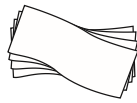


DILEMMA



"Somali Pirates"

ROBERT ENNEVER



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Other than historical figures or events, all characters, situations, organizations and happenings in this publication are entirely imaginary and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, organizations, situations, or happenings is purely coincidental.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this novel to those whom life has treated harshly, to those who, by an accident of birth, have been condemned to poverty, sickness and hunger; to those millions trapped in an economic prison of servitude, cruelty and exploitation so that, by their labours, a fortunate few might wax fat.

I dedicate it to those who wage war on oppression, who give voice to the down-trodden, and who fight for fairness and justice.

I dedicate it to those who do battle with bigotry, intolerance and ignorance, and those who seek to conquer the diseases which afflict humanity

I dedicate it to the generous souls who care for the ill and suffering.

I dedicate it to all of you who strive to make this world a better place.

May your efforts not be in vain!

Robert Ennever
March, 2019.



Loch Nees Lodge Hotel

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Robert Ennever
February, 2019



“Loch Ness Lodge Hotel”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sometimes decisions are easy to make; the options are so disparate that they require no consideration. The best choice becomes the only choice.

On other occasions the advantages and disadvantages are more complex, less obvious. It is difficult to know how or which to choose.

There is, however, a third possibility. Circumstances may be such that they leave no alternative but to suffer the effects the cause has dictated.

In all three cases the course we elect to follow will determine the eventual outcome.

Along the way problems will be encountered, distractions will occur. Inevitably some paths will lead to a dead-end and it will be necessary to retrace our steps. Other routes may result in a need to extricate ourselves from perilous situations.

Often, faced with an unwelcome quandary where there are no winners, only losers, we are forced to decide between two evils.

We are on the 'horns of a dilemma'!

This is the situation which confronts characters in this novel.

Robert Ennever
March, 2019.



Boni Forrest Crocodile

PROLOGUE

Cairo.

Cairo never sleeps. Although it was well past midnight the streets were crowded with people. Hawkers extolled their wares, buyers bargained vociferously, stall owners protested prices could not go any lower; ladies of the night plied their trade, itinerant sailors sought relief from their wretched existence in hashish-induced euphoria, and tantalising aromas of cooking wafted in the heavy atmosphere.

The lane, which led to the quays where the nondescript tramp steamers berthed, was narrow and poorly lit. The night was dark. Clouds blotted out the moon. The day-time temperature had dropped but humidity was still oppressive. Here, in the alley's built-up confines, the hubbub of the busy city was muted, the squeals of rats fighting over scraps the only sound, cats sneaking in search of prey the only movement.

A furtive figure clad in a loose-fitting gallibaya sidled to a doorway, knocked four times on the solid woodwork, paused and repeated the signal. After a short interval the door swung open, permitting a shaft of bright light to illuminate the visitor.

'As-salaam alaykum!' (Peace be with you!) The doorman motioned the visitor inside.

'Wa-alaykum, salaam,' the visitor responded. He followed the servant into a large room where four men sat around a table. All were dressed in western clothes. All were obese and sweating profusely.

A chair was pulled up for the guest, fresh 'shisha' (molasses-soaked tobacco), added and the 'hookah' passed around. Each man drew the water-cooled smoke deep into his lungs and sat back, outwardly relaxed but eyes betraying underlying tension.

The 'hookah' did the rounds of the group several more times before anyone spoke. Then one, a shorter individual whose suit, though well cut, bulged open across his paunch, rapped on the table for the others' attention.

'Brothers, let us get to the business of the evening.' He turned to the visitor. 'Yusuf here has something to show us.' With a gracious nod to Yusuf, he said, 'Please!. We are all eager to see what you have brought with you for our brothers in Somalia.'

Pausing theatrically, Yusuf reached inside his 'gallibaya' and withdrew a linen-wrapped package. With a slowness which infuriated the onlookers, —a fury they managed to conceal—, he untied the cords fastening the small bundle and unrolled it to reveal a sparkling cluster of diamonds.

A collective gasp from the watching men indicated their avaricious surprise.

The short man was first to recover from his amazement. 'Truly you bring to our brothers in 'al-Shabaab' the means to continue their fight! What you have laid before our eyes will buy many favours. It will provide arms and munitions for an army of fighters; used judiciously in the right quarters it can cause those in power to 'turn a blind eye'!

His lips tightened. His tone sharpened. 'But why do you come to us? You have not travelled so far merely to impress us with your wealth. We are business men. We are not ignorant, naïve peasants. You must want something from us. What do we receive in return?'

'You are Shipping Agents. You have access to ships trading at ports from Cairo around the Horn of Africa

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to Mogadishu, Mombasa, and as far as Cape Town in South Africa. Doing business without too many hassles requires contacts. And contacts must be paid for! ' Yusuf adopted a confidential tone. 'I can't be the courier. I'm too well known to the authorities; my passport will immediately flag any attempt by me to leave Egypt. So those nameless people, supporters of revolutionaries who seek to overthrow corrupt rulers and free the oppressed, have provided this—,' he indicated the scintillating collection of diamonds, '—and authorised me to make a suitable payment to anyone who can facilitate delivery to our brothers in the struggle against tyranny.'

'And if we were able to 'facilitate' delivery? What would that involve? How much would we be paid?'

'I would need access to a ship's safe through its captain. The combination of that safe would be changed and I would be the only one this end to know it. Upon that being achieved I am authorised to pay you one thousand English Pounds.'

