

*A sweeping story of love, catharsis and conservation
from the Dales of Yorkshire to the hills of Chyulu in Kenya*

Catharsis

Landscapes of Love

PHILIP TYLER



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LANDSCAPES OF LOVE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Park Rangers who risk their lives every day to protect the mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park and the rhinos in the National Parks of Kenya.

In the year ending March 2021 alone, twenty young Park staff in Virunga were murdered in a ‘ferociously violent and sustained attack’ by armed poachers.



Mountain gorilla and baby in Virunga

“If we do not do something to prevent it, Africa’s animals, and the places in which they live, will be lost to our world and her children forever.”

Mandela

Contents

Artists and Photographers	ix
Prologue	Colsterdale – The Yorkshire Dales – England xi
Chapter 1	Hydra – The Saronic Islands – Greece 1
Chapter 2	Masham – North Yorkshire – England 14
Chapter 3	The First Flush of Love 38
Chapter 4	The Dark Landscape 60
Chapter 5	Chocorua – New England – The United States of America 76
Chapter 6	Flames in the Fall 90
Chapter 7	Hvar – Adriatic Sea – Croatia 117
Chapter 8	Verbier – The Alps – Switzerland 149
Chapter 9	Romantic Landscapes – The Loire Valley – France 185
Chapter 10	The North Yorkshire Moors – England 205
Chapter 11	A Labyrinth of Love 231
Chapter 12	Chyulu Hills – Kenya – West Africa 245
Chapter 13	Landscapes of the Mind – Somalia – West Africa 262
Chapter 14	The Deserts of Arabia 289
Chapter 15	The Indian Ocean – A Landscape of Love 309
The Ending	326

Artists and Photographers

Dedication	Page v	Mountain gorilla and baby – photograph by Andrey Gudkov/ iStock
Prologue	Page xii	Red-legged partridge – pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 1	Page 10	Hydra harbour – photograph by Milan Gonda/ Shutterstock
Chapter 2	Page 31	Red Kite - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 3	Page 49	Badgers - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 4	Page 61	Kingfisher - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 5	Page 77	Lake Chocorua – photograph by Denis Tangney Jr
Chapter 6	Page 91	Pack horses – photograph by Tracey Elliot Reep (www.traceyelliotreep.com)

Chapter 7	Page 143	Hilltop Fortress above Hvar harbour – photograph by Rustamank/iStock
Chapter 8	Page 168	Golden Eagle - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 9	Page 202	Chateau Chenonceau – old drawing courtesy of The Power of Forever Photography/iStock
Chapter 10	Page 226	Curlew - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 11	Page 232	Old Mill wheel – photograph by Philip Tyler
Chapter 12	Page 253	Mount Kilimanjaro from the Chyulu Hills – pencil drawing by Stella Maris Kinread
Chapter 13	Page 281	White rhino – pencil drawing by Clive Meredith (www.clivemeredithart.weebly.com)
Chapter 14	Page 303	Peregrine falcon - pencil drawing by Nolon Stacey (www.nolonstacey.com)
Chapter 15	page 312	Dolphins – photograph by Chris Marrison/iStock
Cover photograph		African sunrise – photography by Rixipix/iStock

PROLOGUE

Colsterdale – The Yorkshire Dales – England

They first met on Masham High Moor, that runs along the ridge between Wensleydale and Nidderdale in North Yorkshire. It was a beautiful spring morning, with dawn mists still hanging in the deep valley below. The curlews were flying high, filling the skies with optimistic concertos against a chorus of other less musically talented birds.

He was staying near Catterick with an old university friend, after a few months working abroad, and needed a day on his own in the peace of the English countryside to think. Apart from a JR called Suzi that is, which he had borrowed from his friend to keep him company. Dogs are such good companions when you need to be on your own.

