

MOLLY

By William Davies

This book is dedicated to Geoffrey and his mother, Gillian, without whom I would not have had the privilege of knowing this special treasure for all too short a time.

CHAPTER ONE

Thomas was the third born into a relaxed, if undisciplined Scottish family, where the human spirit was revered, the parameters set wide, his mind free to test the boundaries of thought.

Competition was fierce between them as they tested each other's skills. His sister was a natural leader, intelligent, considered attractive, and well-versed in managing hordes of men thirsting for her company. His brother kept a loving eye on him during those awkward teenage years.

Thomas had turned thirty when his mother died, her husband having died six months earlier. They had paid for his time at Edinburgh University and much of his travelling expenses, questioning when he would lose the wanderlust and find a lifelong companion. He remembered clearly his mother's parting words.

'Thomas, darling. Keep looking. Some people find direction quickly, others sift the choices before them more carefully. Keep looking, Thomas.'

After their mother died the family spent some days at the manor house before returning to their lives.

'Well Thomas, what are you going to do with your share of the estate? Isn't it time to be a dutiful uncle, and find someone who will curtail your craving for distant horizons?'

Thomas looked over to his nieces and nephews. 'I'll miss them Sis. I'll send gifts. To stay? I don't know. I still have that travel itch. Camera work is casual, and I'm yet to find a soulmate, and true purpose in life. I admire your achievements, I'll write when I can. My friend, Masika is urging me to visit

his country, and we're having lunch next week when he comes here for business.'

They separated, his siblings to their lives of children and work, Thomas to continue his travels.

Do restless souls need other restless souls for harmony?

CHAPTER TWO

Masika and Thomas had developed a close friendship at University. He was a native of Bortonia, a country on the west coast of Africa. Masika's family were wealthy traders and he was expected to go into the family business.

He and Masika kept the friendship alive, Thomas promising to visit his country, the last one made during their recent lunch, when they reminisced about their university days. Thomas had been a member of the University camera club, and since then had taken trips to various parts of Europe, often doing casual work for magazines.

Masika was a tall, well-built African with a ready smile and a playful wit.

Both were skilled runners and had enjoyed the rivalry, Thomas preferring the shorter distances to 800 metres, Masika the longer races. When Thomas asked why, Masika laughed, tousled Thomas's hair.

'That skill comes from learning to run faster than the slave traders. You'd make a good target, Thomas, fair freckled skin, prized, I believe!'

'Alarming, Masika. It whets my appetite. Give me some background.'

'Sadly, Thomas, as you'll observe, we're a struggling third world country. Exposure to the international community of the drug and slave trade, along with the corruption and poverty through your lens will support those working to remove these elements from Bortonia.'

'An interesting project, Masika. Give me an outline of what to expect.'

'Bortonia is surrounded by the ocean, the large Langano river and a country to the north. There is a ridge running the length of it, a physical barrier between the two sides. About two thirds of Bortonia is on what is known as the Badlands side which bounds the river. The main seaside trading port and seat of government is on the Palace city side where I live. The Badlands has

been ceded to a man called Santino who works with the major slave trader, Luca. I shudder to tell you more of this criminal family of brothers and cousins. Luca, Santino, and a man only known as the chemist, someone you should avoid, come from a family of Southern Italians that migrated to Bortonia in the middle of the last century.

‘Luca has contracts to supply bonded labour for the diamond mines of King Moustapha, the King of Kordokia, a country about two days away by ship. At first, labour was willingly available, the contracts attractive to people with little prospect of finding work in their own villages, but word from escaped slaves quickly came back about the conditions and non-payment.

‘Luca could not supply labour, voiding his contracts, so he resorted to capturing the men, forcing them in chains onto his ships that sailed both from the Langano river and a small port not far away from the Palace city port. Santino does the enslaving, Luca deals with government, and the King. The chemist controls those that attempt to escape.

‘They are three men; King Moustapha, Luca, and Santino, bonded by greed.

