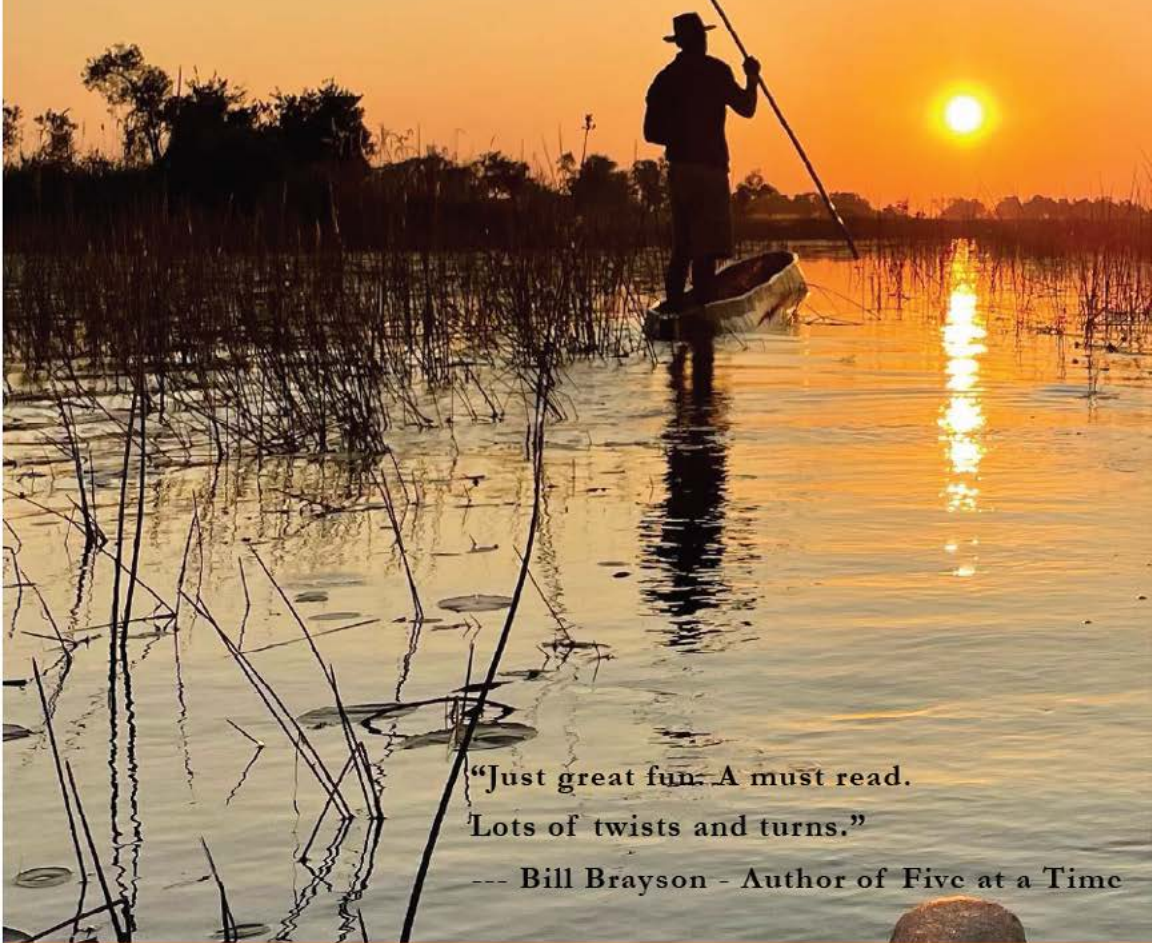




# BROOKS

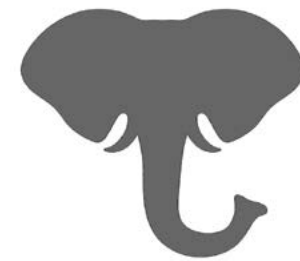


"Just great fun. A must read.  
Lots of twists and turns."

--- Bill Brayson - Author of *Five at a Time*

a novel by

**BRIAN HANCOCK**



**Skabenga** - the Zulu word for a gangster,  
hooligan, bandit or vagabond



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For Sally - the love of my life

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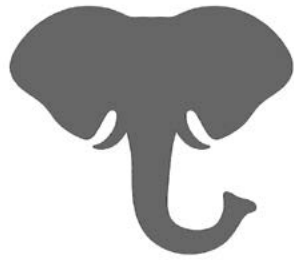
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**BROOKS**

A novel by

**BRIAN HANCOCK**

**Note:** If you would like a customized BOOKPLATE of Brooks please contact [brian@greatcirclepress.com](mailto:brian@greatcirclepress.com) and he will send one to you.



## INTRODUCING A TIME TO WEEP

**Brooks is the second book in a three part series; A Time to Weep.**

The first book in the series is Cinnamon Girl. The book starts off in the peaceful seaside town of Marblehead, Massachusetts. An idyllic start quickly turns to disaster and from there the plot twists and turns and goes to the dark side. Four main characters emerge. Jay, a dreamer with the idea to sail around the world with his family. Zach, the captain of a cargo ship whose unfortunate crossing of paths with Jay leads to tragedy and an unlikely friendship. Lillian, the housekeeper from Jamaica who ends up in an affair with Jay, and Brooks, a wheeler-dealer and a scoundrel all mixed into one complicated package. The story is set in London, Jamaica, Botswana, the Bahamas, and the rolling hills of New England.

**Brooks**, the aforementioned scoundrel, gave up his life in the human trafficking and child prostitution business in London to take on a more 'normal' lifestyle; elephant poaching in Southern Africa. After an encounter with a tiger in Asia, Brooks switches from ivory to diamonds and this is where Lee Lee comes in. Raised on the Mekong Delta in Vietnam by a mother who ran a noodle stand, Lee Lee rises to become one of Vietnam's most successful businesswomen, all on the back of illegal trading. She also discovers her sexuality after meeting Tam and a torrid romance follows.

**The third book in the series, Lee Lee**, is a work in progress but will focus on Lee Lee and her rise to political power in Vietnam, despite being gay in a country where homosexuality is most definitely frowned upon.



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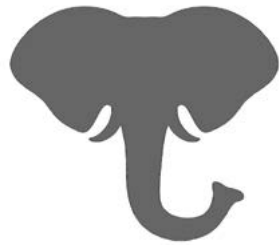
## AFRICA

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When you have acquired a taste for the dust,  
And the scent of our first rain,  
You're hooked for life on Africa,  
and you'll not be right again.  
Until you watch the setting moon  
And hear the jackals bark,  
And know they are around you  
waiting in the dark

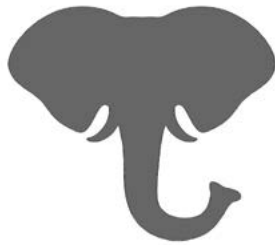
When you long to see the elephants  
or hear the coucal's song  
When the moonrise sets your blood on fire,  
then you've been away too long.  
It is time to cut the tracers loose,  
and let your heart go free,  
Beyond that far horizon  
where your spirit yearns to be.

Africa is waiting - come!  
Since you have touched the open sky  
And learned to love the rustling grass  
And the wild fish eagle's cry.  
You'll always hunger for the bush;  
for the lions rasping roar,  
To camp at last beneath the stars  
and to be at peace once more.



## OPENING

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**T**HE HERD WAS MOVING ALONG just below the escarpment. The old matriarch knew better than to have them all silhouetted against the early evening sky where they would be vulnerable. She was wary, her trunk sniffing the air. She could taste the dust and dung from a herd of buffalo far below on the plains. She could also taste the peppery smell of tobacco. People were close. She could also taste death. It was still bitter in her mouth.

Five days earlier her herd has come across a killing field, a mass slaughtering. In the hot sun lay around 30 elephants, all of them maimed and bloated. All of their tusks had been removed, cut off with chainsaws. The matriarch had quickly gathered the young ones to make sure that they would not witness what she had seen. She knew, however, that the stain on their tongues would be there forever. They moved quickly, the night air getting cooler.

The matriarch knew that they were vulnerable. It was an instinct passed down through the blood of her ancestors. It was in her blood and she would pass it on in some magical way to her offspring. The sun set quickly, as it always does in Africa, and the herd slowed down taking time to breath in the sweet smell that comes with an African sunset. The plan was to move toward the waterhole where they could relax a little.

As they got down onto the floodplain the elephants started moving with less urgency. They stopped to enjoy the sweet msasa leaves and after that they feasted on mopane leaves. They liked the high protein content of the mopane, but they also knew that the tree had a secret weapon to protect itself. As soon as elephants start to eat their leaves, the mopane tree reacts by pumping chemicals from its trunk into the leaves and they turn bitter and acidic.

The elephants quickly moved on.

The waterhole was packed with buck and warthogs. The matriarch held back keeping an eye out while letting the youngsters drink first. The young bulls were getting restless. They were horny. It's a problem with all teenagers, including four legged ones. Once satiated the herd kept moving. They would usually sleep at night but the matriarch's instinct told her that on this night they would be more vulnerable after dark so she kept the herd moving until dawn when she found a thicket for them to rest in.

It was starting to get light and she was dozing off when she heard the guns. They were far off but their murderous sound carried on the light morning breeze. She hustled her herd awake and they set off in the opposite direction. The matriarch knew that they had to get as far away from the noise as possible. She still had the bitter taste in her mouth from the killing field.

Despite her best instincts, and her complete love for her herd, they too would fall victim to the guns.

## CHAPTER ONE

**B**ROOKS DINTWA was getting tired of his spoiled life on the island. He had fled Interpol and after a year their trail on him had gone cold. Brooks had played by the rules, the rules of a fugitive that is. He had kept his head down. His father, for all his faults as a rhino poacher, had noticed something desperate in his son and had squirreled him away to an island in the middle of the Okavango Delta. He hoped that the kid had enough money to pay for the place. Brooks had come to him asking for help and through his connections he had found him a cottage far, far from where any police would ever find him. It was a small island paradise, very secure, but very expensive. Brooks had money, a lot of it. He had made it through some, shall we say, not so legal means during his five years in London.