The bitch put up a wayward red-legged partridge, and he was following its flight, along the gentle curve of the cloud-shadowed hillside, when he caught sight of a grey Arab stallion. It was following the narrow track down from Gollinglith Ridge, near the twin standing stones. The rider was wearing the kind of coat an Antipodean stockman would wear and one of those wide-brimmed bush hats. As



Red-legged partridge

they approached closer on the track, the wind caught the brim of the hat and revealed the aristocratic face of an English lady, slightly flushed by the cool morning air. She was carrying a Canon camera over her left shoulder; one of those with the rather glaring advert on the strap. He noticed the camera had a wide-angled lens, as used in landscape photography.

“Landscape photographer I presume?” he queried, in a pleasant manner.

“No, astrophysicist actually,” she replied dismissively.

“Not with a Canon D5 camera you’re not,” he observed competitively.

With that brief encounter, she pushed the stallion on past him, forcing him to step aside off the pathway to avoid its extravagant movement. She half looked back at him quizzically and then pressed on down the hill towards Colsterdale.

Their paths did not cross again for two years.

CHAPTER ONE

Hydra – The Saronic Islands – Greece

He had been working on the Greek island of Hydra for three weeks and was having a quiet evening off at the Techne restaurant overlooking the cerulean waters of Avlaki Bay. The food was an inventive update of traditional recipes and he ordered the hylopites with apaki and mizithra cheese, exquisitely created by the talented young chef. The Savatiano wine, made from the old vines in Attica, was a particularly good complement to an excellent meal. He enjoyed eating on his own, planning the night's work ahead, and finished the bottle at a leisurely pace. At about ten, he thanked the owner for a pleasant evening and started back through the labyrinth of car-less, narrow streets and passageways up the hill to his friend's villa, where he was staying whilst on the island.

He passed sea-salted fishermen, lazily seated in tired wooden chairs, enjoying their evening smoke. Excited young lovers, mostly illicit in Greece, embraced in shadowy doorways. When he was about one third of the way up the hill, he turned a corner and ahead of him he saw three Albanian youths lurking in the shadows of one of the narrow passageways that make up the mosaic of thoroughfares on that side of the island. When he got nearer, he could

see that they had cornered a young woman, holding her with her back against a flaking wall. They were tentative, yet aggressive in manner, as all cowards are. He could not see her face, to see if she was a local, or hear her voice at that point. He hung back not wanting to get involved, in case it was a family affair; however, the intensity of the conversation increased, and they were clearly intent on robbing her. She held her own for a while with deprecating remarks, interspersed with the occasional reference to their lack of a father. Suddenly the self-prescribed leader of the group, a particularly unpleasant character, pulled a long blade, changing the dynamics of the situation.

He walked slowly towards the youths and distracted them from their captive.

“Don’t get involved mister,” muttered the smaller youth with the grubby tee shirt.

“I think it’s time to go and play somewhere else,” he proposed calmly, in his best non-confrontational voice.

“You got money too?” asked the leader aggressively.

“I did have but I have just paid for my dinner at the restaurant, I’m afraid.”

“You’re a fucking liar – give me your wallet,” the leader screamed, turning towards him with the knife in his right hand but relieving the intense pressure on the woman. She was now clearly very scared and staring down at the ground in apprehension.

The youth approached closer to him waving the knife, which unfortunately left him with no choice. He put hand behind his back and pulled his Heckler & Koch handgun from his belt and pointed directly at the leader’s head. The youth’s eyes widened with shock and he stopped in his tracks.

“You can’t kill all three of us, before we get to you,” blurted the youth bravely.

“But I will kill you first and I predict that when you are dead on the floor, with blood pouring out of your twitching body, your two friends will be running away at speed – it’s your call.”

The stunned youths looked at each other with indecision; but their bravado evaporated and they ran off down a side passage, into the shadows of the now setting sun.

He approached the woman, who was still looking at the ground. “Are you OK? Sorry about the graphic language but cowards always run away when faced with their own mortality.”