The short man's lip curled in contempt. 'There are four of us. Why would we bother for a miserable two hundred and fifty pounds each?'

Yusuf thought quickly. 'One thousand pounds **each!**' he confirmed. 'As well you can take your pick of any one stone to share between you, once I have access to a ship and before I leave you. That will more than compensate you for your assistance.'

The short man looked at his companions. 'Are we agreed?'

As one they nodded.

'You may select a stone now. I trust you to honour your side of the bargain,' Yusuf said. He noted the greed lighting their features. 'But be aware! My masters would be most unforgiving should there be any breach of trust. They have eyes and ears everywhere. Retribution for treachery would be swift and unpleasant.'

He waited as a lively and heated debate ensued over the choice of a gem. Finally, as agreement was reached, he re-wrapped the remaining diamonds and said, 'I have demonstrated my good faith, gentlemen. Now it is your turn. Please ring the Captain of an appropriate vessel and tell him I am on my way.'

The captain, a bearded swarthy man, was waiting at the gangplank when Yusuf arrived. He glanced about nervously as he led the courier to his cabin and opened the ship's safe.

Yusuf deposited his package and followed instructions for resetting the lock's combination. This done, he made sure nobody was watching and headed towards the city centre and the hotel he had checked into. His hand slid into a pocket, feeling for the ivory amulet inside. Its smooth perfection reassured him as he withdrew the tiny statue of Amon-Ra, supreme god among the plethora of Egyptian deities, and pressed it to his lips.

Bless me, Lord of all Gods, he prayed and replaced it inside his gown. Although a practising Muslim, Yusuf felt it wise to hedge his bets.

Yusuf's assailants were upon him before he was aware of their presence. One held the struggling courier's arms behind his back while the other jabbed a hypodermic needle into the side of his neck.

Within seconds Yusuf was unable to resist. His legs turned to jelly, his mind shut down and, as he slumped to the roadway, he was dragged to a waiting car.

Yusuf woke to find himself strapped to a wooden chair. Disturbingly, although he was naked, he was quite warm. Striving to focus, his bleary eyes could make out a glowing

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brazier not far from his seat. He flinched as ice-cold water was poured over his head.

'Wake up, Dog!' His tormentor had lost an eye. A vivid diagonal scar distorting his forehead was evidence of a sword's slash. Yusuf knew he could expect no mercy from this man.

'What is the new combination?' The voice came from the rear of the room.

Yusuf squinted, a spotlight directed at his face made it impossible for him to see his interrogator. He shook his head and said nothing.

'Ah! So we have a noble martyr, do we? What a shame! Proceed.' The voice was dispassionate. It gave the impression its owner had seen all this before.

The torturer picked up an electric cattle prod, applied it to Yusuf's testicles and pressed the button.

Yusuf screamed and fainted.

The chill of more water roused him, only to find the one-eyed monster holding a red-hot poker inches from his face.

'I ask you again. What is the new combination?' More frightening than the words, it was their total lack of any emotion which terrified Yusuf. He clenched his teeth, determined not to betray the cause inspiring his fanaticism.

The heat neared his forehead. Yusuf shut his eyes and prayed to Allah, the Merciful. There was a smell of singeing hair; his skin was stretching, beginning to blister.

Allah is not listening! He strained against his bonds, prayed again. This time to Amon-Ra.

The poker pressed against his brow. He shrieked, heard the sizzling, smelt the cooking flesh. Again Yusuf passed out. And again they used icy water to revive him.

He came to, conscious of the agony of his forehead but still determined not to reveal the code for the safe. *If I am to die, then let it be for al-Shabaab!*

One-Eye approached, holding a leather strap which he used to fasten Yusuf's wrist to the arm of the chair. Using a pair of pincers, he took hold of a fingernail before turning to the unseen voice sheltering in the gloom and waiting for the question to be repeated.

'Pull one out first, so he can feel the pain.. Then I put the question. He has nine more.'

One-Eye obliged. Yusuf was a gibbering mess. 'No more!' he pleaded. 'In the name of Allah, no more!'

'What happens to you is in your hands, not Allah's. I ask you again, What is the new code?' A stubborn shake of the head was his answer. Another nail was extracted.

'Bah! Enough! This fool thinks he can win. Get the hacksaw. Let's see if his hand is worth more than his proud silence.'

The enforcer, saw in hand, advanced on Yusuf.

'I am out of patience.' The interrogator's exasperation added a cruel edge to his words. 'I ask you a final time before we amputate your hands and, if need be, your legs! What is the new code for the safe?'

One-Eye ran the saw blade across Yusuf's wrist, softly, but with enough pressure to leave a trace of blood.

'I will tell you!' the defeated man cried. 'No more. I beg you...', he was sobbing, '...the code is 23 05 61, the date of my blessed mother's birth!' Yusuf sagged against the straps holding him, all resistance gone.

The torturer turned to the unseen man in the dark. 'What do you wish me to do with him?'

'Slit his throat and throw him in the river.'

The man was on the phone. He spoke softly, without emotion.

'Is that you Ahmed? It's done. The diamonds are in the safe on Re del Mar, the King of the Sea. Its captain has an

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'agreement' with the port authorities so there will be no problems with searches or inspections. The code for the safe is 23 05 61. The usual arrangement. Fifty percent of the proceeds of the sale of the gems to you and your band, fifty percent to us here in Cairo. Let me know when it has all been done.'

What Yusuf had never known, and would have mortified him had he known, was that his death had achieved nothing. The phone call, originating from a group of unprincipled rogues in Cairo, was not, —as Yusuf had supposed it would be—, to al-Shabaab, but to Ahmed, the unscrupulous leader of a gang of Somali pirates.