Even though his time on the island had been pampered, Brooks decided to find the old Brooks, the one before the drugs, the one before the child sex business. He worked out like a fiend. He ate clean. His favorite time was in the late afternoon when he took his Mokoro, his dugout canoe, and wound his way among the reeds and bulrushes that lined the narrow inlets of the Delta. Every now and then he would see a crocodile asleep on the banks, basking in the warm sun. He would approach slowly. The crocodile would



open one sleepy eye, see the boat approaching, and make a dash for the water. Brooks enjoyed this part, especially when he had paying customers in his Mokoro. They enjoyed getting close to the croc, but they freaked out when the crocodile suddenly came plunging into the water. It was as if they were under attack. Brooks knew, like any scoundrel would, like any crocodile would, that sometimes you just need to find cover.

HIS SISTER THALITHA had moved from Maun to Johannesburg. She had been part of the business in London but didn't know about the child sex part until they had to make a run for it. First Scotland Yard was closing in on them but by the time they made it across the English Channel to France it was Interpol. Brooks didn't deny the child sex part. "It was business," was all he said. While Brooks was on the island paradise Thalitha had moved back in with their Mom, Daisy, who tended her garden which provided more than enough for herself and for their step-father Pete. Daisy had a hard time getting over what she learned about Brooks. "I think that you have it all wrong," she kept saying. "Brooks would never do such a thing."

"Then why is he on the run from the police?" Thalitha asked.

Daisy was out in her patch digging a row for gem squash. She could hardly wait for them to grow. A gem squash with salt and pepper, and with a little, or should we say, a lot of butter, is about as good as life gets. It was hot, Botswana is always hot, and the tilling was hard. Daisy dug another row, felt her heart constrict, and collapsed. They had a small funeral and that was when Thalitha decided to move to South Africa. She had been her Mom's keeper.

She got a job at a restaurant that specialized in bush meat; impala, warthog and for the more adventurous, snake or crocodile.

It was downtown Johannesburg in an area that had recently been revitalized with some government funding. The restaurant was trendy, and was trending on most local social media. The Covid-19 pandemic had shut things down just long enough for most South Africans to deal with but now, with a vaccine about to be launched in the country, they were ready to go out and enjoy life once again. The vaccine had been available in the United States and across Europe for almost a year, but the South African government was so incompetent that only a few frontline workers and some government officials had been able to take advantage of it. Plus, the corruption was out of control. Corruption in South Africa has always been out of control. It started all the way back in 1652 with Jan van Riebeeck who founded the country. He got the job to colonize Africa even after he had already been fired by the Dutch East India Company for using his office for personal gain. These days government officials had refined the process and raised corruption to an artform.

THALITHA SENT BROOKS an email. "Why dont you join me here in Joburg?" she wrote. "I have a place, I have a job. I think that you will be safe."

"OK."

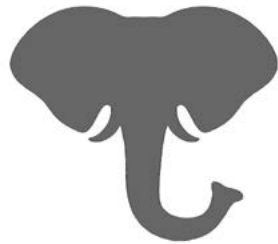
Brooks got a small two-seater seaplane to fly him to Maun. He had not left his secret location in the middle of the Delta for over a year. He had not even dared to attend his mother's funeral, afraid that the police would be on the lookout for him. He hired a kid, the same one that had driven him from Johannesburg to Maun a year earlier, to drive him back to South Africa. First they stopped at the Akacia Cafe in downtown Maun for a farewell meal. Brooks went for the Cajun chicken burger, the kid went for the fillet with monkey gland sauce. They had a long trip ahead of them.

The road was hot and dusty. This time Brooks was not in as much of a rush and had purchased some new camping gear. They spent the first night in Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. They had just set up the tent when a pack of Cape Hunting Dogs ran through their camp. Brooks grabbed his drone and launched it. His year on the island with not much to do had allowed him to become an excellent drone pilot. He quickly picked up the pack of dogs. They had a herd of lechwe in their sights. He watched in anticipation as some of the dogs fanned out while the main pack slowed down to give them time to get on station. The lechwe were in a gully; unsuspecting. They had found some succulents and were feasting unaware of the impending ambush. Brooks zoomed in with his drone. The alpha male was poised to rush the herd. His entire body was flattened, quivering. Not one of the other dogs would dare launch an attack before they got the signal. Four dogs had been dispatched to close off any escape route. The alpha male crept closer, his torso scraping the ground. He was just ten feet from the herd when he exploded and within seconds the pack moved in, surrounding them. The leader had sought out one of the older bucks and had her by the tail. The rest of the dogs coordinated the kill. One of them took the snout, the rest went for the belly. There was no time to waste. If lions heard them they would move in and steal their feast. They ate the lechwe alive. Brooks had seen this before, in person, but watching through the drone's camera was an entirely new experience. He was distanced from the death experience, numb to what was actually happening. In a half hour the lechwe had been consumed by the pack. Brooks was surprised by how different this kill felt when watching it remotely on a screen.

"I need a scotch," he said to the kid. "And make it a big one. Four fingers at least." The sun kissed the tops of the acacia trees and the night noises started. "Africa, what a place," Brooks

thought. "It's a dog eat dog world." That was not the way he wanted to live his life, even more so now that he had given up the drugs. little. As they got down onto the floodplain the elephants started moving

## CHAPTER TWO



**B**ROOKS AND THE KID drove into downtown Johannesburg. “What a sad state of affairs,” he thought. “The city once built on gold, was now a run down shadow of its former self.” Johannesburg had boomed in the early part of the 20th century. Gold had been the fuel; power and money had provided the motivation, and when combined it raised a city from dirt to one of the richest in the world. They drove through Hillbrow and found Thalitha’s apartment.

“Nice to see you Bro,” she said. “You are looking good. Much better than when we lived in London.”

“Thank you, I’m trying. I am glad to be off the island and back in the real world.”

They walked to the Nando’s on the corner and ordered peri peri chicken wings and a side of street corn. The corn was grilled, dipped in butter and then smothered in crushed flaming hot Doritos. Nando’s was a chain almost as famous as McDonalds, but ten times better and they scoffed down every bite.

“So what are you thinking of doing to make some money?” Thalitha asked.

“I dunno. I still have some savings even though that place in

the Delta was rottenly expensive. I might just look for some basic work to keep myself busy and out of trouble.”

“A friend of mine is in construction. He always needs help.”

Brooks gave her a look. “Are you frigging kidding me? Can you imagine me on a construction site? With these shoes?” He pointed at his recently purchased Vans.

“No, I am going to channel the men who came before me. Those who turned this one horse town into a city of gold. Just not sure how yet but it will come to me.

BROOK’S DAD was a part time poacher who ran with a gang that specialized in rhino horn. They were all a bit dense but made a living, if you could call it a living, from poaching. His Dad and his cohorts took all of the risk doing the savage work of killing the rhino’s and hacking off their horns. Once a week they dropped the horns off at a secret location, in Maun. Brooks was no fool. He knew that rhino horn was a huge profit center in Asia where, once ground, was viewed as an aphrodisiac. Somewhere between his Dad and his numbnut collaborators, and Asia, there was money to be made.

Thalitha returned to the apartment. Brooks went for a walk. “I’d be careful if I were you,” she said. “This is not the safest neighborhood.” Hillbrow had once been the beating heart of Johannesburg with a rich nightclub scene and an even richer gay scene. The apartheid years had been bad for Hillbrow. Riots in the streets had turned off even the most ardent partygoer and the clubs had closed their door and shuttered up. These days it was mostly a place to buy and sell drugs. Still, it was a change from the Okavango and a change from London. A change yes, but maybe not for the better. He felt the warm breath on his neck about the same time that he felt the knife in his side. “Who the fuck are you

and what the fuck are you doing here?” the voice breathed. Brooks could smell the Klippies rum on the person’s breath.

“I’m just going for a walk. I’m not making trouble.”

“Well it looks like you are. Look at those Vans. You have three thousand Rands worth of shoes on your feet. What the fuck? Are you a dealer?” Brooks felt the knife cut through his jacket and the cold steel touch his skin.

“No, I told you, I was just going for a walk.”

“The fuck you were. How much money do you have on you?” Brooks knew better than to carry money in Johannesburg. He had purchased some prepaid debit cards. “Let me give you my wallet,” he said to the punk with the knife. He felt the knife being removed and the grip easing enough so that he could turn around. The kid could not have been more than sixteen. She looked frightened. Brooks had been frightened, but not anymore. “OK I will make you a deal,” he said. “I don’t have any cash on me but I will buy you lunch; for a week. Any place that you want, you decide.”

“How can I trust you?”

“You can’t. But what are your options? You can take my word or you can take nothing. I will buy you lunch now and I will meet you here tomorrow and I will buy you lunch then. Or I could have the police take you in. Where do you want to go?” The kid backed away. She looked sad. “Can you buy me a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich?”

“No. I’m not wasting my money on that crap. Follow me.” They went back to Nandos. The person behind the counter knew better than to say anything. Brooks ordered the slow cooked pork with potato salad. He ordered the grilled chicken wrap for the girl. She ate as if she had never eaten before.

“Same time tomorrow,” Brooks said. The girl nodded.

BROOKS LET HIMSELF INTO Thalitha's apartment. I think that I might just have found myself a business partner," he told her.

"What? Who?"

"Never mind."

They watched TV. Thalitha was silent. She was worried. They were watching President Biden at the G8 summit. "I don't miss Trump," Brooks said. "He was ruthless, dishonest and had no conscience. No wonder the world is in such a bloody mess."

"That's a bit rich," Thalitha thought, keeping the thought to herself. Brooks had run a child sex business in London. "It doesn't get much lower than that."