“I had it all under control,” she proposed unrealistically, in a broken voice.

“I know. I was just protecting them!” he joked, to break the tension.

She did that half-quizzical look again and he realised that they had met before in a more civilised landscape.

“A drink?” he offered kindly.

“I don’t drink with strangers carrying guns,” she replied.

“I’ll let you carry it then. I am staying up there – at the top of the cobbled pathway.”

He offered her the gun, grip first, but her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

“I think I will hold on to it for now,” he smiled, and replaced it in his belt behind his back, under his loose denim shirt.

“Sorry about pushing you off the track up on the Moor,” she added apologetically.

“It was my pleasure; I always give way to a lady!”

“Can I take your arm?” she asked.

“You can borrow it!”

She smiled for the first time and linked her arm in his.

They climbed the path to the white-painted villa and she sat on a Lloyd Loom chair on the terrace, looking out over the sea, now bathed in moonlight with fishing boats bobbing gently.

“What would you like to drink – sorry, we don’t have Black Sheep,” he said, referring to the famous Yorkshire brewery in Masham.

“Have you got a gin and Fever Tree?”

“Tanqueray OK?”

“Perfect – make it a double please.”

“Are you OK now?”

“Just a bit cold. Do you have a rug?”

He fetched a warm, woollen blanket from the poolside and draped it around her shoulders. He passed her the gin and tonic in a crystal tumbler and sat opposite her. She looked vulnerable under the rug, but he realised for the first time how beautiful she was. She had long auburn hair held up with an artisan clip, classical cheek bones and a slender neckline. An English lady – confirming his first impression at their meeting on the moor in Colsterdale.

“What are you doing here in robbers’ paradise?” he asked, trying to break the ice.

“Photographing the natural landscapes up in the hills for the Greek government. It’s to do with a European funded, environmental project.”

“I knew you weren’t an astrophysicist,” he laughed.
“How did you get into landscape photography?”

“My father gave me his old Leica camera as a fifteenth birthday present and I used to take it with me up on the High Moor early in the mornings, when the light is so amazing. The skies change every minute and every day is different. I was lucky enough to get some atmospheric shots, which a local publisher picked up at my school photography club annual exhibition, and it just grew from there. Do you like photography?”

“Don’t really have enough patience. My wife was into wildlife photography.”

“Was?”

“Long story. I had better get you back. Where are you staying?” he asked, avoiding the painful question.

“At the Hotel Hydra down on the sea front. I’ll be OK walking back,” she proposed bravely.

“I am sure you will, but I was going that way anyway,” he lied chivalrously.

With that, she took his arm again and they walked back down the cobbled streets to the hotel.

“How long are you staying for?” he asked.

“Probably another couple of days depending on the weather. Why?”

“Unfortunately, I have to leave on the early morning ferry, but I have a friend called Max who could pick you up from the hotel each day and take you wherever you want to go. He knows the island really well and could show you all the interesting views.”

“It’s not necessary, honestly I will be fine.”

“You will be doing me a favour actually,” he lied again, trying to protect her. “Max will enjoy a couple of days off. What time do you want to get going in the morning?”

“About six?”

“OK. Reception at six it is. It has been a pleasure meeting you again and I hope you get some good shots.”

He arranged for Max to be there in the morning, as he walked back up to the villa to prepare for his night’s work.

* * *

The following morning, when she came down at six, there was a very handsome and rather muscular young man sitting in reception, smartly dressed in a sand linen suit and with a Panama hat on his knee. Not what she was expecting.

“Morning ma’am. I’m Max.” He greeted her in a broad American accent.

“Good morning, I’m Charlie. Thank you for offering to escort me around the island at such short notice. It’s very kind of you.”

“Absolutely delighted. Can I carry your equipment for you? That tripod looks rather heavy.”

