

Excerpts from HOT AIR by Geoff Nelder

The novel starts with a hot-air balloon ride. As they fly over gardens, Erica and Paul see criminals torturing someone. The criminals shoot at them and kill the pilot. The hot-air balloon flies on but is now coming to a crash land.

'We almost - hey look at that tree! We're going to hit it.'

'Hold your water. We're going to miss it by miles.'

'Are you looking at the same tree?' he said, and reached again to turn the burner valve up but Erica wouldn't take her hand off it and they had a hand wrestle. Suddenly, the valve tightened up, cutting off more gas so the flame died.

'Now look what you've done,' she shouted, as the basket sank and headed straight for a ridge top of Douglas firs.

'Bloody hell, get us up.' Erica used both hands to rotate the valve to the left. It seemed to be stuck. Maybe it had become cross-threaded with their tussling. Perspiration burst from her skin with the effort. It looked as if the bottom of the basket would converge with the top ten feet of the treetops; in about ten seconds.

'Come on, come on,' Paul urged.

Eight seconds.

'Perhaps we should get into the emergency crash-land positions.'

Five seconds.

Paul obeyed and crouched with his back to a wicker wall, grabbing an internal rope handle. However, Erica struggled while standing, arms above her head. She knew that if they hit hard, the basket would topple and over she'd go.

Three seconds.

Her hands burned with the pain of straining muscles but suddenly the valve wrenched to the left and their ears nearly burst with the roar.

Two seconds.

The basket lurched up leaving gravity standing but there wasn't enough acceleration to avoid the trees completely.

Zero seconds. The wicker in the basket tried to join with its cousins in the pinewood as it scratched through the canopy. Erica was thrown off her feet towards the leading edge.

'Grab me, Paul!'

'I can't. I need to hold on to the ropes with both hands.'

The basket tilted dangerously. Fortunately, the burners were designed to take basket-dancing into account and the flame continued to blast into the envelope. This tore the basket back upright and the arboreal tentacles had to relinquish their hold.

'You 'right Erica?'

'Turn down the burner,' she gasped, still winded. 'Or we'll never land.'

'God, up down, up down. Bloomin' women drivers,' he muttered, as he managed to turn the valve so they didn't reach escape velocity.

The brush with the trees added fresh wood aromas to add to the blood and gas smells.

'I say we go for that green meadow near that old building.'

The balloon rose too high.

'That's ironic, isn't it,' she said. 'Now we could do with some extra weight.'

'Quick, eat some chocolate.'

'Funny man. Paul, I think we ought to get into emergency positions again.' Erica had seen a ruined abbey coming straight at them. They both crouched and held on to the inside rope handles.

Paul cried, 'Look out!'

Erica turned her head to see the object of Paul's excitement looming over them. A very fine example of a white limestone gable, the pointed apex of which impaled itself into the balloon.

The basket scraped against the filigree Cistercian ruins of a great window. They had landed.

It looked as if help was at hand. A uniformed man was dancing excitedly below.

'Get that bloody thing off the nave!' he shrieked.

'Can you get a ladder please?' called Erica, leaning over the basket. They were about twenty feet off the manicured lawn.

'No. Take off again. This is Tintern Abbey – private property.'

'I'm sorry, we haven't flattened any monks, have we?'

'We could just jump up and down,' Paul whispered to her. 'I expect the unrippable balloon would rip eventually.'

'Take off again or I'll call the police.'

'Good idea, but get us a ladder while you're waiting.' They had an urgent need to get away from the balloon. In the excitement of the flight and landing, her brain had temporarily shorted out the reality gunmen chasing them.

'All right, I suppose you've crash-landed. I won't call the police, but please get it out of here.'

'We can do that faster if you get us a ladder,' she said, hoping to hurry the sod up.

'Where's he going to get a ladder from? It doesn't look as if that little shed he lives in is big enough.'

But a ladder was being walked to them from the other direction. A neighbour of the ruined abbey had seen their descent. The ladder was placed

against the basket, pressing it against the wall. A growing handful of onlookers now stood open-mouthed, watching the bloodied aeronauts struggling down.

Erica was relieved to put her foot on the ground, although the 'less terra and more firma' joke didn't seem so apposite with the gunmen still on the loose.

Paul jumped the last two rungs. He and Erica exchanged knowing looks. They knew they couldn't wait for the police or the chase crew to arrive. She false-staggered to the nearest car, pointed at the drying blood on her and whimpered, 'Take us to hospital quick.'

Moments later they were speeding along the A466 to Chepstow hospital.

Excerpt 2

Erica has been kidnapped and imprisoned in a converted medieval watchtower on Mallorca.

Erica rummaged elbow-deep in an old dangerous drawer and luck was with her as she found a torch but luck ran out when she found batteries matching the previous decade. She picked up a Hurricane lamp and looked for means of ignition.

'Looking for a light, darling?' spat a sharp woman's voice.

Erica was so startled she dropped the lamp. It seemed to fall in slow motion but because she assumed her reactions would be too slow to catch it; her arms remained hovering in the air. The thin glass smashed over the stone flagstones.

'Who are you?' they chorused.

'I asked first,' perjured the intruder, although she had the air of someone who belonged there.

'I was here first,' replied Erica.

'You must be Dean's latest piece.'

'I am not his piece! You his mother? Grandmother?' Erica narrowed her eyes to match her thoughts: this woman knew the code to the locked door. They stood amidst the shattered fragments looking at each other. The woman took in the dark red hair and green eyes. Erica was used to being eyed by jealous women and the female relatives of boyfriends. She looked back. Local; maybe Catalan with her long black hair framing matching thick black eyebrows, a hint of a moustache and olive skin. No doubt a beauty in her twenties, thirties, possibly forties but less so now in her fifties. The woman had kept her slim figure shown off by a hugging knitwear top and long deep blue skirt.