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CHAPTER 1

2006

The Indian Ocean, off Somalia.

In earlier times the 'Regina del Mar', the 'Queen of the Sea', would have been termed a 'Tramp Steamer'. But, like many of its contemporaries, the cargo carrying ship had been modified to accommodate a half-dozen paying passengers. Persons who valued money more than comfort; people seeking solitude, or adventure, or, sometimes, those with a compelling need to pass beneath the notice of authorities.

Whatever reasons had prompted her fellow travellers to embark, it had been to escape the nightmare she continued to relive which convinced Luisa MacGregor to accept her husband's suggestion she contact his friend Howard Hawkins.

'Howard's been a mate since Uni days. He left the Royal Navy to free himself from its insistence on rigid tradition, and promotions based not on ability but on seniority or your family background. He's now working as a free-lance ship's captain for a number of rather obscure smaller shipping lines serving the African east coast and the Middle East. Why don't you give him a call? Rather than the hassle of airport queues, immigration and custom inspections, a few days loafing about with no cares or responsibilities might be just what you need after what you've been through?'

Her editor, delighted by the surge in sales her graphic photos and heart-rending reports had brought about, had readily acceded to her request for compassionate leave. Luisa had made the contact, to find Howard was captaining the Regina del Mar from Cairo to Cape Town, via Mogadishu and Mombasa, leaving in two days.

'Of course that's not definite.' Howard sighed in exasperation. 'Nothing ever is in Cairo. Egyptians are not renowned for adhering to shipping schedules. We don't have a full load as yet. There could still be a last minute change of ports of call. It makes life interesting.'

Howard had met Luisa with Duncan once or twice during student days, before marriage put an end to that couple's footloose and fancy-free existence. His recollection of Luisa was of a stunning girl with an outgoing, fun-loving personality. He would welcome her company on board.

'It will be a change to have someone with whom I can have intelligent conversations.' He looked at her hopefully. 'Can I take this as a definite booking? We only have quarters for six passengers.'

It had been the usual frustrating business getting a flight from Karachi to Cairo. As a reporter for a foreign news organisation over which the Pakistani Government had no jurisdiction, Luisa was instantly a target for suspicion.

'What is your reason for going to Cairo? Why are you leaving Pakistan at such short notice? I note here on your passport you only entered the country three days ago. Have you spent all that time in Karachi?' The official was enjoying his moment of authority.

Luisa avoided her initial impulse to inject a little humour into the inquisition. She bit back the sarcastic remark teetering on her lips and fought to maintain a straight face. She had no desire to be strip-searched,

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otherwise detained, or subjected to whatever new form of humiliation he might devise.

The interrogation had continued for half an hour before Luisa finally resolved the situation with a generous 'donation' to an un-named charity. She had not been sorry to leave Pakistan.

So, here I am! Somewhere off the east coast of Somalia. With not a worry in the world and looking forward to seeing Duncan again!

She dragged a deck-chair across the hot metal deck and arranged it behind a large ventilation stack. There it was hidden from the prurient gaze of crew members sheltering in the air-conditioned bridge at the stern of the ship.

It's bad enough they can't stop staring at my hair! I don't want them ogling my body. She rested the paperback she had brought to read on the arm-rest of the chair.

I'm not likely to be disturbed, she thought. *The crew are too lazy to venture out on deck unnecessarily, and my shipboard companions will all be taking a siesta after a heavy lunch. I can't believe this incredibly oppressive humidity! Thank heavens it's winter. The heat must be unbearable in summer.* She lay back, stretched out, undid the strap of her bikini top, let it slip to the deck, and glanced at her watch. *Better keep an eye on the time. An overdose of sunburn might not be the best way to greet my man!* She picked up her book and began to read.

Trying to concentrate is a complete waste of time! Luisa marked the page and put the novel back down. *No matter how hard I try I can't rid my mind of the horrific images of that execution. I thought Duncan was right. A spell of rest and relaxation would do the trick. I was kidding myself! Every time I close my eyes I see the girl's face. Staring at me. Pleading with me. And all I could do was stand there, and do nothing!*

What made me go? What on earth did I think I could achieve? When Amnesty International's appeals were ignored,

when representations from so many countries were dismissed as intrusions into national affairs, why in God's name did I believe Luisa MacGregor could change the outcome? But I did! I truly saw myself as a crusader for justice and an angel of mercy.

The very day the news broke and the furore startled Britain from its apathy, I was in my editor's office, begging him to send me to whip up public sentiment against this barbaric act.

"Luisa..." he looked at me with his seen-it-all, world-weary eyes, "...I admire your enthusiasm more than your good sense! Pakistan, as you are probably aware, is not Britain. It's a different culture, a different set of rules; a place where men must constantly assert their authority because they fear that, one day in the future, their women will rise up and revolt against their autocratic tyranny. But that's not how it is today! Not right now! Under the guise of religious faith, and with the backing of many Imams, — who frequently misquote the Quran for their own ends—, Fatima's brothers see her death as imperative. Unless she dies, the family will forever be dishonoured."

He leaned back in his chair, steeped his fingers and looked over the top of his spectacles. "The London News is about making money, not wasting it! Paying for you to embark on a mission to save this young woman would cost me my job! Our directors would never forgive me. I—"

I tried a different tack. "This execution is the biggest story in the United Kingdom at present. Could you justify the expense if I were to go merely to report on it?"