BROOKS MET THE GIRL at Nando's the following day. Her name was Elmarie Mulenga. She had grown up in Soweto but school had not been her thing. She had run away to find fame and fortune in the Big City. She had a place under the overpass where the M1 intersected with the M2. There were a bunch of kids living there, most of them girls. She asked if she could have the same dinner again but Brooks said no. "You need to try something different. You need to diversify your palette a little. I am ordering you something spicy." A plate of grilled peri peri prawns and a side of sweet potato fishcakes was delivered to their table. Elmarie pulled a face. It was the heat of the prawns. A very unfamiliar taste but as the burn wore off she took another bite. "This is quite good," she said.

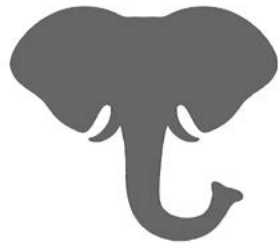
"You will get addicted, like the rest of us," Brooks said.

They met at the same Nando's for a month. They had tried everything on the menu, more than once. Elmarie was becoming addicted to peri peri. She had asked if she could bring some of her friends and Brooks had agreed. He was learning a lot from

her. Her poverty was different from the kids that he had exploited in London. It was probably because he was also black and had also grown up in similar poverty as Elmarie and her friends. The kid behind the counter at Nando's lit up each time they walked in. "Nice to see you again Mr. Brooks," he said. "What can I serve you today?"

"A peri peri rice bowl for me. And a couple of peri peri chickpea pizzas for my friends." crocodile would

## CHAPTER THREE



**L**EE LEE SING grew up middle class on the Mekong River Delta in Vietnam. Well, middle class might be a bit of a stretch. Her Mom had a small noodle shop in Ho Chi Minh City near the Saigon Zoo so they never went hungry. Her Dad drove a cab but the company that he drove for started to feel the pinch from UBER and he was laid off the same day that Lee Lee turned 18. She had been a good student, bright and willing to learn. She was also overwhelmed at times. Her fast paced world was freaking her out and the time spent in isolation during the Covid-19 lockdown had played hard on her psyche. She needed her friends more than ever but many of them had moved away from home since graduating. Lee Lee was also looking to spread her wings and found a job in Hai Phong, a port city in the north of the country. One of her school friends had moved there and she had suggested Lee Lee for a job. She would be an administrative assistant with the chance of moving up.

Hai Phong is a major port city in northeastern Vietnam, across from Cat Ba Island. It has leafy boulevards lined with French colonial-era landmarks such as the Queen of the Rosary Cathedral which dated back to the 19th century. Lee Lee felt immediately at home. Her friend had offered her spare room until she found her

feet. At night they went out to eat street food, usually splitting a meal because cash was tight. Lee Lee never ordered noodles. She had had too many bowls of noodles growing up and none of them that she had tried anywhere else came close to her Moms. Usually it was just a Banh mi which they split, or if there was a little extra money they would add Banh trang tron, a salad full of spicy goodness wrapped in rice paper.

Lee Lee enjoyed her job until the day that her boss hit on her, well that might be a bit of an understatement. She had seen it coming but tried to believe that he would never do such a thing. One evening she was working late trying to catch up on things. She was by the copier stapling papers when she sensed his presence. "Lee Lee it's time," was all he said. She felt her tummy drop, replaced by a cold feeling. She turned and her boss was there undoing his belt. "Turn around."

Lee Lee turned back to the copier. There was very little she could do if she wanted to keep her job. She felt him behind her. She also heard his pants hit the ground, his belt buckle making a dull thud on the carpet. She felt him fuss with her skirt trying to figure it out but suddenly he had her panties. He slipped his finger under her undies and found her ass crack, gently stroking it. Then it took a turn for the worse. He ripped her panties down and started to hump her. Lee Lee had never had sex before, well not with another person. It hurt, both what he was doing and from the edge of the copier that was jammed up against her hipbone. There was some grunting and then it was over. Her boss didn't bother to pull her undies up. She heard him slink away trying not to trip over his pants while pulling them up. They never spoke about it.

BROOKS HAD BEEN a kingpin in the child sex trade in London. He was an intuitive businessman and the Bosses trusted him with not only the child sex part of the business, but also the illegal

human trafficking and the money laundering with the ships and the shipyard in the Bahamas. The Bosses were languishing in jail after the business was busted. Brooks had escaped to Botswana and Interpol had given up on finding him. He was restless. He had cleaned up his act and worked out so that he was in great shape, physically, but not mentally. He missed the excitement of creating a growing enterprise. The edge that came with making a ton of money, juxtaposed against the possibility of being caught and being sent to prison for a very long time. It was a tonic to him. Like some sweet mix rumbling around in his gut. But this time it was going to be different. He was going to use his skills as a businessman to do some good in the world.

He had a burner phone and called his friend Felix Chappell. Felix had worked for Brooks briefly in London but said that he found the child sex thing a little distasteful. He had taken his last paycheck and flown back to South Africa. They texted a few times, but when Brooks was on the island he had pretty much cut himself off from everyone.

"Felix Chappell here. Ready to serve, who is this?"

"Its me, Brooks. What the fuck is with the ready to serve shit?"

"Brooks you old bugger where have you been? Long time no hear."

"I know, I'm sorry. I have been a little bit preoccupied. But I am in Johannesburg now. Where are you living these days?"

"I'm in Sandton. It would be good to get together again. What are your plans?" They made a plan to meet up the following week at an outdoor cafe.

LEE LEE WAS SEETHING. And sore. She wanted to say something to her friend but didn't want to get her in the middle of her mess.

At night she cried; quietly, to herself. Her boss never looked at her after that night. He would always be in some kind of hurry, holding his binders close to his chest or in a deep conversation on his phone. Lee Lee avoided the copy room. She pretty much avoided anywhere where she might have contact with some other person in the office. Her shame was palpable, to herself. No one else noticed.

She told her roommate about what had happened a month later. The bruising on her hip was gone; the jumbling in her head was still there. She had no way to process it. She had gone online and had found a site that was supposed to help rape victims but it seemed, to Lee Lee at least, that they were placing the blame on the rape victim and not the rapist. Her roommate was horrified, but of little help. "I'm sorry," she repeated over and over. There was not much either could do. There were tens of thousands of young girls in Hai Phong all looking for work. If Lee Lee quit her job then how would she be afford to pay the rent?

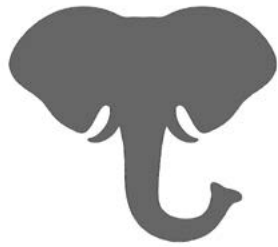
The second rape also took her by surprise. Lee Lee had avoided contact with the other employees as much as she could but she was in the ladies stall when she heard a male voice. "Open the door." Lee Lee froze. She had her panties around her ankles. She recognized the voice. She remained silent.

"Open the door or I will break it down." There was someone pushing against the door. It was a cheap door and within moments he was in. "Don't bother pulling those up," he said. "Just turn around." Lee Lee was horrified. She wanted to scream, but she also needed her job. "Don't worry I am not going to touch you," the voice said. "Just leave your panties down and bend over. Bend far over." Lee Lee straddled the toilet. Her pants and underpants were around her ankles. She bent over. "Bend over more." She heard some kind of rubbing and grunting and then he was gone. Mercifully.

BROOKS AND FELIX MET. They were going to socially distance but after ten minutes Brooks was all in. Felix had joined a group that was poaching rhino and elephant, well mostly rhino. Elephants were a bit trickier. Felix was one up from the murderous bastards that did the actual killing. He managed the warehouse just outside of the O. R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg where the horns and very occasionally tusks were packaged for shipment to Vietnam. Brooks knew immediately that he had a revenue source for his new business. He was just not sure how he was going to use that revenue to do good in the world.



## CHAPTER FOUR



**L**EE LEE'S MOOD turned dark. Her roommate was worried. She didn't know about the second incident but suspected that something might have happened. As a child Lee Lee was always one of the happiest among them, the one willing to prank someone or go off on a little adventure at a moments notice. Now she was brooding, barely communicating. "I'm going to look for another job," Lee Lee said.

"So he raped you again?"

"Yes."

"Fucker."

LEE LEE'S MOM started her business as a sidewalk vendor. She knew her craft. She was up before dawn, one of the first at the Ben Thanh Street Food Market. She took her time combing through the produce, filling her basket with only the best ingredients. The ingredients cost more but she knew that her customers would appreciate it and her tiny stand started to grow a regular customer base. When Lee Lee was little she would help her Mom chop vegetables and sort through the herbs. She loved the herbs. Basil was her favorite. She would watch how her Mom would greet

each customer as if they were a long lost friend. She invited them to sit while she made the soup. “You know why people love my food so much Lee Lee?” she would ask.

“No, but they sure do like your food.”

“It’s because there is love in every bowl.”

When she turned 12 her Dad bought her a small boat. There was a lot of traffic in the Delta, people hustling, trying to get by in life. Her Mom would set her up with broth in a thermos and ingredients in bowls covered in plastic and Lee Lee would drift slowly down the river selling pho. It was the happiest time of her life. She had a little sign on her boat. Customers would come alongside. Lee Lee would get either the chicken or beef bowl, add the broth, some dried basil flakes and some oil. She had banana blossoms and bean sprouts in a cooler which she would add at the last minute. She handed over the bowl and took the money. While the traffic on the Delta looked like a crazy hustle, Lee Lee quickly learned the pattern. Those going down water were usually the traders who had been up before dawn to get their produce to market early. They were always hungry because they had not had any time to eat. Just enough time to sell their veggies or livestock. They were her best customers. In the afternoon and early evening it was the business people heading home. She never told her mother, who would have not approved, but she had a source that brought her some plastic bottles filled with Ruou de, a distilled liquor made from rice. She had a side hustle going on and the businessmen loved it. A hot Pho and a plastic cup of Ruou de and they were happy. When Lee Lee wasn’t on the Delta she and her friends lived simply, flirting with boys, trying to act as if they were not interested, but all that they could talk about were boys. Vietnam had recovered from the war and was prospering, but it was still a challenge to make a living.