‘Another country, Dromona, led by a man named Gunther, invaded us and established a trading compound using our main port in the Palace city. This significantly weakened Luca’s slave trading business. They had been trading for about five years when the drug and slave lords banded together and sacked their compound. This led to violent retribution from Dromona. I learnt this from my parents as I was still a year away from being born and the raid was in nineteen thirty-five.

‘Because of the poverty, a bribery riddled government has flourished, controlled by Luca. Some years back there was a period of peace when the country was ruled with compassion, but the drug and slave lords have reasserted their power, and we are again ruled by a corrupt government based on slavery and the trading requirements of Dromona.

‘So, Thomas, take your lens and expose this stain on my country. I know you look for causes in your life.’

‘You’re making me into a war correspondent.’

‘There are risks, but there are good people in the Badlands trying to disrupt the trade where most of the slaves are taken from, but there is fear, most people being employed by Santino. One name is mentioned, a tribal head called Moctar. Seek him out, he will protect you.

‘An exciting and challenging brief, Masika. I’ll take it and start on the Badlands side. Tell me, is English spoken, or will that be an added burden, and why Badlands, a throwaway remark?’

‘Thomas, my friend. It might sound outlandish to a foreigner and of course there are native names for different areas, but it accurately describes it for what it is. And yes, English is spoken.

‘It’s challenging to go there, but worth it, knowing how you find these sorts of adventures to your taste. The port city lying at the mouth of the river is mid-sized, semi modern, with reasonable amenities, established in the colonial days, but it doesn’t take long to get the feel of the country as you walk upriver. There is a daily bus service between the two sides running along the only trafficable road which goes mostly through jungle.’

As they parted, Thomas promised Masika he would be in Bortonia within the month.

Thomas added self-defence to his preparations. When he arrived in Bortonia, he quickly learnt the accuracy of Masika’s remarks.

Part of the challenge for Thomas, other than visiting a country new to him, was the personal trials he liked to test himself with, and he was always looking for other areas to film. It was his determination to go that stopped his friends from pleading with him to abandon this venture. There was always Masika to call on.

Not long after the family reunion, Thomas boarded a small trading boat heading to the Badlands side of Bortonia. This boat was an all ports cargo boat with limited passenger cabins that crept northwards along the west coast of Arica, eventually arriving at the Langano river port where it squeezed in between two ships taking on produce. Thomas was the only passenger that disembarked. Masika had given him directions to a shop that had details of hotels and maps of the area. Walking towards the town centre he noticed little activity away from the bustle of the wharves, life revolving around small canoes carrying one or two men as they worked their way across the river; navigators fishing to survive.

With his haversack strapped firmly, camera at the ready Thomas found the shop, took a map of the immediate area, thanked the shop keeper, who advised there was a small hotel not far from the edge of the next town, the last before the native villages that stretched along the river bank. It was well into a dry summer, the storms late, as Thomas walked along the dirt road,

dust and heat confronting him. His sweat sodden shirt clung to his body, a contrast to the mild temperatures of Scotland.

He was excited to find so much to photograph. Such a feast of colour; the headgear, skirts swaying as broad backed women, carrying pots on their heads walked past, chatting between themselves. The men with powerful bodies, gave Thomas a more than cursory glance, and he hitched his haversack a little higher. Thomas filmed many of the canoes and small boats plying the river as he mused about its secrets, held tight on calm days, its raging days. Every mile more history until all was lost to the great ocean. From his childhood days, Thomas enjoyed being near water, its calming influence giving peace to his sometimes-troubled mind as he searched for life's purpose.

There were fewer people as he walked upriver, just the occasional cyclist, and fishermen returning with their catch, bags slung over bent shoulders, tired faces showing the end of a dreary day. A big black car, a statement of wealth charged past. With its horn screaming loudly, and car radio blaring, it forced the cyclists and walkers to the side of the road, leaving them coughing as the dust swirled into their eyes and nostrils.

He looked back at the disappearing car and saw two large natives, each with a club, coming towards him, their pace quickly closing the gap. With a prickle down his spine, he photographed them hurriedly as they broke into a jog. Clearing the dust from his eyes, he ran the last hundred or so metres to reach three cyclists, their bright coloured shirts welcoming, as the two men broke away and disappeared into the foliage. The cyclists, having paused for water, rode on, one of them giving Thomas a lift, and they reached the small town and his hotel.