Jack Reynolds had been an editor for many years. He was not an easy man to fool. He leant forward and rested his elbows on the desk. "You're more than just a pretty face..., aren't you?" Suddenly he sat upright in his seat. Business-like, brusque. "When is this execution to take place?" The question was fired at me.

"The date hasn't yet been fixed. Amnesty has an appeal against the ruling before the Pakistan High Court at the moment. A verdict is expected within a few days."

"Will that be when they set a time for sentencing?"

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"You're assuming the appeal will not succeed. I'm not familiar with the Pakistani Justice system, but I believe so. That's if the judges find her guilty."

Jack Reynolds stood up and made for the office door. His presence filled the room. I held my breath. Had I gone too far?

"Do you think there's an ice-cube's chance in hell the girl will be let off? There'd be rioting in the streets were that to happen. President 'What's his name' could be deposed. The Americans wouldn't like that. He's their man at the helm. The Yanks have invested billions in Aid to his regime."

"Do you think that will influence the judges' decision?" I had pinned my hopes on the Pakistan High Court.

The editor looked at me and rolled his eyes. "Are you naïve, or just stupid? Of course the American dollars will determine which way the judges decide. The last judge who dared to stand up to the president had to flee the country. He now lives in exile and there is a fatwa out on his life!" Jack's hand still rested on the door handle. He had neither come back into the office nor left. I held my tongue, waited on his next words.

"Right," he growled. "You'd better get your pretty little arse out of here and down to our Travel Agent before I change my mind!" He tugged the door open, then again paused. "You've got a passport?"

"Yes."

"Will you require a visa?"

"I don't know."

"Well bloody well find out!" The door slammed behind him.

Luisa tucked her sunglasses into her hair and sat up. The glare was too strong and she had to squint for some moments before her eyes adjusted. Looking to all sides she could see nothing but a vast expanse of cerulean water. There was a total absence of wind. Barely a ripple disturbed the shimmering surface of a limitless ocean.

Overhead a large bird hovered above the ship's wake. It had been following the vessel ever since she came on deck. She wondered how it could be so far from land.

Is it an albatross? She had a vague recollection of once reading how such birds could cover vast distances and be at sea for considerable periods. *What a lonely life! How would it ever find a mate?*

The thought took her back to a time when she was alone.

A time before Dunc. I believed then I was happy. Self-sufficient. Too busy to give myself time to think, I was always on the run but going nowhere. It was after we met and had been together some while that I realized I had been only half-living. Perhaps it's by seeing how others react to us that we can measure our worth. She shrugged the idea away, wishing for a moment she had company to occupy her thoughts, to so fill her brain that there was no room for the horror to re-enter.

Luisa scanned the sea and sky about her, knowing in her heart her search was futile. The bird above and the throbbing pulse of the propeller below were the only indications of any living thing. Because, in the fantasy world she had created to obliterate an unbearable reality, the troubled woman had come to think of the ship as having a life of its own. It was her haven, a protective presence against evil men and wicked, easily led fanatics.

Raising her wrist to shade her eyes, she looked at her watch again. She had been lying there for only twenty minutes. She reclined back.

I can give myself another half hour if I slather myself with sunscreen!

Despite her resolve, within minutes Luisa was reliving her trauma.

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The taxi had had to drop me off some streets away from the square where the execution was to take place. But even at that distance the noise of the crowd was deafening, its mood alarming.

I wrapped my hijab more securely about my head, ensuring no tell-tale blond hair was visible, and threaded my way through the mass of bodies into the open space fronting the mosque. At once I could not fail to see the large mound of rocks beside a narrow hole excavated in the ground. Two police cars were parked close by, their occupants showing little interest in proceedings. The excitement of those gathered to witness the spectacle was palpable.

Suddenly the volume of the shouting increased. The crowd surged back and forth, jostling for better vantage points. An older man led two younger men into view. Over their shoulders they carried a body shrouded in white, only its face visible. It was a young woman.

A burst of static from a loudspeaker hushed the religious rabble as an Imam began an inflammatory rant. I had none of their language but its message was clear. It reminded me of a minor performer taking the stage to gee up the audience before the main act.

I pricked up my ears and strained to hear. Someone pressed against me in the crush was translating for a friend. Incredibly he was speaking English.

"The girl's father has accused her of adultery," he was explaining. "She would not obey him and instead of marrying the man he had chosen, she married the man she loves. Now she is with his child. Her two brothers are bringing her to justice."

Disbelieving what I was hearing and having no stomach for what was about to take place, I turned to leave. It was impossible. I was hemmed in. I had to struggle to maintain my footing. Surrounded by a mass of fanatics, I felt a fear I had never felt before. This was madness. These men and women who only hours earlier had been going about their business, eating, drinking, attending to children or bargaining at the local market, were now

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slavering in anticipation of a bloody murder of another human being. And the police had not the slightest intention of intervening!

Several heavily bearded men now assisted the brothers to lower the victim into the hole so that only her upper body and head were visible above ground.

"They are 'Mutaween', religious police. 'Upholders of virtue!' 'Preventers of sin!'" The translator had to shout to make himself heard. "Now it is the father's right, as the accuser, to hurl the first stone!"

A startled Luisa sat bolt upright. Her face was ashen. Sweat poured from her forehead, down her cheeks and into the hollow between her breasts. Wild-eyed and terrified, she looked around, her nightmare resurrected. She uttered a low moan.

The drama would not release her. Before it could be expunged it had to reach its conclusion.