LEE LEE FOUND ANOTHER JOB. She also found again her entrepreneurial spirit. She bought a carbon bicycle and started a package delivery business. The streets of Hai Phong were always jammed so the Amazon and Fed Ex trucks could not be relied on for delivery on time. She found her niche, just like she had selling Pho. She had the UberRUSH app on her phone and would have a message pop up. She was on it right away, pushing hard, delivering packages. No creepy Boss to jerk off onto her ass. She knew that the faster she rode, the more money she would make. She also knew that there were some customers who needed ‘special’ deliveries and they started to text her direct. At first they were coy, not wanting to come right out and say it, but soon Lee Lee cracked the code. They wanted methamphetamine which was highly illegal in Vietnam and punishable by death. Still, where there are users, there are suppliers and Lee Lee was the one that hooked the two up. She didn’t care, she didn’t do drugs. She occasionally had half a beer but this was business and she was a business lady. Soon she gave up UberRUSH and concentrated on the ‘special’ deliveries. The customers tipped well, very well in fact. Lee Lee found her own place to live and even though it was small, she was happy. She was mostly happy because it was above a noodle shop and at night she could smell the pho and hear the bustle. It reminded her of home, and of her Mom, especially.

ONE OF HER BEST customers was a man by the name of Mr. Vu. He was a tiny man with a wry smile. He never hit on her, unlike many of her other customers. He was just kind and sweet. Mr. Vu reminded Lee Lee of her grandfather. “Lee Lee just stop for a minute,” he said. “Come inside. I have some noodles prepared. You work too hard.”

Mr. Vu had a big place. He played the kindly grandfather thing very well but at some point in his life he had made some serious

money. Lee Lee was tired so she said, "OK." She was immediately happy that she had agreed. Mr. Vu's house was cool, clearly he had central air-conditioning, something only the rich could afford.

"Sit," he said. "I will bring you some green tea." Mr. Vu came back to the dining room with an elegant teapot and a steaming bowl of noodles. He poured Lee Lee a cup of tea. "Is there a Mrs. Vu?" Lee Lee asked.

"Not anymore." He didn't elaborate. The noodles were good. Not as good as her mothers but then that was an extremely high bar. The tea was also good and Lee Lee left feeling refreshed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**T**HROUGHOUT SOUTHERN AFRICA poaching was getting out of control. While most of the world cowered from Covid-19, the poachers had become more emboldened. Fewer people on the job meant fewer people to catch them. There was a group in Northern Zimbabwe that seemed to have the formula down and they were going through rhino at an alarming rate. They had tried elephant, but elephant were elusive, despite their size.

Gert Botha was originally from South Africa but he had moved to Zimbabwe after he found his wife shagging the stable boy on their bed. He had come back for a second cup of coffee after doing the rounds on the property and there they were, the two of them; happy as can be. "I will not stand for this shit," he said and walked out. His car was in the garage, the tank full of gas, and he drove north until he could unsee what he had seen. Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe would become his home. He didn't know it then, but poaching, and later diamonds, would become his business.

Poaching came easy to Gert. He was a good church going man, the Dutch Reformed Church of course, but he also had a part of him that could disconnect from reality. "I should have shot the fucker in the arse," he kept saying to himself. "Fuckers."

A SMALL OUTFIT in Bulawayo hired Gert to inspect their farmlands, check on the fencing, that kind of thing. It was all good until Gert stopped in at the Shangrai La Tavern, a dive bar on the outskirts of Bayi Bayi. They had Tusker Beer for a dollar and Gert was well lit when a smoking hot lady sidled up to his table. She knew what she needed to do. The sex was average but by the time the sun set over the hot African landscape, Gert had been recruited.

He went to work for Hanson Industries LLC out of Bayi Bayi. Hanson Industries was a conglomeration of numerous businesses, most of them unsavory. Gert would oversee the rhino poaching side of things. He quickly grew into his job. In addition to rhino they had tried for elephant but they were not easy to poach. Rhinos, yes, but elephants, not so easy. The hunters that had settled that part of Africa always had a problem with elephants. Sure there were photos of wiry, well tanned men in safari suits posing with tusks, but Gert and his gang were not having much luck.

BROOKS LANDED at the Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport in Zimbabwe. His driver was there and they took off right away. Heading north. The road was typical of Africa. Potholes, washed out bridges, and an occasional lion strolling down the middle of the road. The headquarters of Hanson Industries LLC was just outside of Bayi Bayi. It didn't look very prosperous but that was by design. A few chickens made themselves available when Brooks grabbed his bags from the back of his bakkie. Chickens are always hungry but Brooks ignored them. Same with the cat. He opened the front door and could smell rotting meat. He knew what he was getting into but jeezus, had these people never heard of refrigeration?

The lady at the front desk had been expecting him. "Please come this way Mr. Brooks," she said.

Gert Botha was behind his desk. He didn't rise. He just said, "so you are the fucking elephant whisper then?"

"We'll see. I have some ideas."

AT FIRST GERT had been suspicious of the drone idea. In fact he really had no clue what a drone was. He had heard about them but was not quite sure what they could do. He took Brooks up to the shooting range and Brooks launched his smaller one. "Ugh so what the fok is this thing going to do," he laughed. "Bang an elephant on the head and knock it out? You are just wasting my time."

"No wait, watch," Brooks said. He pulled up the screen and showed Gert. "Look at this thing." He dropped the drone in on them. Gert looked up and then looked at the screen. There he was in HD. "I can find elephants with this thing. A lot of elephants." Gert thought for a few seconds and then smiled broadly. "Fok in jy Ma's sa moer," he said. "This is brilliant. How does it work?"

"This particular drone runs on a satellite signal. The cheaper ones run on WiFi or Bluetooth but with a satellite signal it can go as far as I want it to. When I am done I just push this button here." He showed Gert a small button on the lower right hand side of the screen. "I just push this button and the drone returns to home base. That would be me."

"Well I will be befok," said Gert. Brooks was brought on as a consultant with the possibility of a full time position.

IT WAS BRILLIANT. From his bed Brooks could find herds of elephants. He would fly his drone over Hwange. He had developed an app that could detect elephant from above. It was nowhere near as good as the eye recognition app that he had used when

he ran the child sex business in London, but eyes and elephants are two different things. For the first few days he just tracked their movements. Brooks knew that they would follow pretty much the same route every day. It was how they got their food. After a week, and after Gert got on his arse to get some elephants, he gave the order.

“There will be a herd, a massive herd near the bottom end of Lake Kariba. That is where they liked to end their day.”

They went in after dark and mowed down 16 elephants. Gert had bought new chainsaws for the men and it didn't take long for them to remove the tusks. The hard part was getting them out of there. Elephant tusks are heavy. Gert didn't count on that part, well if he was to be honest with himself he thought that they might get four or five, not 16. The men worked all night. They had to. They had families to feed. They needed the work. It was brutal but before dawn they had 32 tusks loaded onto three bakkies covered with tarpaulin, heading south toward Bulawayo.

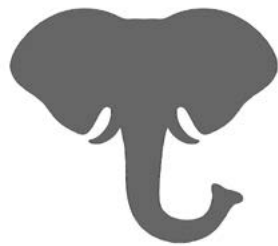
They took out another herd the following week. Plus there was the side business of rhino horn which was as easy as bobbing for apples. White rhino, especially, were just a little on the dumb side. Black rhino, well they were another story altogether.

BROOKS WENT INTO the Marula Cafe and fell in love; instantly. He had had plenty of women in London. Hookers mostly. He had not planned to stop for a beer but Gert had said that he would buy and so they stopped in. He ordered a Tusker. The waitress handed it over. She smiled and her teeth were bright white, but it was not her teeth that got him. It was her scent. It almost floored him. Slightly sweet musk. Just enough, not too much. He was pretty well done and wrapped up with a bow by his second beer.

He found out that her name was Antoinette. Gert knew the owner of the bar and he gave over all the information. Antoinette was originally from South Africa but had studied in New Zealand. She had run from her husband for no good reason. She just knew that she needed to run and she didn't want to follow her friends to England. She wanted to blaze a path of her own so she took a flight to Auckland. After three years in the Kiwi sunshine she flew back to Johannesburg. She didn't feel the hum of the place and bought a one-way ticket to Bulawayo.

## CHAPTER SIX

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THEY HAD THE SYSTEM pretty well oiled. Gert had bribed the shipping company owner with not only money, but also, well let's say, an inconvenient situation with his secretary. The tiny cameras got him full frontal and when confronted with the video, he agreed immediately. His usual shipment of sugar cane from the Port of Durban to Vietnam would also include a harvest of elephant tusks and rhino horns.

It wasn't long before they offered Brooks a full time position. He was not only ordering up the slaughter of dozens of elephants from the app on his phone, he was totally and besotted in love with Antoinette. All he wanted was to spend time with her. All Antoinette wanted was to spend time with him. What they both wanted was a whole lot of leg over.

CLIVE LIVED IN THE SOUTH of England in a small town with a big name. Broadchurch. It was only a big name because of a murder that had taken place there a couple of years earlier, a murder that had gained national coverage. He and his wife ran a small conservation business that focused mainly on eradication poaching in Southern Africa. Clive had started out his career

filming Brent geese on the Bursledon River, a small estuary just to the east of Southampton. He came to realize that his skills as a photo journalist could also be used to help his wife's passion; the halt of all illegal elephant tusk trading.

Elena, his wife, had an idea. They had enough funds for Clive to go to Hai Phong, the very heart of rhino horn and elephant tusk smuggling in Vietnam. They had some leads and were pursuing some things in court, but what they really needed was hard evidence. Hard evidence that there were crates of tusks and horns being processed. At first Clive was skeptical. "You want me to hide in a shipping container and then photograph what I see?"

"Yes."

His wife, Elena, was a force of nature. She drove him to Heathrow. "Good luck," was all she said. There was no goodbye kiss.

Clive flight landed in Ho Chi Minh City. He had not been able to sleep on the plane and was completely wiped out. Elena had found him an AirBnB near the airport and just a few seconds after his head hit the pillow he was down for the count.