Next morning, He searched for a shop where he could read his guide and taste the food of the area. He stopped outside one with faint remnants of blue paint peeling off weather damaged boards, its name long gone. The natives looked curiously at Thomas as they passed by, trudging the streets to the little work available, threading their way between stray dogs, ribs showing, sniffing for food scraps. Thomas had not seen another white man since arriving. A man dressed raggedly, was tooting on a battered trumpet making a show of swaggering along the road.

The creaking door expelled a pair of youths.

‘Say, man, she might have said no, instead of just staring at the table.’ the scruffy youth reflected.

‘With your bad-tempered behaviour – of course she wasn’t interested.’

Intrigued, Thomas grabbed the door handle and found a table by the window which caught the morning sun. It was here that he met the mute woman.

The few tables were on bare boards, the sun piercing through cobwebs surrounding dirty windows. Thin strands of shadow danced on the table tops when puffs of wind, stirring dust in the street, eddied through the door. Patches of linoleum with a garish pattern remained in the corners, elsewhere it was long worn away from shoppers tracking in and out. Early workers joined with sweaty night boatmen, their dead fish smell mingling with the aroma of fresh baked bread and coffee as they gave their orders to the woman and a baby-faced youth. The mixture of smells permeated the room, spread by a slow-moving fan which squeaked with each revolution.

The woman asked a young man, with torn clothes and a dirty face,

‘What is it today?’

‘The usual, thanks.’

Thomas heard her voice, flat and slow, as it drifted over the room. Was he grumpy, in pain from a late night? He had enough pump left to ogle her as he ordered, but her response; only to write it down, ignoring him as she turned away, their daily farce, with no variation to break the monotony.

Apart from her slightly shuffling gait and mask of disinterest, she had a beautiful face, and a steely determination. There was a sense of power, and a near imperceptible quality that excited him. His heart beat faster at the prospect of meeting her.

Did her shoulders droop as she turned and placed the order?

The youth brought his breakfast, rice bread and baobab juice, and coffee. He picked away at it, struggling to concentrate on the guide as he watched her fill the orders. When she came close, he buried his head behind its pages. Once he peeked over the top and saw her looking at him. She didn’t speak but there was a smile, a trace of longing. He put his hand to his flushed face and caught the reflection in a cracked mirror, the bright red, stark against his white, lightly freckled skin.

On returning the next day to the same table, Thomas called the youth over, ordered breakfast and asked after the waitress, his café girl as he liked to think of her. The waiter mopped away the spilt juice.

‘Sorry, I’ll get another.’

‘No, no need. Tell me about your waitress. She was here yesterday. Not sick, I hope.’

‘She don’t come today.’

‘Live around here?’

‘Arrives with Leech.’

‘Leech?’

‘Yeah, boss, Lekan, but we call him Leech. He limps. Limpy Leech, get it.’
He thought this funny, slapped his thigh.

‘Thanks. In tomorrow?’

‘Yeah, rest of the week.’

Thomas lost confidence in his dream of sweeping this woman into his arms, a woman, whom he sensed carried knowledge of realms disconnected to this humble shop, as her magnetism pulled every fibre of his life towards her.

With his camera bag slung over his shoulder, Thomas walked out of town on a well-trodden path to the river, a path he was to travel frequently over the next few weeks, though this was unknown to him at the time. With Masika’s wish that he exposes the slave trade to the world he surprised a boat owner by asking if he would take him upriver. He filmed the town and the people walking along the path. He had been warned of a depressed community, but there was always lively chat as the natives carried their goods, women impressing Thomas as they balanced their pots on their heads. Was it words from Masika playing with his mind or were there many fewer men than women?

After further exploring the small town he hired a bicycle and travelled into the foothills at the edge of the forest, looking for photo opportunities. Each day he would pass by the shop hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Sometimes she looked out, and he rushed by. Try as he might, Thomas couldn’t expel her from his mind.