"No! No!" I was screaming, but no sound came out. The father picked up a stone from the heap. Big enough to inflict pain; not so large as to cause death. I clawed at the man in front of me, trying to squeeze past him to the space around the hole cordoned off by the religious police. I had to reach the father. I had to tell him "This is your daughter!" To tell him "It is your unborn grandchild you are about to destroy!"

I managed to squeeze between two women in the front row screeching for her death, just as the father flung his rock. Fatima, as I later learned the dead woman was called, cried out as the stone hit her a glancing blow on the shoulder Instantly a splotch of blood showed vivid against the white fabric shroud.

I was sobbing, I could not control the shaking which convulsed my body. As in a film where one knows how it will end but is compelled to watch to the finish, so I was unable to leave the unfolding tragedy.

Fatima's brothers stepped forward, approached the pile and each took up a stone And I did nothing! I stood and did nothing!

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Not because it was physically impossible to change anything, but because I was too scared to try to do so! I was as culpable as any of the spectators, as complicit in the crime being enacted before me as any of the participants. That was when our eyes met. Fatima's and mine. Innocent, she sought mercy. Guilty, I sought forgiveness. Then one stone struck her on the back of her skull and a second in the face. Blood spurted from her nose and I could see it was broken.

Now it was the crowd's turn. Hate filled their eyes as they lined up to throw their stones; hate fuelled by their underlying guilt for what they were being a part of. Hate finding expression in anger at their suppression and exploitation; hate which had smouldered for too long under the tyranny of their oppressors.

I don't know the exact moment she died. I do know it took too long. Arms tied to her side beneath the shroud, Fatima was unable to protect her head and exposed torso. And, coward that I was, I left the scene as soon as the crowd began to disperse, its thirst for vengeance satiated by one innocent woman's blood. And I shall never forget that woman's eyes. They will haunt me until the day I die.

The slight reddening of her skin alerted Luisa. She had exposed herself to the sun's rays long enough. Reluctant to return to the claustrophobic confines of her cabin, she lingered in the fresh air, tempted to stay a little longer.

At least here, on the bow, the ship's slow progress provides some air circulation.

Prudence dictated otherwise; she had no option. If she wished to remain topside she needed to cover up.

Refastening her bikini top, she walked back to fetch the slightly frayed but still serviceable cotton bath robe hanging inside her room's sole cupboard. She pushed wide the door and entered. *Phew! It's like a blinking sauna!*

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With no access to the open air, —the porthole had rusted irremovably shut—, the atmosphere inside the cabin was suffocating.

Snatching up the bathrobe and grabbing a wide-brimmed straw hat, she made to leave, paused and picked up the bedside phone.

A cold Pimm's would be nice. Perhaps they could bring it to me where I'm sitting?

Back on her deck chair Luisa made a conscious effort to turn her mind to more pleasant memories, to a time and place where people didn't want to kill each other, to a time when she had first met Duncan.

.....

CHAPTER 2

Some years earlier.

London.

The room was crowded. In semi-darkness. Lit only by the feeble glow of perfumed candles. Candles everywhere. Perched on dusty bookshelves. Placed on tabletops needing a wipe-over. And, in pride of place, on top of an ancient refrigerator whose door was half-covered with fridge magnets.

Their glow was wan, but sufficient to be reflected off the smoke which hung heavily in the air, smoke from incense burners, smoke from tobacco, smoke from marihuana.

The music was too loud. It bounced off the walls, rendering speech difficult and hearing what was being said all but impossible. Not that that in any way precluded tanked-up males pontificating, loudly and at great length, in their attempts to impress the opposite sex. Preening and posturing, strutting or lounging, frustrated peacocks in a mating display, their efforts were sometimes successful, more often an embarrassing failure.

Because many of the women present had already gained a degree of maturity beyond their years, the 'nesting urge' was strong upon them. But the qualities they were seeking in a possible mate were conspicuously lacking in most of the juvenile 'Would be's if they Could-be's' present. So, frustrated, they abandoned their quest and turned to alcohol and drugs for consolation.

The under-graduates' end-of-year party was well under way. The atmosphere, physically redolent with the aroma of incense, cigarette smoke and hashish, was mentally pregnant with emotions.

Examinations were over but results were yet to be announced. Attitudes varied, from smug confidence in those who knew they had done well, despondency in those who had put more effort into enjoyment than study, and gnawing uncertainty in that majority who, while hoping for the best, feared the worst.

Duncan MacGregor had been eyeing the striking blonde for some time, trying to muster enough courage to address her, failing to do so, and finally resorting to dope to induce a state of false optimism.

Rising a trifle unsteadily, he sidled next to her and proffered his joint. 'Care for a puff?' He affected a casual nonchalance which was not his normal manner.

'I don't do dope.' Her eyebrows lifted and her lips compressed in disapproval.

'Oh. Sorry.' Tail between his legs, Duncan excused himself. 'Frightfully sorry.' He turned away.

Her voice was soft. Sultry. 'But I do do drinks.' An amused half-smile lingered on her lips.

'What can I g...g...get you?' he stammered. His bravado vanished. No longer a suave man of the world, reduced to a somewhat incoherent adolescent, his weight shifted nervously from foot to foot.

'That depends. What is there?' *He's like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof!* The simile came unbidden to her mind.

'I know there's beer...' *Why has my brain gone blank?* '...I'll go and see. Back in a jiffy.' He turned, about to head for the makeshift bar, then stopped, stock-still. The gorgeous young woman had taken his arm, restraining him.