With that they set off, in the early morning sun, across the island to Limnioniza beach for the first location shoot. It required a long trek from the port, up past the old monastery of Agia Triada. When they reached the crest of the hills, that form the backbone of Hydra, they stopped to admire the spectacular view of the coastline below. Charlie decided to take some photographs and set up the tripod, whilst Max poured out some iced spring water which he had thoughtfully brought along. After taking a few shots, Charlie sat next to Max on a nearby rock and sipped her drink.

“Do you live on the Island, Max?”

“No, no I flew in this morning to meet you.”

“Err, excuse me, Hydra does not have an airport!”

“Sorry, I flew over from Athens in a helicopter and landed on the beach along from the port, out of sight. Not really meant to do that but all the locals were asleep,” Max smiled.

“Now I am really confused. I thought you were a friend of?” She suddenly realised she did not know the name of her previous evening’s rescuer. “Don’t get me wrong, I am very grateful, but who asked you to come and meet me this morning?”

“I have no idea. My boss just asked me if I would like a couple of days out of the office, helping a beautiful damsel in distress. Naturally, being a true American gentleman, I jumped at the chance. So here I am.”

“Who exactly is your boss? Does he carry a gun?”

“Goodness gracious no ma’am, he is a diplomat at the British embassy.”

“Firstly, will you stop calling me ma’am – its colonial – and secondly why would the embassy pay for you and a helicopter? don’t bother to answer that.”

“Great. That’s sorted that out. How did the camera work?” replied Max, grateful that the interrogation was at an end.

“It’s fine. It’s only the photographer that’s confused. Shall we move on before we lose the light. Just call me Charlie by the way.”

Max collected up the bags, collapsed the Manfrotto tripod, and followed Charlie down the hill. A bit further on, they passed the smouldering wreck of a large mansion, with two police officers from the NCB Athens (Interpol) hovering near the gate. Evidently there had been a large gas

explosion overnight, killing several people and burning the place to the ground. Max ascertained from the policeman that there were no suspicious circumstances and that they could move on safely down the hill.

On reaching Limnioniza beach Charlie did a quick recce of the site and set up her camera at a strategic point and started collecting images. The light was still good and the cloudless blue sky helped with the tones she wanted. After an hour or so Charlie was happy, so Max broke open the packed lunch of crab salad, with a cool bottle of Prosecco Ca'Stella. They sat on the beach looking out over the blue waters between the Saronic and Argolis gulfs. The sun was intense and Max took off his jacket. He was wearing a tight sky-blue chambray shirt, as most young American men do when they want to impress a lady. Charlie pretended not to notice.

“What do you do at the Embassy?” asked Charlie.

“I am a commercial attaché.”

“What does that involve?”

“Mainly arranging business meetings. Pretty boring stuff really. It’s all about imports and exports, tourism – that sort of thing. I understand you live in Yorkshire in England?”

“I do... But how do you know that?”

“Did a bit of homework in the sky; you are quite famous on Google. I love your pictures of the moors. Do you only do landscapes?”

“Yes, mainly now. I used to do some pet photography to make ends meet but landscapes are my love. Shall we make our way back now. It’s getting too hot.”

Max packed the bags again and they hitched a ride on a sea taxi that circled around the island and back to the port. Charlie trailed her elegant hands in the cool sea and was glad they had decided not to hike over the hill again. When they had disembarked and walked back to the hotel, Max offered to take her out for a meal at Omilio's Bistro, that evening.

"That's very kind of you but I must pay," offered Charlie firmly.

"No need. Everything you want is already paid for."

"Everything?"

"That is what I was told. I don't know who your friend is, but he obviously knows all the movers and shakers. I will pick you up at six. Is casual OK?" asked Max.

* * *

When Max reappeared, Charlie was sitting outside the hotel drinking a G & T. She was wearing a white cotton blouse with a mandarin collar and a long pale blue skirt with buttons down the front. Her hair fell loosely over her shoulders. Max was clearly impressed.

