

## Part I

### Chapter 1

Michelle stood next to the man who would be her husband. Before them stood the sour faced minister who mumbled the words of a marriage service Michelle had not chosen. She wondered how she had arrived at that moment. She could not remember making a definite decision to marry, she could not remember having been asked. She focussed on the solid stone of the church wall as she gazed over the minister's head.

'That's what comes about when you don't pay attention,' she thought. Her passion was ancient languages, not the man she was about to marry.

She turned her head. Her eyes brushed quickly over the man next to her to the expectant faces filling the church. She sighed. Her husband-to-be smiled quickly and then frowned, worried the minister would notice the lack of attention to his service. Michelle smiled back but it was a small, forced show.

She liked him but she didn't love him. Her body jumped a little, as if she had been rudely woken during a dream. She did not understand why that realisation had not come earlier. She frowned. She worried that others would believe she was weak and indecisive. She was not one of those women. However inappropriate the moment of her discovery, she had to tell her husband-to-be. It would not otherwise be fair. She leant over and placed her lips next to his ear.

'I don't love you, Alan. I'm sorry,' Michelle whispered. 'I don't want to not marry you but, if you want to, you can stop this now.'

Michelle and her husband went to Morocco for the start of their honeymoon. She was studying Latin contamination after the Punic Wars for her doctorate and she consented that a few days could be wasted on an Atlantic beach provided they spent most of their time on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, where her topic of study took place.

Her new husband had no choice.

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## Chapter 2

There was an old, indigent, berber man who had lived his life ostracised within his own country. His sense of injustice, at his poverty and his treatment by the Arabs and French, was a luxury he indulged in his last years of life, when his hard labour was taken from him by his many grandchildren and their children. He still worked hard but his old bones and body could not have provided for himself, let alone others. Once again, as if coming full circle, he was a dependant. He raged, silently, against his grandchildren, vociferously against his failing body, against the invading Arabs of the seventh century, thirteen hundred years ago, against the later French intruders and their disgusting language but, mostly, he raged against the donkey that shared his labours as he drove it and the cart it pulled for him.

Each morning his grandchildren set him a menial task to deliver, fetch and return using the maligned donkey and the cart. At the end of the day, and after his wants had been satisfied, he again became the patriarch when his family listened to his stories of days so

distant that his grandchildren's children did not recognise his world. His youth was such a long time ago that it was as if he had always been old.

The stoney, scrubby desert where he did his fetching and returning was populated by hills he had known for a lifetime. Their shapes and their moods were as familiar as those of his family. He had given those ancient hills personal names in his youth but as their characters altered, with his older eyes and older body, he spoke the names with vitriol. When scaling some hills became ugly and onerous he stripped them of their names and banished them from his routes. They had become gloating, victorious enemies of his age and frailty.

In the early years of his old age and approaching infirmity, he had looked after the family goats among those same hills. He had enjoyed scavenging and searching the desert for something for the goats to eat. He had loved watching them climb the sparse trees to strip the few leaves they could not reach from the ground. As he aged further, he had been unable to keep up with the goats, and his last task of decision making independence had been returned to the youngest children. His shame had been immense. The donkey, that became his daily companion, suffered the anger of the old man's decay.

His death was near, he felt it but had no fear of its closeness. He welcomed the test as it breathed over his shoulder, whispering its message to simply let go. Each morning, when he woke in the real world after dreams, he laughed, as if the touch of death had failed to harm him.

His long life had been lived north of Agadir. It had been unremarkable and his memory would be erased, as if he had never lived, after the death of three generations.

This day of hot sun, as most of his days were, he ferried his cargo, walking slowly next to his donkey, swishing it with a stick, as the two of them followed paths over hills that still had names for him. When the way was not too steep, and there was air left in his lungs, he would sing, loudly, the songs his grandfather had taught him. The songs that told real stories.