DILEMMA

'It's not important. Don't make two trips. Whatever's there will be fine.' She removed her hand. Duncan experienced a twinge of disappointment.

The bottle of vodka was nearly empty but its contents half-filled the glass he picked up. His eye ran around the table, looking for tomato juice. There was none. So he settled for a splash of orange juice, picked up a couple of ice cubes in his fingers and dropped them into the drink. The glass overflowed. He looked for a tissue, a cloth, anything to wipe its sticky exterior, but could find nothing. He began to weave his way back through the press of bodies.

From across the room he caught a glimpse of the blonde girl. He paused, protecting the over-full glass, to let two girls pass. Arm in arm, whether for support or merely out of friendship, they wobbled towards the bathroom, proclaiming to all and sundry, 'We need a piss!'

Even at this distance her beauty stood out. Tall, possibly taller than Duncan, willowy, long ash-blonde hair, her skin that lovely golden tan peculiar to those of Scandinavian origin, the woman exuded a languid sophistication more often seen in Europe than in Britain. Duncan could not believe his good fortune.

For a moment the crush of party-goers blocked his view. When again he gained a clear passage, his heart fell. A tall, dark-haired, older man was chatting to the 'Nordic Princess' in a way Duncan considered 'overly familiar'. Discouraged, he was about to return to the bar when her eyes caught his and she beckoned.

Steeling himself, he approached, surprised to find the hand holding her drink shaking. 'Vodka and orange! Hope that's your poison!' His voice was unnaturally shrill as he offered her the glass.

She held the drink in her right hand but an instant, before transferring it to her left. 'Would you have a handkerchief,

darling?' she addressed her companion. 'It's very sticky!' She waited as the man withdrew his handkerchief and passed it to her. Duncan took in its monogram. He felt an uninvited gate-crasher at a private gathering.

'I'd introduce you, but I don't know your name.' The dazzling smile she gave him filled Duncan with elation. He stood, struck dumb. Grinning like the village idiot! Speechless!

She cocked a quizzical eyebrow.

She's very good with eyebrows! he noted.

'Well, aren't you going to tell me? Is it some deep, dark secret? I'm supposing you do have a name.' She laughed. It was the tinkle of a mountain stream.

She turned to the man standing beside her. 'I'd heard the English were very reserved. But this is ridiculous.' She grasped his arm in a companionable way. 'They're not a bit like us 'Continental', are they, Ferdy. We don't have this obsession with observing the formalities!' Glancing at a still mute Duncan, she tried to suppress a chuckle. 'Looks like it's up to me to break the British ice! Well, here goes!'

Letting go of the man, whom Duncan already deemed his rival, the woman dropped a mock curtsy, tapped her chest with a delicate forefinger and announced, 'I am Luisa Lindstrum and this...,' she prodded her companion's taut bicep, '... is my brother, Ferdinand.' She hesitated, waiting expectantly. 'And you are...?'

It took some seconds before it dawned on the gauche young man that an answer would be appropriate. 'I'm Duncan,' he mumbled, 'Duncan MacGregor.' Then, scrambling to regain some slight degree of poise, he added, 'I'm a Scot.'

'No... You don't say?' A crinkle of amusement hovered about her eyes. 'I'd never have guessed! Is that an apology? Or merely an excuse?' Luisa was enjoying his discomfiture.

DILEMMA

'If you will both excuse me,' Ferdinand broke into his sister's game, —*A cat toying with a mouse*, he thought privately—, 'I have another commitment.' He held out his hand to Duncan, a gesture to which there was no response so flabbergasted was the younger man. 'It's been a pleasure to meet you, Duncan. If only briefly!' Giving Luisa a kiss on her cheek he took his leave. 'I'll be in touch, Sis. Be good!' He stooped and whispered in her ear, 'Be kind to him, he's only a boy!' before exiting the room.

'Your brother seems very nice.' Now he had Luisa to himself, it was all Duncan could think of to say.

'How would you know? You've only just met him.' Aware her would-be admirer was floundering, out of his depth, Luisa decided to be merciful. She rescued him. 'Actually, you're right. He is nice. Since my parents died he's all the family I've got.'

'What happened to your parents?' He regretted the question the moment it was uttered.

'They were both killed in a car accident last year. On holidays, driving in northern Italy. Black ice on the road—' Her voice drifted. A frown crinkled her forehead, lasted but an instant before she shook her head angrily and dismissed the painful memory.

'Listen, have you had enough of this lot?' She waved airily at the congested mass of inebriated, drug-befuddled revellers. 'Why don't you and I slip away and find a nice coffee lounge where we can talk in comfort. Nobody will notice whether we're here or not. They're all too far out of it to care.' She deposited her half consumed drink balanced precariously on one of the loudspeakers, and took his hand. 'Let's do a bunk!'

'What would you care for?'

Luisa turned to the waiter. 'Do you do a decaffeinated?'

'Certainly, Madam.'

'Then I'll have a macchiato, no caffeine. Please.' Addressing Duncan she explained. 'I normally choose a long black, but I don't want to be up all night visiting the loo.'

Her frankness surprised him. *Most girls don't discuss bladder habits so openly at first meeting.* Her admission tended to put him more at ease. *Perhaps the title of 'Nordic Princess' I bestowed on her isn't so apt after all?* He relaxed.

'Sir?'

Duncan looked up from the carpet he seemed to be studying in minute detail to find the waiter trying to conceal his impatience.

'Will Sir be having something to drink?'

'Oh. Sorry. Make mine a macchiato also.' *A shot of caffeine wouldn't go amiss!* 'But normal, thanks.'