The next morning he made arrangements to get to Hai Phng. To be truthful he had no plan. His wife had the plan; Clive had no idea. His plane landed and he took an UBER to a dive motel. He was very uncomfortable with the whole thing. His daughters Holly and Jessie needed new shoes, but here he was on the other side of the planet stalking the illegal elephant trade. The money for new shoes long since spent on his air ticket.

He started by scoping out the port. He knew the name of the ship and he had an app that had tracked its passage from South Africa. The ship had stopped along the way in Panama City but other than that brief interlude it was on a direct course for

Vietnam. Clive was on the dock when the ship came alongside. The freighter was a bit run down, he could tell by the rust stains. Not long after they threw the lines ashore the containers were being unloaded and emptied. He watched as the trucks pulled up and he followed them to a warehouse on the north side of the city. Clive had no idea what he was going to do but got a reassuring text from Elena. "Don't screw this up. The girls needed new shoes but I put it all on you."

He had his cameras. And an iPhone and a spare iPhone. It was dark, the sun had gone down and there was no moon, yet. Clive slunk along the side of the warehouse. He had no clue how he would get in but the message from Elena motivated him to find a way. Near the back of the warehouse he found a door that was unlocked. He slipped in, quietly. The place was as dark as a nun's arse. Clive had the flashlight app on his phone and started to get orientated. There was a lot more than just shipping containers in the warehouse. There were chickens, lobsters, and more. He climbed onto one container, surprised that there was a hatch that he could slide into. He swung down onto a pile of something. He was not sure what it was but the container was full. His heart was pounding. The night crew came in around seven.

ELENA HAD ONE SIMPLE passion in life. Something even stronger than her love for Clive, and, if she was to be honest with herself, even stronger than the love she had for her children. She was beyond disgusted by the illegal trade in elephant tusks and rhino horn. She was going to move earth and mountain to get this blot on humanity wiped from the face of the earth; forever.

She had grown up a tomboy, always the first to jump into the lake to rescue a duckling with a broken wing or a frog with a gimp leg. Her bedroom was a menagerie of wild animals on the mend. Elena had a way with them. Even the chickens would cock

their heads and listen when she talked to them. Her Mom hated the smell but she loved her passion and commitment. Her Dad said, “leave her be, she will grow out of it.” But she never did.

Elena had planned to become a vet, but in a chance meeting on the dock in Southampton she met a crewmember from the Greenpeace ship ‘Rainbow Warrior’. The crewmember was trying to hit on her but she had no interest. She did, however, have a huge interest in the ship and was eager to learn more about Greenpeace. The crewmember invited her onboard to meet the Captain. He was a man twice her age but there was an instant connection. She told her parents that night that she had a new job; she was going to join the ‘Rainbow Warrior’. Her parents were horrified, but the next day, with a small duffel bag in hand, she became the newest member of the ships crew. She was not surprised when the captain told her that they didn’t have a cabin for her. His bunk was big enough for two people.

She spent a year on the ship sailing first to Greenland to protest seal hunting. The wholesale slaughter of seals by clubbing them churned Elena’s stomach. They shot some video and posted it on a brand new online platform called YouTube. Almost immediately the video took off with people from all over the world giving it a thumbs up. From there they went to Iceland. Huge factory ships were raping the waters north of the Arctic Circle. The amount of fish that was being caught and processed was obscene. The Rainbow Warrior went into the international waters and filmed the factory ships. They returned to Reykjavik and held a news conference showing some of the video which was broadcast on CNN International. They were making a difference, one video at a time.

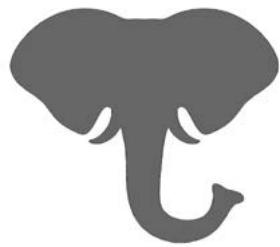
By the time the ‘Rainbow Warrior’ had visited the rest of the Scandinavian countries Elena’s relationship with the captain had soured. He had tried on more than one occasion to invite another

girl into his bed for a threesome but Elena was not in the slightest bit interested. She was strictly heterosexual and in fact she was pretty much a missionary position kind of girl. The ship was in Copenhagen for a global conference on banning whaling when she packed her duffel and without saying a word to anyone, walked down the ships gangplank and never looked back. Her Dad bought her a one-way ticket to Heathrow.

It was at a conference on how best to protect Brent Geese where she met Clive. He had a lop of blond hair that hung over one eye and a very quick and easy smile. In fact he laughed at just about everything, which at first was a bit annoying but after a while Elena got used to it and found it quite endearing. They dated for a year before getting married in a small stone church on Hayling Island.



## CHAPTER SEVEN



**L**EE LEE MADE A POINT to visit Mr. Vu every day. He was starting to become like a grandfather to her. He would always have a beautiful china teapot with some delicious green tea ready when she arrived. She asked only one more time about Mrs. Vu and was told, quite abruptly, that there was no longer a Mrs. Vu. The way that he said it made Lee Lee a little suspicious, like maybe something bad had happened to her, but she quickly pushed the thought to the back of her mind. Mr. Vu was ever so kind.

**CLIVE WAS GETTING UNCOMFORTABLE** in the container. And hungry. He hadn't planned things out very well. He had done some scouting around and saw that most of the other containers in the warehouse, especially those near the front near the large doors, were all locked down tight. Some of the containers like the one he was in were at the back of the warehouse and had probably been there for a while. At precisely seven the night crew came in. Clive had set up one of his iPhones to film from one of the rafters of the warehouse. He used his other iPhone as a remote. He had his main camera with him.

The warehouse workers started to unload the containers.

There were crates of lobsters, a lot of frozen meat, and some kind of dried goods. All pretty routine. Around midnight a worker with the forklift pulled out a pallet which was covered with a tarp. He placed the pallet on the ground and removed the tarp. There were a dozen elephant tusks on the pallet. Clive started to film. The worker pulled out a second pallet and that one also had elephant tusks on it. Clive kept filming. He was getting it on his main camera as well as on the iPhone in the rafters. There were eight pallets in total, six of them with elephant tusks and the other two with rhino horn. Clive could not believe his luck. It was just the evidence that Elena would need to get her cases through the courts. Then he slipped. Clive had been standing on a ledge on the inside of the container when he suddenly slipped. He hit the ground hoping that no one heard him. He lay still acutely aware that the forklift driver had turned his engine off.

Clive heard some footsteps approaching. "Fuck." A man looked over the lip of the container and right down at him. He yelled something in Vietnamese and ran away. Clive stood up and scrambled to get out of the container. He dropped to the ground and ran for the back door of the warehouse but before he got there five men blocked his way. They wrestled him to the ground all the while yelling to each other. Clive was well and truly screwed and he knew it. The men took him to a small office and tied his wrists to a large desk. He had no clue what they were saying but he was pretty sure than none of it was good, at least for him. Then one man came in with Clive's video camera. He had dropped it in his haste to get away. The men started to watch the video and that was when the police were called in.

MR. VU STEPPED OUT to get more tea. Lee Lee needed to use the bathroom. She had only been in the main part of the house

but she poked around the area near the side of the house near where there was an old banyan tree. She was curious about things and opened a door. Inside there had to be more than a hundred elephant tusks. Lee Lee quickly closed the door and hurried back to the living room. Mr. Vu came in with the tea and poured her another cup. "Is everything alright?" He asked. Lee Lee was flustered. "Yes of course," she said.

THE POLICE ARRESTED CLIVE and took him to the Hai Phong central prison. Trespassing was the charge. Clive was terrified. He had no idea what to do. Were they going to allow him a phone call? Apparently not. Were they going to get him a court appointed lawyer. Apparently not. Two days after they had shoved him into a tiny cell with only a small meal and some water he was taken out to a recreation area where he was allowed to walk around for a half hour. He was beside himself. He knew that Elena would be worried. He had no clue what anyone was saying. He had not been brought up on any charges and simply had no idea what the future held for him.

The following day, after he got back to this cell after his short time in the recreation area, there was a man waiting for him. "I am from the British Consulate," he said. "I have been talking with your wife." Clive felt his knees start to tremble. "Yes Sir," he said.

The man said, "I'm afraid that I don't have any good news for you. This city is corrupt and there are some people working behind the scenes to make sure that you get punished. It's not about the trespassing. It's what you had on your video camera. Elephant ivory is big business here in Hai Phong and there are some very influential businessmen that can easily pay off politicians and judges. I will do what I can but for now hold on for a bit of a rough ride." Clive felt his knees buckle. The man

left and Clive sat in the corner of his cell sobbing. His only ray of hope was that Elena was on the case. Elena was single-minded especially when she had a project to work on and he knew that getting him out of jail would be her next project.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**B**ROOKS AND ANTOINETTE were as thick as thieves. Inseparable. Brooks had never been so happy. As the rosy glow of their initial relationship started to wear off Antoinette said to him, “you do that for a living?” Brooks was ashamed but tried to explain himself. “I have a gift,” he said. “Yes I know that elephant poaching is bad but I can turn this into something good.” Antoinette moved to the opposite couch. “This had better be good,” she said. “Elephant poaching is never good.”

Brooks was not sure how to put it. “Listen,” he said. “I have had a bit of a bad history. It’s not something that I am proud of and not something to bring up with a new girlfriend, at least not right away.” Antoinette shot him a look. “What does it have to do with elephant poaching?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you in the elephant poaching business?” Brooks shifted uncomfortably. He had never seen Antoinette like this. “Listen,” he said.

“No you listen to me,” Antoinette said. “There had better be a bloody good reason for this.”

Brooks was not sure how to respond. He had met with his

lawyer earlier in the day and the papers were ready to be signed. “Look,” he said, “just listen to me. I can explain everything.”

Antoinette shot him another look. “That’s what a cheating husband always says. I can explain everything.”

“No, no this is not like that.” Brooks got up and made them each a cup of tea. “I am a businessman,” he said. “I know how to make money. I know how to make a lot of money. And I am not making a lot of money working for Hanson Industries. Please just hear me out.”

Antoinette said, “Ok.”

“When my mother died they found out that she had had heart disease for years. They think it might have started when she was a child but went undetected. All of us might get heart disease at some point but do you know that children all over the world can get heart disease too, and die of it?” That set Antoinette back a little.

