

LOVE IN THE LAND OF BAREFOOT SOLDIERS

A NOVEL

ADVANCE
READING
COPY

FRANCES VIETA

LOVE IN THE LAND OF BAREFOOT SOLDIERS

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

Cover design by Yucca Publishing

Print ISBN: 978-1-63158-013-0

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-63158-030-7

Printed in the United States of America

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LAND OF BAREFOOT
SOLDIERS

A Novel

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YUCCA



Horn of Africa - 1935

INTRODUCTION

“LOVE IN THE LAND of Barefoot Soldiers” is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination, or historical fact used in a fictitious manner. Except for well-known historical figures, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

Some people will wonder what the difference is between Ethiopia and Abyssinia. There is none. The confusion is historical: Ethiopia of classical times became Abyssinia in the Middle Ages and remained thus until the end of World War II. I have chosen to use Ethiopia, in almost all instances, because Haile Sellassie did the same. There are also many variations of the Ethiopian spellings of names and places. I used the ones Haile Sellassie used in his autobiography.

In 1935, Ethiopia, eight times as large as Italy and twice the size of France, was, save Liberia, the only independent country in Africa. Under Emperor Menilek II, she successfully withstood an Italian attempt to colonize in 1896 by annihilating an Italian army at the Battle of Adowa. The Italians never forgot that blow to their honor.

In 1935, there were fifty-two members of the League of Nations including both Ethiopia and Italy. The League had been created after World War I to prevent another major war. The U.S. never joined the League and by the time of this book, both Japan and Germany had withdrawn.

In November 1934, both Italians and Ethiopians died in a border clash at WalWal in the undemarcated no man’s land between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. Despite the fact that WalWal was more than sixty miles inside Ethiopia, Italy demanded heavy retribution. Ethiopia requested arbitration through the League. Italy stalled, but continued to send armaments to her colonies, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to the northeast and southeast of Ethiopia. The WalWal incident was to become Mussolini’s pretext for conquest. His mind was long set.



CHAPTER 1

THE CLANGING OF THE anchor against the chains signaled the docking of the Royal Italian ship *Cesarea*. This was Djibouti in French Somaliland, an important port on the Red Sea along the Horn of Africa. It was May 30, 1935.

Ceseli Larson braced herself against the swaying deck as she focused her binoculars. Up on the hill a French flag jumped in the sea breeze above the governor's residence. *I have come so far*, she thought, as she saw for the first time a mere suggestion of tawny desert and the purplish mountains, her gateway to Ethiopia.

Crossing to the other side of the ship, she saw naked young boys diving for coins. She searched in her satchel for an Austrian silver *Thaler*, threw it high into the air and watched as one boy jumped up out of the water catching it in his outstretched hand as the sea green water fell away from his young body. He smiled his thanks, pantomiming with laughter and waving at her excitedly.

She waved back, while with considerable difficulty holding on to her wide-brimmed straw hat and felt tiny drops of sweat begin to drip from her hairline. She could feel the heat through the soles of her shoes as she watched the gangplank as it was put in place.

Going back to the dockside, she looked anxiously at the scene below searching for someone to signal her. She knew she had the habit of biting her lower lip when she was nervous and she wasn't surprised to be doing so now. *I'm not very hard to find*, she thought, *I'm the only woman disembarking*.

In fact, Ceseli Larson was not the kind of passenger one would expect to be disembarking from an Italian ship at a port on the Horn of Africa in 1935, but typical was hardly a way of describing this keen, intelligent and headstrong twenty-five year old. As the only child of the acclaimed international lawyer, Hamilton Larson, she was very much like him. Growing up without a mother, Ceseli had traveled extensively with her father from an early age and was equally at home in New York, London, Paris, and Geneva, speaking the languages of the fashionable salons in all of them.

She was raised to participate in a man's world with the same aspirations usually reserved for sons.

She had the brains to match her beauty. Educated at the best American schools, she majored in the classics and had chosen the University of Pennsylvania's well-respected school of archaeology for her graduate work. This choice was the result of her love of history and her many trips with her father to Greek and Roman ruins. Her motive for coming to the Horn of Africa was clear: despite the recent death of her father, she fully intended to pursue their carefully made plans to write her doctoral dissertation on the obelisks of Ethiopia's royal city of Axum.

She felt increasingly worried until she finally saw her name on a chalk board with a little bell waved in her direction. The man was jostling through the crowds that waited for the ship's passengers. Waving at him, she started down the swaying gangplank. At the bottom, he called out over the general shouts and yells of the porters and attendants.

"Mademoiselle Larson? I'm the Thomas Cooke travel agent, Henri. I have your ticket for the express train to Addis Ababa," he said, patting his vest pocket. "We can go straight to the station; it's not far. I'll carry that for the mademoiselle," he said, politely reaching for her satchel.

