . . No,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Just forgot to call my wife last night. Not clever.’

‘Ahh.’ The other man looked sympathetic. ‘You could do it immediately after this.’

‘You’re right,’ said Gene Newman. ‘And we probably do need to turn back.’

This last was addressed to his daughter. A nod to the nearest Secret Service agent told the man that the President was done, while an equally quick nod to his daughter, followed by a glance at His Excellency, told Ally exactly what was expected of her.

‘Thank you,’ she said with a smile. ‘It’s been really interesting.’

‘Interesting’ was a Newman family word for boring, but the minister didn’t know that and this was just as well, because Ally could see from her father’s frown that she should have said something different.

‘I mean it,’ she said hastily. ‘It would have been neat to see monkeys but this is really, really . . .’ Ally gestured round the vast square with its jellaba-clad crowd now spilling out on to flat roofs and filling the upper balconies of a long café behind them. ‘It’s really something,’ said Ally.

‘You like?’ The minister sounded pleased. Although why the cousin of a king should care what a fifteen-year-old American girl thought Ally wasn’t sure.

‘Oh yes,’ she started to say. ‘I really—’

That was when the first bullet hit the dust beside her and an agent she’d barely noticed before slammed Ally to the dirt, breaking a floating rib on her left side as he rolled over her, putting his bulk between the girl and the direction of the shot. ‘Stay down,’ growled a voice in Ally’s ear. ‘There might be another.’

The rifle was an old Kropatscheck rechambered for 8mm. It had seen service with the Vichy forces in North Africa and then – a decade later – been wrapped in oilcloth and stacked in the corner of a cellar for a further fifty years, half hidden and almost forgotten.

Until today.

Wiping vomit from his lips, the man who was not Jake fumbled the rifle into its component bits, cleaned the bolt with a scrap of rag held

between shaky fingers, ejected seven unused bullets from the tubular magazine and haphazardly wiped down both magazine and bullets while he waited for the police to find him.

He had failed and for this he would not be forgiven.

The darkness had suggested the minaret of La Koutoubia as an ideal place from which to shoot the President but this proved to be out of the question, because uniforms of every hue had begun locking down the area around Djemaa el Fna before the tramp even remembered where to find the rifle.

Actually, a minaret from any of the other three mosques overlooking the massive square would have done just as well, as would the roof terrace of Café Argana or even Les Terrasses de l'Alhambra, which hadn't been there when he first knew the city.

In the end he'd been reduced to climbing the scaffolding on a building site off Rue Zitoun el Oedim. 'Shit choice,' said the man.

And the ghost at his back had to agree.

Ridiculously beautiful with his honey-dark skin and huge eyes, the teenage boy was arguing with a bare-kneed girl on a roof that no longer existed, but which the man could just have seen had the dog woman's house not fallen down in the years since he'd been away.

Neither the girl, the boy nor the man who remembered them had any doubt about the fact that the boy was losing. And even now, with the Kropatscheck reassembled in his hands and darkness still using his eyes, the bearded man could summon up Marzaq al-Turq's thin face and that of the red-haired girl, all rounded cheeks and down-turned mouth, which only levelled out on the rare occasions when Malika smiled.

'Please,' Moz said, as he combed lemon-juice highlights into Malika's hair. 'This is important.'

The house had belonged to the English woman and sat on the corner of Derb Yassin and a nameless alley, in the old Jewish district, in the days when the Mellah still held more than a handful of *Yehoudia*. Once, of course, there had been nearly forty thousand Jews living in the Mellah but the foundation of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflicts had put an end to that.

When begging didn't work, Moz tried blackmail. 'Look,' he said, 'you have to—'

'No,' said the girl, 'I don't.' Her patience had gone, her voice was tight. If Moz possessed more sense he'd have paid attention to Malika's warning signs.

'You would,' Moz insisted, 'if—'

'If what? *I loved you?*'

Moz nodded.

'You know,' Malika said, 'my mother warned me about boys like you.'

It was a bad joke. The woman was long dead and there *were* no other boys like Moz in Marrakech, nor girls like Malika either; that was what they told themselves. Moz and Malika were what Marrakech had for punks, a half-English waif given to wearing men's shirts instead of dresses and a half-German boy in jeans, with newly dyed black hair and shades stolen from his employer, Jake Razor.

Sat there on the roof of Dar el Beida, at a time somewhere between noon and the next call to prayer, an hour when the city panted like an old cur under the weight of its own exhaustion and only cats and occasional hippies were stupid enough to roam the maze-like streets of the Mellah, Moz finally realised Malika wasn't going to do what he wanted.

Beyond a certain point friendship broke. As for love, it seemed that was more fragile still.

'I can't,' said Malika, as she took back her comb.

Moz poured away the saucer of lemon juice in silence.

'And I won't,' she added.

'Then I will,' said Moz. 'And I'll do it by myself.'

Their fight was about whether Malika would help him deliver a package of drugs for Caid Hammou and about the fact that Moz wanted to get his hands into Malika's pants and Malika wasn't entirely sure she'd let him.

The year was 1977.

Wreckless Eric had signed to Stiff, Television's LP *Marquee Moon* was ripping apart the souls of all who heard it, Sheena was a punk rocker. The Sex Pistols, about the only good thing to come out of the jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, had got to number one in the UK charts and been banned from Woolworth's. Neil Young was two years away from the greatness that was *Rust Never Sleeps*.

Despite their clothes, Malika's attempts to bleach her hair and the shades hiding the tears which now hung in the corner of Moz's eyes, none of the above names meant a thing to either of them.