“Yes, young people die of heart disease and there is not much being done about it. When I got that information about my Mom, Daisy, I made a promise to myself. No more. No more. Today I created a foundation that will end heart disease in children. That’s where I was this morning. I met with Lucas Shilling. He has drawn up the papers. We are a 501c3 non-profit in the US, and around the world. Even here in Zimbabwe. I am going to use the money from this terrible trade in elephant tusks and rhino horns and we are going to fund research into heart disease focused on children.”

“What about your job with Hanson Industries?”

“I resigned this morning. They were pissed. They were even more pissed when Gert also quit to join our new operation. Plus Sixpence and two of the other top poachers. I am going to have to figure out how to pay them until the new operation gets to be profitable.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me about this before making such a drastic change?”

“I was afraid that you would leave me when you found out about the poaching.” Antoinette shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I might have if you hadn’t come up with such a good reason. Come here my love,” she said. Brooks came over and kissed her. “Ok we are going to fuck the fuck out of heart disease no matter what it takes.” Brooks kissed her again. He had never loved anyone so much.

CLIVE WAS MISERABLE. Beyond miserable. The food, what there was of it, was crap. Almost inedible. His court appointed lawyer was a joke. The man had a bad suit and even worse shoes. He was clearly a stooge for the government. “We can get you a court date in August,” he said. That was four months out. Clive put his head in his hands and started to cry.

ELENA WAS TAKING NO CRAP. She had Minister Jacob on the phone. “This is bloody bullshit,” she said. “Bloody bullshit. You and that wanker Boris Johnson know that there is a terrible trade in illegal ivory between Zimbabwe, England and Vietnam yet you do nothing about it. Now my husband is in jail in Vietnam and you are doing nothing about out.”

Minister Jacob started with the platitudes. “We have contacted the Foreign Office and they are doing the best they can.” That was when Elena lost it. “Listen to me you fat fuck,” she said. “You listen to me. I know about you and the PM’s daughter. The tabloids will love that story. Figure this out or there will be consequences.” She slammed the phone down.

“Fucking wanker.

BROOKS SIGNED THE PAPERS the next day and the International Association for Relief for Children with Heart Disease was launched. It was a non-profit, in most countries. They also signed papers for Brooks Industries which would act as a front company for the foundation. Shilling had explained that it would be a bit distasteful if a charitable operation had elephant poaching as its main source of income. Antoinette joined him in the lawyer's office. "Ok Brooks," she said, "I am with you on this one. Let's just make damn sure that we change the world."

Brooks placed a call to Elmarie. "I need you."

Elmarie Mulenga joined the foundation. As Senior Vice President. There weren't actually any other Vice Presidents, and she knew this, but she didn't care. Brooks set up a small office, Antoinette would work the phone, Elmarie would manage the day to day part of the operation. Gert would be in charge of the ground operation for Brooks Industries. Brooks would bring in the money and oversee the poaching operations. They were in business, the business of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Paul, in this case, being their Foundation.

Gert had managed to get a lease on three trucks and was busy establishing the ground side of things. Brooks placed a call to Gert. "I have my eye on a big herd on the east side of Kariba, near Mabizi," he said. "They seem pretty established in the area, not moving very far. There must be plenty of food there and of course Kariba provides them water. I suggest you add some reinforcements, rent some extra trucks. I think that you could probably get at least 30 targets." Targets was their code name for elephants. There was more than a little concern that their phones might be bugged. "Let me know when you are ready and I will get you the coordinates of the herd."

The following Monday the poachers moved in. They left their base camp just as the sun was setting and headed south to

where Brooks had the herd pegged. Their first issue was to get past the Kariba Bush Club without sending up any alarms. The game wardens at the bush club kept a close eye on things and would be suspicious of six pick-ups trucks in convoy. None of the trucks had any markings on them and that in itself was suspicious. Everyone in the area worked for some kind of bush outfit and their cars were all emblazoned with logos, website addresses and phone numbers.

The group spread out with a plan to meet up a mile or so from where the herd had gathered. It was around nine in the evening and very dark when they got to the area. Brooks and Gert were communicating via TikToc. The same app that Brooks had used in London for the child sex trade. The Chinese had it very well encrypted and it would be almost impossible for anyone to trace a call or message back to either of them. His drone could see the herd. It was a bit fuzzy but Brooks had figured out some night light feature that would not spook the herd. He had them right where he thought that they would be. Right on the edge of the lake. There was a small peninsular that ran out into the lake and that was where the herd had chosen to spend the night. He sent a message through to Gert. "It looks like there are at least 50 elephants. I can't tell male from female but you guys need to move in soon. There is money on the table there."

Gert was starting to think like a hunting dog. "You," he said. He pointed to the guy next to him. He was recently recruited and Gert didn't know his name. "And you. You guys go to the north. "Sixpence," he said. "You come with me." Gert and Sixpence had become good friends and worked well together. "We will go to the south and skrik the herd. They were going to frighten the herd of elephants. Something to make them panic. "A panicked elephant is a dead elephant."

The dirt was still warm from the hot summer day. Gert felt his

feet sink into the sand. He and Sixpence were moving south. He had the rest on station; guns ready.

They could smell the elephants. A musky dung smell. It smelled of the African bush. It smelled of money. Most of the elephants were sleeping standing up. Some were on the ground. None were expecting anything. Gert and Sixpence moved closer. Gert had muted his phone but had forgotten about the radio in his jeep. "Hey there. Hey there, hey there." The voice on the radio blared out. "Friends and farmers. Fuckers and engineers. Let's all enjoy some good music." Gert could not believe his ears. The herd was restless. Then Michael Jackson came on. Really, Michael Jackson? The herd was spooked and bolted. "Move in right now," Gert yelled into his radio. There was a barrage of gunfire. The first few elephants hit the ground. Michael Jackson kept on singing. "Beat it. Beat it." There was more gunfire. "Beat it. Beat it." Seven more elephants hit the ground. In the end they got 28. The blood flowed rich and thick. Brooks watched from above, his drone finely tuned into the action. He turned on the spotlight and the killing field was right there in front of him. It looked just like something out of a horror movie. He was so detached. There were 28 dead elephants on the ground, some struggling for their lives. His team moved in with chainsaws. Brooks could see it all on the screen of his drone control panel. He was disconnected from the brutality of it all and managed to put it out of his mind. There was payroll to be met and his Foundation, the International Association for Relief for Children with Heart Disease, needed the money.

## CHAPTER NINE

SIXPENCE WAS NOWHERE to be found. Gert had seen him run in with his guns firing but after that no one had seen him. The slaughter was horrendous. Dead elephants everywhere. Most of them were crying out in pain as their tusks were being chainsawed off. The dry earth could not soak up even half the blood that was pouring over the hot African dirt. Even though it was the middle of the night the soil was still warm. Sixpence was under an elephant and could barely breathe. He had come in hot and fast but the elephant had collapsed on him trapping his leg and his torso under the left leg of the elephant. Sixpence could not move. Sixpence was not a religious man but he started to pray.

"Godverdomme," he said, then quickly altered his plea. "I'm sorry God," he said. "I'm really sorry. "My mother always taught me to be polite but I have an elephant on me. A big fat half-dead elephant." Someone came with a chainsaw. They hacked the tusks off and dragged one of them away. Sixpence said, "help," but the killers didn't hear him. There was too much gunfire and chainsaw noise. They came back for the second tusk. Sixpence could not cry out.

The sun was coming up when Sixpence opened one eye. He was sure that he was dead, but he wasn't and there it was, that

round bowl of fury beating down on the African bush. The sun was up. It was starting to get hot. The elephant was dead and he was stuck under the dead elephant. There was no one around. Sixpence opened his other eye and saw the killing field. There were dead elephants as far as he could see. His tongue was too big for his mouth. Then he saw the lions move in. They moved slowly, like a bunch of athletes loosening up before a big game. They had a swagger. They were hungry. They settled in on an elephant close to where he was. An all you can eat buffet. Sixpence was not sure if his leg was broken or just numb from the lack of blood flow. He didn't want to bring any attention to himself. Every now and then a lion would glance over his way but not show any real interest. Sixpence raised himself up on one elbow. He looked around and started to make a plan. He thought that now in the light of day he might be able to get out from under the elephant. The bugger was heavy. He eased himself backwards a little. There was a lot of blood. It acted like a lubricant. His leg was sloshing around in blood. He saw the male lion look over his way.

BROOKS WAS THRILLED. This was a big payday for their foundation. Sixpence was collateral damage. Money was money and the foundation needed money. The tusks were going to be transported to Durban. The crew had nailed a couple of rhino on their way back to Bulawayo and their horns were in the shipment as well. He felt a little guilty about watching the slaughter through a lens. It was like watching a bad movie but he had not been able to figure out the sound on his app so he didn't hear the screams and the cry's for help as the herd was taken out. Once the men got back to their base camp Brooks joined them. He had brought along five gallons of tshwala, a thick home-brewed beer made from fermented sorghum millet. The men drank late into the day. By the time they passed out, the tusks were almost in South Africa.

SIXPENCE GOT FREE from under the elephant. For a while he hid behind the corpse looking for lions but the pride that had first moved in seemed satiated. They had gorged themselves and were asleep in the shade of an acacia tree. Sixpence was horrified by the amount of dead elephants, most of which had started to bloat as their corpses rotted. His leg was not broken, just numb from the lack of blood and after a while he was able to start hobbling. He used Lake Kariba as a reference, keeping it to his left. He had drunk from the lake but was hungry. He found the road back to their base camp. Sixpence waved down a car. It was a family from Bloemfontein in South Africa. They were on a holiday enjoying the bush and took pity on the small black man hobbling down the road with his thumb out. The wife said, "pull over and pick him up." The husband said, "he may be a terrorist." The wife said, "pull over now for the glory of Jesus." The husband pulled over. Sixpence got in the car and sat in the back seat alongside the two daughters. No one asked why he was covered in blood. The wife prayed a little, then lit a smoke, and then she fell asleep. The girls huddled close to each other. Sixpence did the head bob thing for a while then he too fell asleep. They dropped him outside his Mom's house.