"Thank you, Henri, but I'll carry it myself. These are my cameras and I never let them out of my hands." He was quite stout, she saw, with a small dark goatee and ruddy complexion and he was wearing a sweat stained French kepi hat. She tried not to notice his tobacco stained teeth.

"As you wish, mademoiselle. I have arranged for your luggage to be brought directly to the train. Now, this way please," he said, cheerfully leading her off through the crowd.

She hitched her canvas camera satchel onto her shoulder and followed him. "Henri, is it always this hot?" she yelled above the din in the streets.

"At times, the sand fleas, the flies and the heat are unbearable. I'd like to say you get used to it, mademoiselle," he called back, shrugging, "but you never do. That's the price for living in the 'Queen of the Sands'."

"That's what you call this place?" Ceseli asked, as she passed the towering cones of sea salt that lined the dock entrance, the only product of this tiny French enclave. She followed him through the hundreds of hustling ebony-skinned stevedores who were now unloading the ship. They stared at her and made her feel uncomfortable and she was aware of the fact that she would soon be all alone, a stranger in a foreign land.

The street narrowed abruptly as they left the dock area as she followed him through a shortcut that was dark after the blaring light of the port. It was cooler here, but smelly, and flies seemed to land on her face with great regularity. She brushed them aside with one hand while she held tightly to her camera bag with the other.

As she hastened to keep up with him, she was jostled to and fro by the men and women in the crowded street. The women, wearing brightly colored head scarves, were laughing and bumping each other while the men in blue, tan, and black *jellabiya* seemed to be walking hurriedly ahead. There were small children everywhere and they were pointing at her. She felt increasingly uneasy in these unfamiliar surroundings.

She saw the whitewashed stone and mud buildings squeezed between formal Ottoman style ones with their okra walls and green trim. On the other side of the street were shops brightly painted in light blue, yellow, green, and pink. There was a long line of people outside a small shop and she wondered what they were selling. *Bread*, she thought, noticing how peacefully the shoppers waited.

At a shop on the left, a man was sitting on a three-legged wooden stool which he had pushed back at a precarious angle, but it didn't seem like he was going to fall. From the minaret of a tall white mosque, the lilting voice of a muezzin was calling the faithful Muslims to prayer. His sing-song voice was new to her inquisitive ears.

"We're almost there, mademoiselle," Henri yelled back over his shoulder as they neared a long rectangular shed made of cement blocks and corrugated iron that served as a train station. Inside there was such confusion that she found it difficult to keep up with him. The high ceiling gave some relief from the heat, but not from the smell that she would come to know as the smell of East Africa. It tickled her nose as she tried to decipher it: a pungent mix of disinfectant, sweat, garbage, animal fur, urine, and sewage combined.

After the extensive studies she had made on dress and physical characteristics, Ceseli found that she was easily able to distinguish among the indigenous peoples: the slender Danakil, almost naked in their short desert loincloths, the Amara and Galla tribes intermixed with Arabs. A few wore leopard skins. One tall imposing man, with his lion's mane headdress and long cape, she recognized as being a *Fitaurari*, or provincial governor. A young boy held his leather shield and ceremonial fly-whisk which served as a symbol of rank. Another man dressed in a simple khaki

uniform carried the governor's broad-brimmed sun hat. The Fitaurari was boarding a train car with a large entourage of well-armed men. Most of them scampered up onto the roof using toe holds that were imperceptible to her untrained eye.

"Over here, mademoiselle," Henri beckoned. " *Ici* is the waiting area for the first class!"

Large wooden crosses identified two Catholic missionaries with their ankle length white cotton robes. Several of the other men looked Mediterranean, Greek or perhaps Turkish. A few were Arabs with their flowing white jellabiya, and several were well-dressed Africans in British tailored slacks and office jackets. One man stood out from all the other Africans, not only because of his white linen suit, but also for his strikingly blue eyes and honey complexion. *He is extremely good looking*, she thought. She also noticed, with some apprehension, that among these first class passengers, she was again the only woman traveler.

The conductor's shrill whistle blow signaled that the first class passengers should board. Ceseli followed Henri out to the train and the travel agent led her to a compartment at the very end of the first class car and waited for the porter in his starched khaki uniform and perky red fez. Around his waist was a wide red sash and hanging from that a large key ring that held several huge keys that seemed to be relics dating back to King Arthur. As the porter opened the compartment door, she noticed his holster and revolver. He had a wide scar running from his right ear to his chin. None of the stubbly dark hair of his beard grew along the scar line.