He walked up a minor slope to one of the main roads that cut through his path. He joined the road and followed the shoulder until the road had exhausted its fit of turning. He could cross safely only where the road was straight for a distance. He grabbed the donkey and turned its head, although the donkey knew as well as the old man the place of safe crossing. The old berber suspended his singing to concentrate on the road crossing, his last of that day. He resumed his singing on the other side.

A short way up from the crossing point, the road climbed and there was a dirt road that veered off for a short distance around the back of an excavated roadside. It was hidden, for a short way, from the main road before it merged with the road again a few hundred metres further on. The short exit was a viewing point for tourists, it provided an uninterrupted view over the lower foothills of the Atlas mountains to the distant Atlantic ocean. The old man never stopped there. He did not admire what he saw every day of his life.

He took the short detour and followed the dirt road, around the bend and out of sight of the main road. This would be where he would leave the roads, for the last time that day, and follow the old paths that led him home. He resumed his singing, it was loud and clear.

There had been no cars while he had been near the road and his singing distracted him until he stopped, in the middle of the dirt road, in shock, in open-mouthed, mid-note silence when he saw a parked car. The driver's door was open but there was no-one nearby. The old man stared as if that car was the first technology he had seen.

A head bobbed up, from over the edge, and a man came into view, walking up the old man's track and back to the car. The man saw the old man staring at him and he also stopped, before reaching the car.

Arthur was embarrassed as the old man stared at him. He had turned off the highway in a hurry to relieve himself. He had parked the car obliquely in his haste and had rushed a short distance down the rocky and gravelly slope to behind the closest bush he spied. He had returned sedately, enjoying the pleasure of relief, unaware that he was being watched.

A second car came too quickly off the highway to react and preserve everything of an old man, his donkey and cart. Something would not survive. It was the cart that would take no more journeys as the car swerved, slid and side-swiped it. The donkey was jerked but was then relieved to find it had a degree of freedom it did not have during the day. It shuffled its legs but did not move away. In response to the startled look on Arthur's face, the old man looked over his shoulder and, without comprehension, saw he had a donkey but only the mangled remains of a cart.

The second, sliding car came to a halt. A young woman opened the door and propelled out. She was the most upset of the three people and the donkey.

'Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I didn't see you there,' she said quickly in an agitated English.

The old man did not understand her.

She sounded American, Arthur thought, like he was. She looked mid-twenties, nearly twenty years younger than him.

'Are you all right?' Arthur asked her. She ignored him as if she was waiting for the old man to reply to her English request. Arthur asked the old man if he was all right, in French.

The old man's mouth was open and the sounds of his song were still in his head. He was not aware of what had happened.

Arthur repeated his question but the old man did not reply as he stared at the remains of his cart as if his imagination could again make it whole.

Arthur took a few steps towards the young woman and asked if she needed help.

'OK. OK. I'm all right,' she said with frustration. She shrugged off Arthur's assistance.

'You speak French?' she asked firmly.

'Yes.'

'Can you ask the old man if he's all right? Please?'

Arthur asked the old man again and this time he responded with a single, 'Yes,' spoken timidly in a French that he disliked.

Arthur walked around the donkey to free the last of the splintered wood and tidy up the, still attached, harness. He took out his wallet and gave the old man money, enough to buy many carts and feed his extended family for days. Arthur was not wealthy. He gave an amount that was inconsequential even for a salaried academic.

The old man allowed Arthur to lift his hand and place the money into it although he did not understand why he had received such treasure. Arthur smiled, a kindly paternal look that the old man knew from his grandchildren. He hated that look. Arthur closed the old man's fingers over the money and tried to explain that he could buy a replacement cart. The old man understood, and before the crazy Westerner changed his mind, he swished the donkey and the two of them moved off and over the edge, following the indistinct mountain path that led him home. He would have a new story to tell that night and he began rehearsing his tale. He was distracted as he practised the form of the words he would use. The donkey, with relief, received no physical abuse for the rest of their journey.

Arthur watched the old man and his donkey disappear. He then began to clean up the mess of wood, that had been the cart, throwing the bigger pieces to the side of the dirt road. The woman helped him and within a short time the roadway was clear enough. They had not spoken.