They sat in silence while they waited for the coffees. Duncan, because he didn't know what to say, Luisa, because she was taking the opportunity to study this man she had invited to share her evening.

Shorter than her, stocky rather than slender, his round freckled face was graced with a generous mouth; his ears, slightly more protuberant than considered desirable, were partly concealed by the shock of red hair which crowned his head and kept spilling over his eyes, causing him to develop the habit, an unconscious reflex, of flicking his head back as he spoke, to clear the way for each new paragraph.

It was not his muscular frame, however, nor the legs capable of covering vast distances, not the hairy forearms nor the bulging biceps, it was his eyes which claimed and held her attention. Of the brightest blue, they contrasted with the paleness of his skin. But rather than their colour, it was the intensity shining through those windows to the world which engendered in her the belief that here was a man she could trust.

DILEMMA

The macchiatos arrived. Luisa raised hers to her mouth and blew on it gently to cool it. 'Tell me about you,' she asked.

'There's not much to tell.' Duncan tried to cut short the conversation. Not because he wasn't prepared to divulge his life story, but because he felt it wouldn't hold enough interest for someone as travelled as she appeared. 'I'm a pretty dull fellow, really.'

'I don't for a minute believe that. But why don't you let me be the judge? For a start, how old are you? Where are you from? Why are you at the University?' Luisa let her questions hang in the air. She waited.

'Right. You asked for it! So here it is, a potted history of Duncan Reginald MacGregor, age twenty-two. Born on a farm south-west of Inverness, educated, —some might dispute that!—, at the local Grammar School, and, Heaven alone knows how, granted a scholarship to University where I currently have another year to graduate in Economics, assuming I pass the necessary exams.' He grinned. It was an appealingly boyish gesture. 'Now...' he was growing in confidence, '...it's over to you. Who is Luisa Lindstrum?'

'I was born in Egerton, a tiny village in Kent. My mother was English from High Wycombe and my father, her second husband, came from Italy.'

'Oh, that surprises me. I would have said you had a Scandinavian background.'

'Why is that?'

'Your colouring for a start. And your hair, your overall body shape —'

'So you've noticed my body shape!' An enigmatic half-smile twisted her lips.

The colour flooded to his cheeks. He blushed. 'What I meant was—'

'What that meant was that you're a normal red-blooded male. And I find that flattering.' She let him off the hook.

'Actually, you're right. My grandfather, on my mother's side, was Norwegian. From Oslo. Mother's family, though from a Celtic background, were nearly all blondes. I suspect a degree of Viking input! 'Lindstrum' was mother's maiden name. She retained it to avoid prejudice against Italians during the war. But my parents compromised with me. Luisa is an Italian name.' She finished her coffee. 'Next question!'

'Why are you here tonight? Are you at University? We've never bumped into each other.'

That's not remarkable. I'm a cub reporter studying journalism. I only attend lectures part-time. Next year is my final year. Hopefully then I'll be able to write my own by-lines.' She looked at her watch. 'Damn! It's nearly eleven. And I've got an early assignment tomorrow. Would you mind awfully if we called it a night?'

Duncan was on his feet, a veritable Jack-in-the-box. 'I'll see you home.'

'No need. I'm a big girl.'

'Let me at least see you into a cab.'

He stood by her side until a vacant taxi pulled up. She hopped in, wound down the window. "Maybe we'll meet again sometime," she called. Horns blared, brakes squealed. Ignoring the ruckus, the intrepid driver barged in front of the approaching cars and the cab snaked its way through the resultant traffic-jam as the theatres disgorged their patrons. Duncan waved, but Luisa was gone.

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CHAPTER 3

London.

They had met again. But it had not been by chance, Luisa was to realize later.

Showing an enterprise only severe love-sickness could have brought about, Duncan spent the hours between lectures, —when prudence would have dictated he frequent the University Library—, haunting the offices of London newspapers, inquiring whether by any chance a certain Luisa Lindstrum was on their staff.

He had almost despaired of a result when, nearing the end of his list, he entered the front reception area of the London News. The raised voices of a small crowd gathered by the lifts caught his attention.

‘What’s all the fuss about?’ he asked the receptionist.

‘One of our junior reporters is interviewing some ‘would-be’ celebrity. She’s new to the job, otherwise she’d know the News never conducts such interviews here in the front lobby. These so-called ‘stars’ of stage or screen will do anything to rate a headline. The last thing they need is a quiet, respectful meeting. Invariably they cause a commotion. Their side-kicks are paid to incite trouble.’

A whistle shrilled. The girl pointed along a corridor. ‘Look! Here come the security guards now. You watch! The photographers will be hard on their heels!’

A torrent of verbal abuse was pouring on the guards. But it was all ‘huff’ rather than ‘puff’. The instant batons were drawn, the trouble-makers melted away, hustling the ‘star’ who had paid them out of the building..

A few cameras flashed, the news hounds departed, peace was restored, and only a dishevelled lone figure remained.

'Luisa!' Duncan could not help his cry of joy. He strode to her side.

She gave no sign of recognition. Cheeks flushed, make-up streaked by tears, she was distressed. Not by the foul language of the 'hangers-on'. Not by the disparaging suggestion by the current 'latest and greatest' Pop idol that she was incompetent and not qualified to conduct such important interviews. No, the barb which had pierced her professional armour was the jibe that she was 'Only a woman! And who could expect anything better from a fucking female!'

Duncan tried again. 'Luisa. It's me, Duncan. Long time no see! You remember—'

It was obvious she didn't.