"Can I say you look amazing this evening," he flattered her, in a less than subtle American way.

"Thank you, kind sir. You're looking handsome yourself," she smiled.

They wandered down to Omilio's and took a table overlooking the harbour, where the rigging was tapping on the high-tech masts in the warm evening breeze. Max ordered two more drinks and they looked through the menu.

"I am having the fresh squid – how about you, Charlie?"

"I will have the same I think."



Hydra harbour

“Where are you from Max?”

“Just outside Boston, New England. Went to Harvard Business School and then did a PhD at Oxford, on the evolution of European languages.”

“Any family?”

“No. My parents were killed in 9/11. Wrong place. Wrong time. I have two beautiful godchildren in California, who Facebook me all the time and give me a lot of fun.”

The waiter finally made it to the table.

“Good evening. Are you two having a nice stay on our lovely island?”

“Yes, very pleasant thank you,” replied Charlie.

“Have you been around the island yet?”

“Yes, we walked over to Limmioniza beach this morning,” reported Max.

“Ah. You will have gone past the big house that burnt out last night?”

“Yes – it looked awful and several people were killed evidently.”

“No one on the island will mourn that Chinese lot going. They only came to the island very rarely and never spent any money here. There have been rumours for years that that were mixed up in all sorts of bad things.”

“What sort of things?” asked Max.

“Mafia type stuff. Two of them were accused of being involved in illegally trafficking ivory from Somalia to Thailand last year. The case got to court in Athens but was thrown out on some sort of technicality to do with diplomatic immunity. Everybody knows they were guilty as sin, so good riddance I say. What would you like to eat?”

“I don’t think we should have a Chinese dish then Max,” Charlie smiled.

“We will both have the squid please,” Max confirmed to the waiter, “and a bottle of Vinsanto Argyros 20.”

“What do you make of all that then Max?” enquired Charlie, not understanding the intrigue of her future with her rescuer on the island.

“These islanders love a bit of local gossip. I expect it was just an accident of some kind,” lied Max.

“I suppose you are right. Max could you ask your boss if he has a contact email address for; whoever is paying for you helping me? I would like to write to him to thank him for his kindness.”

“I will ask when I get back, but I doubt he will know. As far as I understand it, we just got a large bank transfer and a note asking for someone to come over and carry your bags. Best job I have ever had. Cheers!”

With that, the first course arrived. They thanked the waiter and dived in, being really hungry after a long day. It was a romantic, Saronic sunset across the bay. The evening shadows from the masts reflecting in the still waters and the seabirds were dipping for their own suppers.

“Shall we have a dessert ma’am?” teased Max.

“I thought I said

Max smiled. “Only joking. Did I tell you that you look amazing tonight?”

“You did actually, and it’s been a lovely evening but I think we should be getting back. We have another early start tomorrow.”

Max took the hint and they walked back to Charlie’s hotel.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Forgive me?” begged Max.

“No need to apologise. You are a very attractive young man and great company. I am just not in a position to start a relationship at the moment.”

“Of course. Sorry. Can we rewind?”

“Never happened. Is six OK for tomorrow?”

“See you then,” said Max, leaving the hotel entrance and pondering another unsuccessful conquest.

* * *

Charlie and Max spent the next two days travelling the island on foot or by water taxi. They laughed a lot and she took some beautiful photographs for her portfolio, that she hoped would please her clients. On the final morning, Max carried her bags and equipment down to the ferry and loaded it on board.

“What time does your flight leave for Manchester?”

“Not till late afternoon, so I have plenty of time. Thank so much for all your help, Max. You have been great company and I have really enjoyed my few days on the island,” said Charlie sincerely.

She gave Max a friendly hug and he smiled as she climbed aboard the ferry. He waved, as the ageing, white-painted ferry, tinged with rusty streaks, eased its way out of the historic harbour. Unknown to Charlie, their paths would cross again, when he could help her revenge her past.