Sixpence was pissed. Brooks and his crew had left him to die out in the African bush. He had a great deal of respect for Brooks but the number one rule of friendship is that you never leave your friends out in the bush to die. Sure Brooks was not there shooting elephants but he was in charge of the operation and could have sent the men back in to find him. It seemed as if all Brooks cared about was money, and the tusks. He cleaned up at his Mom's house and took a nap. He knew that his mother would not ask any questions.

GERT KNEW HOW to get into South Africa without having to deal with customs. He went through Mozambique where the border

was lax. He then drove to the northern border of South Africa and slipped into Ndumo Game Reserve. That got him a free ride down the spectacular east coast of South Africa to Durban. He pulled his truck into a warehouse right in the port area. The owner of the shipping company was there to greet him. "Yussus," he said. "This is a big haul. I am not sure if I can take all of this." Gert smiled. "I'm sure that your wife would like to see the tape. By the way does that pretty secretary still work for you?"

"I will get my men to unload them."

## CHAPTER TEN

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LEE LEE SING knew that Mr. Vu was up to no good. Every now and then when she visited he would leave the room and talk on his phone in hushed tones. She heard something about elephants. And rhino. She had snuck back to the room where she had earlier seen tusks, but they were gone. She was still doing 'special' deliveries for her favored clients and still making a decent living but she wanted more. She wanted to be able to buy her mom a nice house where she could live and not have to work 15 hours a day. She knew that her mother loved her work but everyone deserved to put their feet up at some point in life.

There was a knock at the door. Mr. Vu was upstairs on the phone. Lee Lee opened the door. A man stood there. He had a certified letter for Mr. Vu. Lee Lee signed for it. She had a hunch and slipped the letter into her backpack. Later that night she pulled the letter out and steamed it open. It was from some law firm. They had apparently received confirmation from a judge that Mrs. Vu's death could be ruled an accident. There was a large amount of money to be paid but, for now anyway, he was off the hook; for murder.

Lee Lee lay on her bed looking up at the ceiling. Mr. Vu? Such a nice man.



THE SHIPMENT OF TUSKS arrived in Hai Phong. Mr. Vu was happy. His factory on the banks of the Can River would grind down the rhino horn. They would package it in tiny plastic bags and then box the bags. Mr. Vu's brilliance was not in producing ground rhino horn, it was in the packaging and marketing. It was subtle and discreet, almost like the Amazon logo. Jeff Bezos knew his stuff. It takes a while but if you looked at the Amazon logo long enough all you see in the end is an erect penis. The logo for Mr. Vu's rhino horn product had the same effect and Vietnamese men all over the country took it daily, like a vitamin supplement.

CLIVE WAS MISERABLE. He knew that Elena was on the case but he was slipping into depression. All he had really wanted to do was to film Brent Geese on the Bursledon River. Now he was languishing in some half-baked prison halfway around the world. He was the only non-Vietnamese person in there. His court appointed lawyer came by but didn't offer much hope. He said that the court date was still a ways off but as he was leaving he said, "I had a strange call this morning." He laughed. "My English is not that good as you know. The person had a very British accent. Very British. Sometimes when people speak very British it's hard to understand them. The man said something about a plea bargain, whatever that is. Something about a trade as well. No idea what he meant by any of it." The lawyer shut the cell door and left the prison.

Clive was allowed one call a week and he always called Elena. She said, "I have Minister Jacob by the balls and he is moving mountains. I think that you might be out within a week, or two at the most. "He finally has the ear of that twat Boris, the PM. I think that there might be some action soon. For the first time since he had landed in jail Clive felt a modicum of hope.

LEE LEE WAS COOKING up an idea. She needed money, Mr. Vu needed anonymity. No one would ever suspect her. She wanted in on the elephant tusk trade. She had some leverage. She knew about the murder. Lee Lee was a sweet girl, her Mama's girl, but the two rapes had built in a hard edge and she was determined to turn some bad situations to her advantage.

MR. VU DID NOT suffer fools lightly. If you didn't play by his rules he would bring in what he liked to call, his 'decision makers', those that used a tad of force to get Mr. Vu the decision and outcome that he wanted. His men, who worked in the dead of night, usually brought him the right answer. His supply chain was bringing in the elephant tusks by the ton. His factory was churning out immaculately carved tusks. He had hired the very best and they had talent. An elephant tusk could be carved into the most intricate and exquisite ornaments and the wealthy around the world could not get enough of them. There was one buyer in Monaco who kept calling looking for more. Mr. Vu said, "You send your stooges over to Zimbabwe and slaughter more elephants and I will get you more ornaments."

The buyer said, "I'll wait."

LEE LEE WAS HAVING TEA with Mr. Vu. She went through the pleasantries. The tea was delicious. Then she cut to the chase. "You need a business partner," she said. Mr. Vu gave her a long look. It was as if he knew that it was coming. "Hmmm," was all he said. He walked into the kitchen and brewed more tea. "A business partner huh? And what kind of business do you think I run?" Lee Lee was a beautiful woman and she knew how to use her beauty. She dipped her eyes and thought for a moment. She had recently been watching the 4th season of The Crown, the one that had Lady

Di front and center. She looked up through her long eyelashes and through the lop of hair that hung over her forehead and said, “I know what business you are in and I want to be a part of it.”

CLIVE WAS SPRUNG from jail the following Sunday. The guards came for him after midnight. They hustled him out of the cell, shoved a bag of his belongings into his hand, and handed him over to an UBER driver who was waiting by the main entrance to the prison. Elena had paid for a really nice hotel overlooking the Can River. When Clive checked in there was a more than decent bottle of red wine in the room and some Swiss chocolates. Clive thought that he was in heaven. He downed the wine and was just falling asleep when he suddenly remembered. There was that iPhone in the rafters. The other iPhone that had been recording the shipments of ivory. He called the front desk. “Yes Sir, I can have a cab here in five minutes.”

“Can you please wait,” Clive said to the cab driver. “Keep the meter running.” It was three in the morning and the night shift had all gone home. He slipped along the back of the warehouse and found that the door was still unlocked.

He had charged his phone and used the flashlight app to orientate himself. The container where he had hidden was still there. The same ladder that he had used before was there. He placed it against the rafters and there was the iPhone. The battery was long since dead but Clive was pretty sure that he had what he needed to help Elena win her cases.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**B**ROOKS WAS GETTING GREEDY. The Foundation had opened a new office in Australia and Brooks was on edge. He thought, “maybe they were moving too fast.” Since he had filed the papers with Lucas Shilling he had raised close to seven million dollars almost all of it on the back of the illegal elephant tusk and rhino horn trade. Shilling had set up a separate organization that was channeling the money to charities that specialized in serving children with early onset heart disease. It was “all good”, as Brooks liked to say, but he was finding it harder and harder to find herds of elephants. There were many other operations competing for the same animals. Brooks ran the best outfit and they were the only one that was using a drone to locate the herds, but still, no elephants meant no business and no business meant no money and, well, no Foundation.

Antoinette said, “I have been doing some research. There is money in tigers.” Brooks was dismissive. “Tigers? What? Tigers don’t have tusks.”

“No wait,” Antoinette said. “All over India, and I think in Bangladesh too, tigers are being poached and their body parts are being sold and used for traditional Chinese medicine. Same deal as rhino horn. Those stupid twats over there, those that can’t get

a hard-on, they think that ingesting some kind of tiger balm or rubbing it on their dicks will enhance their sex drive.” Brooks gave her a look. “Hmmm, clever,” was all he said.

A week later Brooks landed in Bangladesh. Most of the Covid restrictions had been lifted and everyone was moving around like it was 2019 once again, except that many still wore masks. He later found out that they were wearing masks because of the heavy pollution in Bangladesh and not so much because of Covid. Shahjalal International Airport was a shitfight. So many people. So few signs. He was out of his depth. He had no idea what to do but he did have a brand new app on his phone, well two new apps to be exact. One was an automatic language translator. He could either speak into it and the app would translate, or vice versa. The other app was brand new; it tracked the movements of every Bengal tiger that had been tagged by the Bangladeshi and Indian governments.

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, was a heaving mass of humanity. Brooks took a rickshaw to his hotel, just for the fun of it. Moments after he got on board he knew that he had made a mistake. The rickshaw owner was a joker. He liked to do tricks like jumping into the air. Every time that he did it Brooks thought that he was going to fall out of the rickshaw. He was really glad when he arrived at his hotel. It was grand, in a British Colonialism kind of way. It was ornate, gold mostly with a lot of granite and wrought iron. He dumped his bags on the bed and headed into town. Brooks was hungry. His hotel was just around the corner from the Dhakar New Market and the street food scene was ripping. Brooks found a stand that sold Kachchi Biryani. He had read about it on the plane. The owner of the stand was a plump but highly enthusiastic man and motioned Brooks to a small table. The bright red plastic seats and table added a festive feel to the restaurant. It reminded Brooks of Maun. The owner brought over a steaming plate of food. The layers of meat and potato had been cooked

slowly and covered with a dough crust. When Brooks cut into it the whole plate seemed to sigh. A thick and heady steam escaped and Brooks tucked in. It was a meal to remember. His head hit the pillow and Brooks was done and dusted. He had a lot of work ahead of him.

CLIVE ARRIVED BACK at Heathrow and Elena was there to pick him up. “You look like crap,” she said.

“I love you too,” Clive replied.

Elena didn’t know about the iPhone. Clive had charged it on the plane and there was all the evidence that Elena needed to get her cases successfully litigated in court. “Well one good thing,” Elena said patting Clive on his belly. “That Vietnamese prison was a great weight loss program.”