'Last December. At the end-of-year get-together. We had coffee—'

A strand of hair had come loose from the chignon Luisa felt added a touch of maturity when she was working. A button had been torn from her blouse and it hung partially askew. Her crying had ceased but a solitary tear hung from her nose.

She sniffled. Dabbed her eyes with a tissue. Tried to regain her composure. Focused on the male figure before her.

'Oh, it's you.' She sounded less than enthusiastic. 'Came to watch the slaughter, did you? Like Romans at the Colosseum. Nothing like a spot of bloodshed to brighten up the day!' Her eyes blazed defiance; this male had witnessed her humiliation.

'You do me an injustice. I wasn't attending some 'spectator sport'! If you must know—'

'I don't *have* to know anything!'

He reached out and took her arm.

Angrily she shook it off. 'Don't touch me. I don't like being touched.'

DILEMMA

Duncan swung on his heel. He was half way to the entrance when he halted, took a deep breath and returned to do battle.

It is sometimes said 'Hair is red because of the hot temper beneath!' Whether that be true or false, Duncan MacGregor was certainly possessed of a hot temper. He had walked London from end to end in his quest. He had been late for lectures, skipped tutorials and missed meals. He had devoted most of his waking hours dreaming of the day he would find the girl who had so entranced him at that dreadful party.

Today he had achieved his goal.

And been turned away like a wretched vagrant! Discarded like a worn-out pair of boots or threadbare socks, dismissed as though my weeks of seeking counted for naught! Nobody deserves to be treated like that!

He had reached her side. 'I know you're upset. You have every reason to be. But I'm not the culprit. And unless you're not the woman I believed you to be, you won't treat me like that.'

She sniffed again. Her nose was about to run. Defiance yielded to truculence. 'Are you expecting me to apologise?'

'That's up to you. I'm not the boss of you. But I care about you and I know you're hurting.'

'So you think my saying 'Sorry' to you would make me feel better?'

'It couldn't do any harm.' He was about to say more but realized, *Less is more!*

Her breathing, more correctly panting, was easing. Luisa was calming down. Her jaw jutted. She was about to speak.

Duncan looked away. *A wrong word would ruin everything. Even the right word, if said at the wrong time, could precipitate a disastrous quarrel.*

'You're right. You didn't cause the problem. You just happened along at the worst possible time. I'm sorry I said what I said. Can we wipe the slate clean?'

'Only if you'll agree to let me buy you a coffee. And promise me you won't fling it in my face!' He took her arm and, this time, she did not snatch it away.

Luisa used her teaspoon to scoop out the last of the chocolate-sprinkled froth, replaced her cup in its saucer, and stood up to leave.

'Thank you, that was kind of you but, if you'll excuse me, I'm due back at the office. Have to fly!'

'Wait!' Duncan half-rose from his chair. 'Will you have dinner with me?'

'No.' Her response was instinctive. *What do I know about this crazy Scotsman? He says he's been looking for me all over the city. Is he some kind of 'stalker'? Should I be concerned?*

'Well, at least let me take you to lunch.' Duncan was persistent.

He's like a chastised puppy! Luisa relented. 'We could go to Mickey's Bar. It's a watering-hole much frequented by my fellow 'journos'. It's not far away.' *I would feel safer when surrounded by friends from work.*

The entrees were managed without any social misdemeanours but Duncan was wishing he had not ordered steak as a main course; he was struggling to finish it, so churned up was his stomach.

Luisa had been more prudent and settled for a Caesar Salad. But even she lost some of her aplomb when the un-cut-up baby spinach leaves used as garnish insisted in falling from her fork as they approached her mouth.

Duncan pushed his plate aside, largely untouched.

'Was the meat too tough?' Her apology was instant. 'I've never had a meal here before. Only drinks and nibbles. And the occasional coffee. I shouldn't have suggested it.'

'No, please don't be sorry. The food's fine. It's me. ...If you must know, it's you not the meal which has spoiled my appetite.'

DILEMMA

'Oh.' Luisa seemed less than impressed. She stiffened and looked around the room, avoiding his eyes.

'No, No!' I've said that all wrong. I wasn't implying any fault on your part. I'm just having difficulty understanding why the most beautiful girl in the world would bother to be here, having lunch with a toad like Duncan MacGregor?'

Luisa could not help herself. She burst out laughing. 'How long did you spend rehearsing a line like that?'

'I can't claim ownership of it.' Despite his embarrassment he gave a sheepish smile. 'I must have read it somewhere and filed it for future use. When it might seem appropriate?'

'I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for an opportunity if I were you! I've had better compliments from folk who didn't like me. What made you think now was appropriate?'

'I like you.'

'I rather got that impression.' It was said in a quiet voice.

Duncan felt the woman opposite was not displeased. He had the good sense to know there were times when it was better to say nothing. This was such a time. She seemed to be considering.

'Do you like music? Classical music?' Her question took him by surprise.

'Yes. Very much. Why?'

The abrupt way she stood up signalled lunch was over. Luisa had come to a decision.

'You haven't answered me. Why? Was that the wrong answer? Have I offended you?'

Instead of replying, Luisa took a credit card from her purse and handed it to him. 'Here, take this! I'd like to pay half. While you're fixing up I'll just make a quick visit to the loo. I'll meet you outside and we can take a taxi.'

'What for? Where are we going?'

Luisa frowned, feigned a puzzled innocence. 'Back to my apartment. Where else?' A smugness Duncan could not fathom lit up her features as she mocked him. 'We can listen to some music together!'