Determined to visit again, he exchanged shoddy travelling clothes for a clean shirt, a smart pair of shorts. The creaking door complained as dust swirled off the street following him to the table.

The youth started across, a knowing look, faking a slight limp. Thomas glared at him and caught her attention. She came across, pencil and paper ready, a brief smile.

She was stunningly beautiful, and Thomas was cross with himself for doubting his instincts and not returning sooner, a wasted week. There was pain, pain, and defeat in her eyes, yet she moved with grace and dignity, her background different to this town with its culture of poverty.

Would her eyes reveal her mystery? They were deep blue, expressionless. What would be discovered should she choose to remove her defensive mask? Her skin was light olive, a mixture of native and European heritage, her face angular.

Her straight black hair, shoulder-length, was clean but unkempt, hands slim, skin roughened by work, no jewellery. There was a small scar near her nose, perhaps from remedial surgery. Canvas shoes, the dress, dreary, ideal for her work. Her fatigued manner showed an age more mature than the reality. What was that imperceptible something that must have been developed in an environment away from this river with its simple fisher folk? She came across.

‘What will it be?’

More tense than before, but still grey-toned, Thomas choked and stared over her shoulder at a distant point. He was brought back to reality by an edge to her voice, impatient, her face tightened.

‘Your order, what do you want?’

‘Sorry, I had to see you again. Do you mind? I was taken by your beauty.’

She smiled, as Thomas saw the smirking youth serving another table.

Again, he sensed the heat in his flushed cheeks as all he could think of was to repeat the breakfast. Lowering his eyes, he picked at his shirt buttons.

She turned to place the order, her smile gone, but her eyes were a little brighter.

Her reflection in the mirror revealed despair in that unguarded moment, the ache of disturbing thoughts, as she stood waiting for his food. Had she dreamt that Thomas offered escape from bondage, only to be quickly replaced by certainty?

She could have been any shop girl; bored, moving from table to table, to the kitchen and back, deflecting the abuse, enjoying the praises. This was the wrong environment for her. Why was she here?

She brought Thomas's order, his attention being drawn to a thin man, angrily staring at him from the kitchen window. He had a scar across his left cheek, receding dark hair, brown pockmarked flaky skin, signs of an abused body. She moved to the next table, her eyes glistening with moisture as she gave a faint shake of her head.

He ate hurriedly and left, reflecting that she reminded him of his sister. There was strong chemistry between them, stronger than any he had experienced with other women.

Tantalized by her beauty and intelligent face, unable to be hidden behind her mask of despair, Thomas walked to the river trying to work out why she was there. He conjured up dark thoughts about her skinny companion, searching for logical answers. He didn't find any.

There were children fishing from a jetty. He photographed them as he sat alongside, dropping his legs over the edge, until he felt a tap on his shoulder, and pressure in the small of his back. He looked around to see the boot of a large bare chested black man with a cloth hat shading his eyes, his face slashed with white teeth as he grinned. He had a fishing rod, and a long flat bladed unsheathed knife, the tip flicking Thomas's right shoulder, as it dangled from a rope belt holding torn trousers in place.

Thomas left.

CHAPTER THREE

Shivering and walking slowly in a perfect summer evening, Thomas reached the shop which was closed. He turned back to the hotel, thinking of her stress when he last ate there, the thin man glaring at him. He was bedridden for several days with a tropical virus, but when it passed, he stepped into bright sunshine, still weak from little food and his illness, but determined to make it to her shop. His breathing grew faster and shallower until dizziness blurred his vision and he collapsed outside the creaking door. When he woke from his faint, there was a small crowd of casually interested gawkers, chatting amongst themselves, waiting to see if the woman holding his head from

flopping into the gutter, would abandon him to the dust of the road – the café girl.

Having paused long enough to see a scene with no dramatic ending, and that he was being cared for, they gathered their baskets, their water pots and walked on, printed dresses moving with their gait as they disappeared around the corner.

