

PROLOGUE



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The little craft putted across the still blue surface of the Indian Ocean, its monotonous chug-chug and wispy trail of fuel smoke stirring the boys and men who were idling on the wharf.

‘Oi... oi... oi!’ a sparrow of a lad, no more than six, cried.

As though a beehive had fallen into their midst, the group sparked into a frenzy. Bursting into chatter, they slung out ropes and began scrambling down the uneven steps of the sea wall to welcome the bobbing dhow. The timber boat was part of a small afternoon fleet, travelling in convoy as a safety-in-numbers strategy to deter raids from the Somali pirates operating in the region. This tiny vessel would be the last passenger boat to clip its way from the Kenyan mainland to the little island of Lamu that day.

I leant forward from my perch above the promenade and peered through the star-shaped gaps in my hotel’s crumbling concrete balustrade, scanning the island’s new arrivals with an intensity that belied my casual demeanour.

Winston, the owner of the hotel, followed my lead and clutched at the banister, whispering as though we were spies, ‘Who are you looking for, John?’

‘No one,’ I blurted out, realising I sounded far too defensive to be credible.

The overladen dhow bobbed so low in the water, it was difficult to identify any of the passengers in among their flowing robes and the crates piled up around them. One of a dozen women wearing black burqas led the procession off, heaving a bulging woven basket onto her head and leaping from the

wobbling craft with surprising ease. The skipper's boy began passing old brown suitcases, crates of produce, tubs of cooking oil and wooden-caged animals to the previously napping dock-dwellers. Eventually only three passengers remained. They were *mzungus* – white foreigners – like me, but not the person I was desperate to see.

Deflated, I slumped back into the old floral lounge chair I had been sitting on, a cup of fragrant tea beside me on a small table. The drink had been presented with a flourish by Winston's enigmatic wife, Bertie, a woman twice his size and doubly loud but half his age. I raised the cup with both hands, but they shook uncontrollably and the liquid sloshed over the rim. I quickly placed the cup back down with a fumbling crash.

'Sor... sorry, Winston. I can't hold anything. I... I just... I just...' The last word collapsed in a whimper: 'can't...'

Winston pretended he hadn't noticed, peeking sideways and surreptitiously analysing my shaking hands, cracked lips and gaunt, pale face. I was not surprised: he and Bertie had been watching me closely since I collapsed at the bottom of their stairwell days earlier. Far from being the perfect guest, I had been shuffling around their little hotel ever since, vomiting, sweating and crying out in the dark of the night – making it impossible for anyone to ignore me.

Hoping to avoid further scrutiny, I attempted to divert his focus. 'Look,' I said, pointing down at the boat.

Three western girls, in their mid-twenties and with their hair in holiday braids, were crab-crawling towards the bobbing dhow's side. With a monstrous backpack tilting her sideways, the first of them placed a cautious foot onto the boat's side, confronting the short step over the water as though it was a zip-line across the Grand Canyon.

'Oh my God!' she cried. 'Where's the safety harness?'

A shirtless teenage boy, wearing floral board shorts that would have looked more at home on a beach in California, stepped forward from a waiting cluster of touts. He held his hand out to her and proceeded to pull all three onto the dock with efficiency. The lad was immediately rewarded, becoming the chosen one to lead the trio into the labyrinth of Lamu's stone-walled laneways.

Winston's gaze followed the three girls and their caravan of would-be guides.

'No business for me today,' he lamented.

I let out a loud snort of disbelief.

The Full Moon Hotel may have been built in a great spot overlooking the Indian Ocean, but the view appeared to be its only redeeming feature. Showing

glimpses of past grandeur, the crumbling building looked like it had been hit by a mortar. Since crossing its threshold days earlier, I'd encountered squat toilets that emitted a stench like an open latrine, mouldy green hosepipes for shower heads, and mosquito-netting over the bed with holes a circus rat could leap through. And there were plenty of those critters on site, scampering noisily through the walls as though a rodent freeway weaved between the crawlspaces. Had I been physically capable of walking more than 50 feet from the dock upon arrival, I too would have powered through Lamu's hodgepodge of laneways, to anywhere but here.

Winston and I sat in companionable silence for an age, watching the long pink twilight scorch across the horizon like a technicoloured flame. Stars started popping into the sky, and the *Adhan* began echoing out an otherworldly wail from the island's twenty-plus mosques. The Muslim call to prayer acted like an air raid siren, and the busy waterfront cleared in minutes. There were no motorised vehicles on the island, and soon the only distinct noises emanated from the putt-putt of shore-hugging fishing dhows heading out for their nightly catch, and the clacking hooves and trumpet-braying *bee-haws* of passing donkeys.

Darkness fell. Lamps from the fishing dhows flickered to light and sparkled across the flat sea like floating candles, mirroring the starry twinkles in the sky. Winston eventually broke the silence, pointing up at the bright crescent-shaped moon rising in the sky.

'There will be a good catch tonight,' he said. 'The fish – they come to the surface to see the light.'

Exactly what I was trying to do, I thought.

'We should go in,' he said. 'My good wife will have dinner ready for us.' He looked at me and curiosity finally got the better of him. 'First, I must ask you, John... are you okay?'

Ah, the power of those three words. My eyes filled with tears in an instant. Turning away, I wiped fat wet streaks off my face. Winston turned towards the sea, kindly pretending not to notice.

I desperately wanted to confide in him but felt too embarrassed. And what could I say if I didn't even know the truth myself? How could I trust this man I had just met when I felt that I could not trust *anyone* anymore?

'I'm okay, Winston... I think. Well... maybe not. I don't really know,' I mumbled. 'But hey... *hakuna matata*, right? No worries.'

'*Hakuna matata*,' he replied, leaving my obvious lie alone... for now.

Suddenly, I didn't want to leave Africa's worst hotel. For days I had kept myself in exile in a threadbare room furnished with rat droppings, while I recuperated, trying to remember but hoping to forget. Yet, in Winston's orbit of reassurance, this place felt like a wonderful sanctuary where I might hide away from the outside world without risk or fear.

Standing up and leaning unsteadily on the veranda's rail, I gazed at the glistening white arrow of moonlight ripping across the sea towards me. The scene was glorious and peaceful, in contrast to my current frantic and disturbed state of being. I desperately yearned for clarity to confront the biggest dilemma of my life. But – alone, confused and physically wrecked – my mind was not working and the recent past was lost in a thick fog.

I couldn't remember much, but I remembered how it had all started. It had all begun months earlier, with the phone call that had blown my world apart and swept me down a path I had never anticipated I would travel.