"Thank you, Abdullah," Henri said pleasantly to the porter. "This is Mademoiselle Larson; she is going to Addis," he said as he handed over the tickets. "When you exchange places with your Ethiopian colleague, please urge him to take special care of her, *n'est pas?*"

"Mademoiselle Larson," Abdullah said in his heavily accented, but understandable French. "*Bienvenue.*"

"*Merci,*" Ceseli smiled at him.

Turning back to Ceseli, Henri changed his tone to one of concern. "We put you in the last car because you don't get the stench of the engine. I hope that was right," he said, looking around. "Someone is meeting you in Addis, I'm sure. Women don't travel alone in this part of the world, you know."

"I'll be fine, Henri. They do know I'm coming. My godfather is the American minister in Addis and he will meet me. Thank you for all your help."

"The boxes contain your food and water," Henri said, pointing to several string tied cardboard boxes on the rack above the window. "We didn't know what you'd like so we gave you several choices. Your trunk will be on board; do not worry." He took her satchel and put it on the wooden slats that overhung the window.

"That's very kind," Ceseli said, looking at the bleakness of the compartment. "You don't have to wait. I'll be fine," she added, mustering more conviction than she felt. "Oh, Henri, I'll be coming back in a few weeks."

"Just wire the office, Mademoiselle, and I'll meet you. It shouldn't be long now. Maybe ten minutes, or fifteen at most," he said, checking his watch. "Why was the ship so late?"

"We took several hours longer than scheduled unloading in Massawa," she said, handing him a generous tip.

"The war I suppose," he said, saluting as he climbed down off the train. "Please lock the door." His warning only reinforced the trepidation she was feeling.

Ceseli looked around the small compartment of the express train that would carry her through five hundred miles of feudal, landlocked Ethiopia. The railroad, the brainchild of a Swiss engineer who worked for Emperor Menilek II at the end of the nineteenth century, had been seen as a way to connect the capital of Addis Ababa with the Djibouti port in French Somaliland. Work on the railroad began in 1897 and was finished in 1918. Because of the complexity of the undertaking that spanned a desert inhabited by warlike tribes not wanting to have their caravan trading threatened, only one track was laid, meaning that the train went only to Addis and then came back.

She noted the two worn coach chairs facing each other at the sides of the large window. They were so bleached that it was difficult to guess what the original color might have been, but now they were a sort of an ochre tinge. She remembered her father's advice: "The past is done, you can't undo it, choose the future, be creative." So Ceseli chose the seat facing forward.

She leaned out the large open window and looking along the train, noticed her trunk being loaded into the baggage car along with six of what looked like shipping crates for grand pianos.

The shrill whistle blew again and now the second and third class passengers thronged to board the train pushing and shoving to get through the narrow gate before climbing up into the cars. All of them seemed to be carrying large bundles tied with rope, some balanced precariously on their heads. Children squirmed in every direction. One withered old lady was carrying a live chicken, its legs tied to her belt, its beady eyes looking terrified in its upside down position. Armed guards climbed up onto the roof. Some seemed to be right over her head.

Abdullah pulled closed the doors to her compartment, slamming them shut with a dull thud. Ceseli turned the lock into place from the inside. The train whistle blew again. As the train started to move out of the station, she watched a gray-blue baboon grudgingly relinquish its seat on the rail.

Turning to look back toward the end of the train, she saw a man sprinting along the platform chasing after the train. He carried a small black bag in his left hand. He was catching up and instinctively she jumped back from the window as the bag came plunging through it. She watched, aghast and fascinated, as the man grabbed the handgrips on either side of the window and jumped onto the narrow step. He was hanging suspended above the tracks as the train gained speed. Slowly, he pulled himself up, steadied himself, and then climbed in through the open window.

"*Scusatemi*," he said, panting as he turned to her. "I don't usually climb in windows, but the next train is in two days and it's not an express. Is this place taken?" he asked, still out of breath.

"Maybe you should ask the porter," Ceseli answered, shocked by this new event.

"I will," he said, putting his bag on the shelf above. Then, without asking, he closed the window.

She felt extremely annoyed at this intrusion. Wasn't this her compartment? And he didn't even bother to ask her if he could close her window.

"It's hot, but the wind and dust make it worse. Trust me. It'll cool down when the sun sets. I'm Marco Antinori. I'm a doctor at the Italian hospital in Addis Ababa."

"Ceseli Larson," she replied, piqued at his arrogance.

"Glad to meet you. And thank you for your open window. If it had been closed I would have to wait another two days. That's not an ideal way to use my time."

Abdullah opened the door and looked at this young white man. He seemed unsure of what to do as Dr. Antinori fumbled in his pocket for his crumpled ticket.

"Is this seat taken?" Marco asked him.