She held his head nestled in her lap, the warmth of her body flowing into his, her feminine loving face, close. His chest tightened, and heart thumped rapidly as she stroked his forehead. In his mind's eye, Thomas Peeled away the drudgery, the sadness engulfing her, to reveal a mind and body the equal of any challenge. What event had drained her motivation, blocked her capacity to attain her potential?

She kept his head cradled in her lap, with a dreamy look in her eyes, continuing to stroke his forehead and hair, muttering,

‘Beautiful, honest, fearless eyes, sensuous lips, kindness.’

Thomas, clasped her hand, held it against his cheek.

‘As soon as I saw you I knew you didn’t belong here.’

The thin man was limping quickly through the doorway, a thunderous expression, baton raised. Was this Lekan? She saw Thomas staring at him. Her body stiffened, her face turned to stone, the man was repugnant. She squeezed his hand, stroked his face one more time, and ran her fingers quickly through his hair, pulling it gently. As they stood, Thomas drew her close, studying her face,

‘We must meet again.’

‘It’s not possible.’

Her eyes clouded over, as she subtly shook her head and stepped away. Thomas walked a few paces, turned back, but she was gone. Two days later, now completely free of his fever, he went back for breakfast. There were few there. The youth started across, but she cut him off.

‘You look better. I was worried. Were you sick?’ She pushed her words, voice crisp.

‘I was ill for a few days and hadn’t eaten. I was hoping to see you again.’

She was animated as they gazed at each other, drawing their minds together, and then, he saw the man over her shoulder, Leech, with a threatening look, limping rapidly towards them. Her eyes followed Thomas's, as he asked,

‘He's not your man?’

Molly shuddered, her face imploring Thomas not to believe it.

‘I'm not allowed to speak, just take orders. I wish we could meet again, but it's impossible. Give me your order.’

What power did this hobbling bag of bones hold over her, not family, a companion of sorts? He had to see her again.

The next day he returned to the shop and was about to enter when her terrified look stopped him. He let the door swing shut as Leech rushed forward. With baton raised, he grabbed her by the elbow and propelled her towards the kitchen. Thomas was about to confront him, but seeing the panic in her face, he balanced the action of provoking him against imperilling her further. Her fear prevented him from entering the shop again. Better to first learn more about this relationship, particularly as she had said it was impossible to see him. He managed to get some photos of her as she pulled her elbow free.

Putting the shop and the controlled waitress aside he enquired where he might meet Moctar and was told that he brought fish to a beach not far upriver from the jetty with the black man and the dangling sword, and that he was due to come today or tomorrow.

Moctar was curious to meet Thomas, and said he didn't know Masika, but the slavery resistant movement was well known. He agreed to show Thomas more of the country and take him to his village but warned against photography. There were many people who would not want their faces seen overseas.

They arrived after a long day and spent two nights which gave Thomas time to do some photography and meet his family before Moctar had to return to town. They welcomed him enthusiastically, any curiosity about his background and reasons for being in these parts, suppressed by good manners. Nonetheless, Thomas, honoured to satisfy their interest in this traveller, willingly told them about Scotland and his history. It was calming and lessened the disappointment of not seeing Leech's prisoner again. Moctar's warning about photography prompted Thomas to be more selective, but it didn't stop him doing what Masika had asked of him.

Moctar taught him about the plant life and the best fish to catch, and his wife and children introduced him to many of the village people. When they left for the return trip, Thomas reflected on the warmth of their friendship which endeared them to him.

They were well on their way when Thomas asked Moctar how it was that his village was leading the resistance to slavery.

‘We are numerically strong as we resisted being involved with slavery. Often village tribes from the river area go inland seeking slaves to sell but our people refused, developing their fishing and farming skills. We are powerful so that Santino would find it costly to raid us. We also have a strong spy network and can out-manoeuvre him.’

‘Thank you, Moctar, and let me ask you about Leech and the mysterious girl whom he treats as his prisoner.’

At the mention of Leech, Moctar’s face contorted, his body stiffened. The casual chat stopped instantly, and he stared ahead. They sailed on in silence until the sun had moved past its zenith and was well on its way to the horizon, the air oppressive. He cut the motor and they drifted on the tide as the river flowed slowly towards the ocean.