Erica tried but couldn't discern a family likeness with Dean. She wondered instead, if Angie was a bottle blonde. She'd go for a filial lead-in.

'Are you Angie's mum?'

'My dear girl, you are obsessed with family.' She put her expensively manicured hand on Erica's arm. Not grabbing or holding, just experimentally tracing Erica's downy hairs.

'Who *are* you then?' blurted Erica, having the shivers at this unexpected tactile familiarity.

The witch removed her hand to pour herself a glass of red wine: 'I am the daughter of a famous writer. A very famous poet and author who lived not far away.'

Erica brain-searched her school English Literature. Her puzzled face caused the woman to look exasperated.

'Oh you ignoramus, everyone knows that Robert Graves lived on Mallorca.'

'Ah, I've heard of him,' brightened Erica, picking up her coffee, deciding not to cloud her mind with wine.

'List some of his work, dear.'

'*Dulce et Decorum Est*? Oh no,' she quickly amended, being evil-eyed by the woman. 'That was Wilfred Owen wasn't it? We did him too.'

'Horrors of war. You're on the right track. Well, come on, come on!'

Erica struggled then she remembered a production, '*Oh What a Lovely War!*'

'Oh my God. Child, do you not know '*Goodbye to all that, I Claudius*? I despair.' She poured another large glass, drained it, and collapsed on a chair.

'So, Miss Graves,' said Erica, having noted the absence of a ring, 'did your father come here?'

'I am Senora Megaera Lampedo de Minstra. I'm afraid I cannot bear the dignity of my father's name directly.'

'Ah,' said Erica.

'I presume, by your 'Ah', that you see me as a bastard.' Megaera dared her with steely eyes.

'I meant what a poetic name. Mine is just Erica Steadway.'

'Erica. That's a wonderful name. It's Viking for powerful. Did you know that? Of course you didn't. I will tell you about my names.'

'You don't need to.' Too late.

'Silence girl and enjoy. Now, my first name is Megaera. Have you ever heard of her? No, of course you haven't, you girls don't have classical schooling. Megaera was a Fury. Have you ever heard of a Fury? No, of course you haven't. Furies were—'

'Will you stop doing that?'

'Stop doing what, child?'

'And that. Stop calling me child, I'm a woman. And don't keep saying I don't know anything.'

'Oh I'm so sorry, Erica, dear. Is it Okay to call you dear? All right then, you tell me what Furies were.'

'I don't know, but before you start on me remember I could ask you loads of tricky questions on modern life such as music, films, and what do you know about wi-fi?'

'I will try. Back to my name, because it is about Robert Graves you know. I'm afraid my father was not politically correct in all aspects of his life. What am I saying? He was proud of not being politically correct! Anyway, there were several ladies in his life besides his wives. He called them his Muses. Do you... sorry. A Muse is a term for a woman who inspires. Are you a Muse, Erica?'

Taken off guard, Erica gave an instinctive answer.

'Naturally.'

'Well done, Erica. Right answer. I like you already. But you see, Megaera, my name if you remember? You nod so you do. Good. Megaera was the name of a Fury. Now Furies were Goddesses of punishment. Almost an antithesis - um, the opposite.'

'I am familiar—'

'Sorry, Erica, do you see? Robert gave me a name to make me strong.'

'Uh?'

'My mother was one of his Muses. A cute mistress to inspire his poetry but he wanted his offspring to have the balls to take the world by its scrawny neck.'

'So he gave you the name of the opposite of a Muse. You were to be a goddess of punishment. Punishing the world for what? Its sins.'

'I haven't found out yet,' the black-haired woman said, 'so I punish everyone for everything!' They both laughed and had a glass each.

'As for my middle name, Lampedo. Robert was a complex man. Lampedo was a rarity in that she was a mother to a king, a sister, daughter and wife to a king.'

'What? At the same time?'

'Not easily, though if you stretch the definitions it could happen, especially when it wasn't that rare for royalty to have somewhat incestuous relationships. But remember that Robert wrote *I Claudius*?'

'You mentioned it,' said Erica being more polite than interested now that she was on her second glass of red.

'The mother of Claudius was also the mother, sister, daughter and wife of a king! So what does that tell you?'

'It's obvious,' said Erica through the glass. 'You're Robert Graves' mum as well as his daughter.' Once again they both fell about in fits of inebriated giggles.

'No, Claudius was the subject of one of his best known works, *I Claudius*.'

'So, you think he was thinking of you...'

'No! Don't you see? I was conceived when he was writing it.'

Erica thought it was the sort of tenuous link that people grab for when they are anxious to prove something that's really just a coincidence.

'What does your mother say about your father?' Erica risked a potential disaster.

'Oh. She had a hard time. Her family didn't approve. She protected him so much.' She was looking wistfully out of the window as she spoke between sips.

Erica developed the picture this Megaera's real personal history didn't feature Robert Graves at all.

She risked boldness. 'So there isn't a Graves on your birth certificate then?'

Elegant manicured fingers waved in the air, 'It's this island. The bureaucracy can't be trusted one little bit.'

Neither of them noticed the door opening behind them.

'What the hell are you doing back here? I've had the combination changed after I threw you out last month.'

Erica's ears nearly came out on stalks. It meant Megaera had a means of getting through the gate without using the combination. Maybe she was able to get it from someone else. Either way if she didn't get on with Dean it gave Erica something to work on.

Megaera seemed totally unfazed, although the wine could be partly responsible.

'Hello Dean, my boy, it's so nice to see you too. Have some wine.' And then to Erica. 'He's a sweet boy really. Have you bedded him yet?'