When Arthur decided that they had finished, he held out his hand to her, 'Arthur.'

'Michelle,' she said and shook his hand with a firm grip that surprised him. 'I was just stopping to look at the view,' she explained, as if that excused her haste. 'Thanks for your help. I couldn't have done that, I don't speak French.'

She walked back to her car. 'How much do I owe you?' she said as she retrieved her bag. Her hand shook as she thought about the accident.

'Nothing,' Arthur said.

'I insist. How much?' she said firmly.

Arthur told her the amount and she gave it to him.

'That's not much. Is it enough for the cart?' she asked.

'He'll replace that cart many times over. It was more than enough.'

'It's criminal isn't it? That so little for us can be so much for him.'

'Just having a car makes you rich beyond that old man's wildest dream,' Arthur said.

Michelle did not want a conversation with an unknown man in the middle of the Moroccan desert. She got into her car.

'Where are you staying? Perhaps I'll see you again,' Arthur asked before she had shut her door.

Michelle smiled and told him the location. 'I'm on my honeymoon. Do you still want to see me again?'

She shut the car door, knowing there would be no response. She turned the ignition, smiled again at Arthur, said a silent thank you through the closed window, and drove off.

Arthur watched until her car disappeared, expecting to never see her again.

### Chapter 3

Arthur did see Michelle again. The next day.

He wandered around the busy souk in Agadir. It was not the best place to buy things, cheaper and authentic items could be purchased in the smaller centres but Arthur was amusing himself. He had been able to walk there from his hotel.

He stood at a market table holding a silver plated tea pot. It was cheaply made but the Arabic engravings on it were interesting. He was considering it as a memento of his trip to give to a family member. The stall owner was vociferous in his attempts to convince Arthur it was solid silver and worth a fortune. Arthur was haggling in the expected manner and had already made to leave once, without purchasing. He was preparing to leave once more before he did buy the tea pot.

'Oh, Hello.' Michelle said as she stood next to him. She looked at the tea pot in Arthur's hand. 'That's nice.'

Arthur greeted her.

'I want to say thanks for yesterday, now that I've seen you again,' she said.

'That's no problem.' Arthur weighed the tea pot in his hand as if that could determine its proper value. He had been thinking of a question since Michelle had driven off the previous day.

'Why,' Arthur asked. His forehead creased as if he had been presented with a conundrum.

'Why were you driving out in the foothills, on your own, if you're on your honeymoon?

Do you mind me asking?'

Michelle laughed. It was an inclusive laugh that made Arthur like her. 'No, of course not.

Ask away. My husband and I had spent the morning sitting on the beach. So boring. I was

almost crazy with the inactivity. And then, after lunch, he wanted a siesta. I had to do

something so I went for a drive. Was it that silly a thing to do?'

'No. Not silly. A bit different perhaps. Not expected for newlyweds. He didn't want to come with you?' Arthur asked.

'I didn't tell him,' Michelle said. 'He went to sleep and I just went.' Michelle laughed again.

'Was he upset when he found out?'

'Not really. He was a bit worried about the cart problem but it's hard to worry in retrospect. He wants to thank you, by the way.'

Michelle called to a young man, about her age, who was standing some distance away looking at jellabas. He walked through the crowd in response to Michelle's wave and hail.

The young man had a scowl on his face as Arthur watched him draw close, weaving in and out of the people in his way. The frown was for Arthur, a strange man talking to his new wife. The young man's face straightened and the jealous care lifted when he saw

Arthur in closer detail. Arthur's age dismissed him as a potential rival. What a silly boy, Arthur thought, men of his age were the ones most to worry about.

Michelle explained who Arthur was and the young man thanked him profusely, as if Arthur had saved his wife from certain death. Michelle stood back and watched her husband's excessive performance. Arthur stole a glance at her during the stream of thanks and saw her ironic, endearing smile.

Arthur did not like the young man. He did like Michelle.

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