‘Thomas, my friend, a bad question. I won’t tell you all I know. That would compromise me and the girl you mention. I can say that people who count the devil as their close friend detain her. They are the power this side of the range and there is one man, Santino who is the main employer. There are good people, particularly in my village who do what they can to assist those who are suffering because of the slave and drug trade but their help is limited.

‘If you achieved the impossible, and became friends with her, there is a silent majority in the villages that would wish you well, but few would stand in support. All families are tainted through a network designed to keep everyone loyal to Santino and his organisation.

‘You must leave. Your continuing presence has already aroused suspicion as to your motives for not moving on. Have you not wondered why you are the only non-African, in the area? There is a bus that goes daily to the Palace city; take it. You would be safe on the bus as they would prefer you leave than have to remove you if you stayed.’

‘Remove me?’ Thomas asked.

‘Yes Thomas, at best, you’d be beaten badly, more likely you’d be killed.’

‘But what about my promise to Masika. I have some footage but not enough. Can you help me? I suspect Leech is connected. I’m also drawn to the girl and cannot understand why I’m being stopped from seeing her. What’s her name?’

‘Leech is instructed to keep her isolated, but you should not photograph him.’

‘I have already.’

‘No name, Thomas. It would only burden you. Keep your camera out of sight, destroy the film – Go.’

He started the motor and they finished the short journey in silence. Thomas was hurt that his friend would not answer his questions, but also sorry he had given Moctar discomfort by raising the subject of slavery and the girl. And, what danger had he exposed Moctar and his friends to?

With his predicament at the forefront of his mind, and the shop girl’s fear showing every time he saw her, he took Moctar’s advice and bought a ticket for the bus trip to the Palace city. He was about to board when the black man with the flat bladed knife and the cloth hat stepped in front, pushing Thomas onto the road. He turned with a grin and said,

‘Blacks first here, man.’

Thomas stood and started to follow him onto the bus, but he blocked the doorway, his right hand curled round the handle of his knife.

No point making it an issue, always another day. Inside Thomas was seething with anger, which strengthened his determination to find the girl and take her away from this limping human shell, even if it meant confronting him in the shop. As he turned away from the bus, his resolve was reinforced by the memory of her body as she cradled his head. This was stronger than the warning from Moctar which was still testing his courage. He took a photo of the man as the doors closed behind him.

It was late afternoon. Having again booked into the hotel, Thomas strolled up the incline, and reached the shop which had closed for the day. As he turned to go back Leech was in a side street whacking his baton with considerable force on the girl, who winced but remained silent. He lifted his arm to deliver another blow. She saw Thomas, broke away and ran into another street. He got one good photo of Leech before he limped after her. Thomas quickly overtook him and, incensed by this deliberate act of cruelty, he gave him a

thorough beating. Leech drew a knife from his belt, which Thomas took from him, pulled him close by his shirt collar, his flaring nostrils repulsed by Leech's stale alcohol steeped breath. Grasping the opportunity, he demanded of Leech.

'What's your business with her? Gaoler, gold digger, what generates her fear, and what right must you have to stop me seeing her? Are you part of the slavers, Santino's group?'

Leech collapsed onto Thomas, his feather weight easily carried by one hand, as he held his shaking body upright by the throat. Looking at his watery, glazed eyes, Thomas loosened his grip, knowing he would not be answered. He settled for a threat and another thumping, this time with Leech's own baton.

'If I catch you hitting her again, I'll see you join the debris of the river.'

Screaming at Thomas in his native tongue, Leech disappeared into the gloom, his high-pitched voice bouncing off the clay bricks of the houses in the narrow lane. Thomas found his café girl banging on a wooden slatted door. He held her close, and they embraced with such passion and love flowing one to the other that he knew his search for a mate was over. She winced when he squeezed where the baton had fallen hardest as the door opened and she slipped inside.

He was determined to see this challenge to its end, notwithstanding the risks which had been made clear by Moctar, but the actions of Limping Leech, Lekan, whatever they chose to call him, firmed his resolve. Anger blocking rational thought, he waited impatiently for tomorrow and the start of his search.