"Mademoiselle?" Abdullah looked at her clearly apprehensive. He knew he was under Henri's orders to guard her at all costs.

"*Va bien*, Abdullah," she said, reassuring him. He took Dr. Antinori's ticket, checked it and handed it back before leaving the compartment.

Marco Antinori sat down in front of her.

Well, she thought, *if someone is going to climb in my window, it's nice that he's so handsome*. He had a warm genuine smile, she saw, and lively gray-blue eyes. He was tall, and slender unlike most of the Italians she knew in New York, who were often from the south of Italy. He was wearing a blue short sleeve shirt, khaki shorts and long khaki socks slipping out of heavy leather sandals. *He doesn't look like a doctor*, she thought, *but then what does an Italian doctor in Africa look like?* The only doctor she knew was Dr. Hunt, who had cured her childhood illnesses with chicken noodle soup, soda crackers, and daily doses of cod's liver oil.

"You're going to Addis?"

"Yes, but only on my way to Axum. I'm an archaeologist and I'm writing my dissertation on the obelisks of the ancient Kingdom of Sheba."

"Sheba?"

"As in King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba."

"Oh, that Sheba. Axum is supposed to be a very beautiful place. You're not going alone?"

"I'm not sure. My godfather is arranging it. He's the American minister to Ethiopia."

"But surely he won't send you alone. Beautiful young women don't travel alone in a country like this. Any woman for that matter. It's too dangerous. Surely, you've been told that."

"I have, yes. My father and I had planned to come together," she said, pausing. "But he died recently. I knew he would want me to come anyway."

"My condolences," Marco said, holding her gaze. "How did it happen?"

"He was giving a speech at the League of Nations in Geneva and he just fell over and died."

"A heart attack. That must have been very hard for you. It's easy on the person who goes, but very hard on the family."

“They said he didn’t suffer. I was in New York at the time. That’s where I live.”

“He didn’t suffer, I’m sure, but that doesn’t make it easier to accept. You’re sure he’d want you to travel around this *desolato* country alone?”

“I am sure,” she said, with more conviction than she was feeling.

“That’s very brave of you. I hope you know best.”

Ceseli turned to look out the window, breathing deeply, trying to control her emotions. *Funny*, she thought, *there is a kindness about him, a sort of compassion and such expressive eyes. Don’t be silly. There is nothing more in those eyes than in any others.* But as strange as it was, she was talking to him as if she had known him all her life. She had just told him about her father as if it were not the most painful thing she’d ever had to live with.

Now out the window, she could see a gently ascending tawny desert stretching to the horizon, broken here and there by outcroppings of huge rocks. In the distance was a red spiral joining the desert with the sky and she saw a long line of camels, tied from head to tail, patiently following each other with large packs on their humps.

“That’s a sand tornado,” Marco said, pointing to the cone of sand. “You see a lot of them, and that’s a caravan carrying salt. The nomads take it to the highlands, where it’s worth its weight in gold. The Afar people live out there. They’re very tough and very jealous of their salt pans and of course their watering holes. A man would die quickly without water when the temperature reaches one hundred and thirty degrees.”

“The National Geographic says it’s the hottest place on earth. It’s supposed to be five hundred feet below sea level,” Ceseli added. “How do they live in such heat?”

“The body adapts. They raise sheep, goats, and camels. They adapt, too. You’re American?” Marco asked.

“Yes, I am. And your English is very good.”

“I went to a British school in Florence. That’s where I live. Do you know Florence?”

“I went there with my father when I was twelve. He was attending an archaeological conference. That was one of his passions. My father told me I needed some culture so we went to all the favorite tourist places: Ponte Vecchio, the Uffizi, and the Duomo. It’s a beautiful city.”

“My father was probably there. He’s a doctor and an expert on Renaissance gardens. We live just above the city in Fiesole. My father knows where every plant and tree comes from, and what it can be used

for,” he smiled. “I guess that’s why I got so interested in tropical medicine. I used to curl up in his big old leather chair and read his books on Africa. I’ve never tired of that,” he smiled. “You see, it’s getting cooler.”

It was getting cooler she realized as she took down her satchel and pulled out a well-worn navy sweater. As she pulled it on she thought she could feel his eyes on her. The sweater was much too large for her slender body, but it had been her father’s favorite and she liked to wear it.

She settled back into the chair wondering what this handsome young man would be like. Outside, the evening light accentuated the panorama with heavy shadows. She noticed a Danakil herdsman standing with one leg crooked into the knee of the other, heron-like, and etched against the setting magenta sun. Then, in a heartbeat, it was dark.

Ceseli closed her eyes, and lulled by the rhythmic clickity-clack of metal against metal, fell into a deep sleep.