“Not funny,” Clive said. “I have something for you.” They had pulled into a pub in Woking. The Kings Arms. Clive had not stopped eating since his release from the prison in Hai Phong. He was on his third pint of Guinness and had demolished a massive steak and kidney pie with a double side of chips and gravy. He reached into his bag. “This is an early Christmas gift,” he said to Elena. He handed her the iPhone. Elena had thought that the whole trip to Hai Phong had been a bust. Clive had thought the same until he went back to the warehouse. The video footage on the iPhone had it all there. In full color. In HD. “You are a bloody genius,” Elena said. “I would fuck you right here and right now if I could.” When they got back to Broadchurch they first backed up the video onto an encrypted hard drive and then Elena took care of her promise. Clive had never been so happy to be home.

BROOKS MET THE FOLLOWING morning with a guide who knew the area where the Bengal tigers were the most prolific. Brooks

was posing as a journalist telling the guide that he had been commissioned to write an article for National Geographic about the plight of the tiger in India and Bangladesh. The guide, Arun, was happy to have some work. They were meeting over a cup of Masala Chai at a street cafe. Arun outlined a plan. They would travel west toward the border with India. It was a forested area with mangrove swamps. Arun knew of an outfit there where they could base themselves for a few days. Brooks wanted to learn as much as he could in the week that he had in Bangladesh. The future of his Foundation might count on how successful he was tapping into the illegal tiger trade.

The countryside that they drove through was beautiful and Brooks struck up a rapport with Arun. They sipped cups of chai and fell into an easy conversation. Arun had grown up dirt poor in the south of the country but he had a love of wild animals. Brooks had grown up dirt poor in Africa and he too had a love of animals. He neglected to tell Arun about his elephant poaching business but it was true, Brooks did love animals. His step-father Pete was a wildlife scientist and they had camped out many times in the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park when he was a kid.

Later that evening they pulled into Jalangi, a small town just over the border in West Bengal, India. Brooks bought dinner. Arun insisted that Brooks take the main bunk in the back of his camper van. Arun said that he would be plenty comfortable on the front seat. They would meet with the bush safari business the following morning.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

MR VU SAID “OK,” but that there would be some strings attached. He knew that he was getting old and needed a протѣй. When Mr. Vu said “strings attached” Lee Lee’s heart sank. She was not interested in screwing an old guy. Mr. Vu saw her face and said, “No it’s not that. I need you to talk with your Mom and see if she would come over once a week and cook noodles for us. I will pay her.” Lee Lee’s Mom had closed her noodle stand in Ho Chi Minh City and moved to Hai Phong to be closer to her daughter.

A few weeks earlier her Mom’s had made them a noodle dish for lunch and served it to Mr. Vu. It was beyond good. Her Mom had started to add cinnamon basil to her noodle bowls and it took her fabulous food to a whole new level.

“What’s the other thing?” Lee Lee asked.

“If you ever mention a single word about those lawyer documents to anyone ever, ever, our agreement is over. She slipped and fell down the stairway. I did not push her.”

“Deal.”

ELENA CONTACTED her solicitor the very next morning. “I have some evidence for you. I need to see you right away.” Her solicitor

set up an appointment for later that day. She was just about to leave when her daughter Holly arrived home from school. She looked pale. "I don't feel good Mom," she said. "I think that I am going to be sick." Elena called the solicitor and put off the meeting for an hour. Holly really did not look well. She went straight to her room to lie down. "I will call Dr. Peckham and make an appointment for you," she said.

"It's OK, I'm sure that I will be fine by tomorrow."

But she wasn't fine. Not fine at all. She had been dizzy all night and could not hold down any food. Elena had given her ginger ale but she threw that up as well. Elena pushed back the meeting with her solicitor until the following week. She called Dr. Peckham and asked if he could see Holly sooner.

Dr. Peckham recommended that they see a specialist in London. He had run some tests but was not sure what was causing Holly to be so sick. Clive took her to London while Elena met with her solicitor. "Oh yes baby," he said. "This is just what we need to blow this whole thing wide open." The video footage that Clive had managed to get on his iPhone was beyond incriminating. He not only had footage of the pallets being unloaded in the warehouse but he also had footage of the ship arriving from South Africa and the workers unloading it at the dock in Hai Phong. Clive had been clever enough to take photos of the container number stenciled in the top right hand corner of each container, and when the container was unloaded at the warehouse the numbers matched perfectly. "Yes this is all good stuff," the solicitor said. Elena made a mental note that she would take care of Clive in fine fashion when he and Holly got back from London.

It didn't quite work out that way. Clive got home just before dinner. He had called ahead and had given Elena the news. The specialists wanted to admit Holly. They had run a battery of tests but were still not sure what was going on. They wanted to keep

her under observation. There was something wrong with her but even the best docs were not too sure what it was.

LEE LEE ALWAYS HAD a good nose for business and she learned quickly from Mr. Vu. "This job is as easy as selling pho on the Mekong Delta, maybe even easier," she thought. The only difference really was the profit margin. There was some serious mark-up on ivory especially once it had been carved into intricate ornaments. Once she took over running the factory she noticed how much money Mr. Vu was leaving on the table, well the floor to be more precise. The tusks were carved into beautiful pieces of art. The chips were being swept up and thrown away. She had the workers start to make jewelry from the chips. Earrings, nose rings, all kinds of great stuff. Mr. Vu was impressed. "You are a good business lady," he said.

BROOKS, ALONG WITH ARUN and two guides from the safari camp in Jalangi, headed out in search of tigers. Brooks had located quite a few of them on his app but didn't want to say anything. For a start he didn't want to disclose the fact that he had an app that could locate tigers. He also wanted to see how the men worked in their own environment. They drove north into a heavily forested area. One of the guides said. "We need to go on foot from here."

The forest was thick and lush. There was a small path between the trees that had more than likely been trampled into a path by the night creatures. Brooks was not too sure about things. He was used to the savannah in Africa where you can see animals from a distance. He was worried about coming around the corner and coming face to face with a huge Bengal tiger. Arun said, as if reading his mind, "don't worry, we need to get to the swampy area before we will encounter any tigers. It's much more open there."

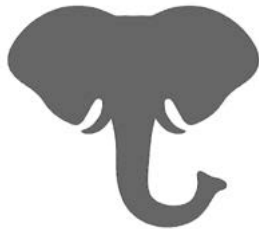
They hadn't walked very far into the forest when they saw a pack of gibbon, a local ape. They were swinging from the trees muttering to themselves. They clearly didn't appreciate visitors. Brooks was starting to feel more at home. Bush and wild animals were a huge part of his childhood. He was starting to wonder if poaching tigers was going to be a lucrative business. Finding them seemed much more difficult than finding elephants, even with the App.

They pushed on for another hour until the terrain started to turn swampy. It gave way to mangrove trees. Arun said, "We are getting close now. I know that it's strange but tigers like to swim. Well to put it more accurately, tigers don't mind the water as much as other cats do." They sat on a bank overlooking a small swampy pond and had just started to eat their lunch when one of the guides put his hand on Brook's leg. "Still," he said. He had seen a flash pass slowly behind a mangrove tree. Brooks was well accustomed with this routine and all four of them sat completely still, holding their collective breath.

The tiger came out slowly from behind the mangrove tree. It had not seen them. She was a beautiful specimen. The tiger was much larger than Brooks had expected. So powerful and elegant. Her stripes blended perfectly with the mangroves. The tiger sat for a moment licking her paws. Brooks was mesmerized. He had seen all kinds of African animals, but never an Asian tiger. Then the tiger looked their way. She squinted for a few seconds trying to see what it was that she was looking at. She must have figured it out because she raised herself up and looked directly at the four of them. Brooks was blown away by her beauty, by her elegance, by her presence. She padded toward the pond. The four of them sat very still. The tiger stopped at the edge of the pond and started to lick her paws again. Every now and then she would look up and look directly at them. One of the guides said, "Just sit still."

The tiger knew exactly what she was doing. She was fucking with them. She sat on the opposite bank grooming herself. Every now and then she would look up and look over at them, but mostly she went about the business of taking care of her personal hygiene. Then she got up and padded toward the pond. She squatted and drank, occasionally glancing their way. Brooks felt as if he was being hypnotized. The tiger lifted her head. She looked Brooks directly in the eye, and held her gaze for a full two minutes. Brooks knew in that moment that he would never kill a tiger. He also knew that he would never poach another elephant, or another rhino for that matter. The tiger turned her back on them. Her work was done. She walked away, slowly fading into the forest.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



**T**HE FOUNDATION had targeted smaller hospitals. Brooks didn't want to get embroiled in the mess of hospital insurance and financing. He wanted every dollar to make a difference to some child with heart disease. There was a small hospital on the outskirts of London that had applied for a grant and had been given close to \$100,000. A doctor there had written his doctoral paper on heart disease in children and was passionate about the subject. He could not believe how overlooked it was and how underfunded the whole subject had been. The doctor got a call from the Royal Hospital London. It was a nurse who had interned with him before going back to work at the biggest hospital in London.

“Doctor Sibella, I think that we might have a case here for you to look at,” the intern said. “The doctors here are flummoxed. We have a teenage girl who is sick and no matter how many tests that they run on her they can't figure out what's wrong. I think that she might have heart disease.” The next day Holly was taken over to All Saints Hospital and put under the care of Doctor Sibella. Clive was commuting between Broadchurch and London; anything was better than the bloody prison in Hai Phong. “This might take some time,” Doctor Sibella said. “But we will get to the bottom of what's making Holly sick.”

BROOKS WAS ON the plane home. “OK now what?” He thought to himself. He had a big Foundation to run. He needed money, and a lot of it. He knew that Antoinette would be ok with his decision but the rest on his payroll, including Elmarie, how was she going to take it? He had recently agreed to hire a couple more of her friends who used to reside with her under the bridge where the M1 and M2 intersected. They didn’t care about how the money was made; all they cared about was that money was being made. And that they were getting paid.

Brooks loved old movies and the plane had Internet. He was scrolling through things to watch when he saw a movie that he had not seen before. It was available on YouTube for a ridiculously small charge. ‘Diamonds are a Girls Best Friend.’ He clicked on the link. The movie came on. It starred Marilyn Monroe. Brooks situated his headrest the way that he liked it, asked the stewardess for a coke, and settled in for a long flight.

Brooks was mesmerized by Marilyn Monroe. He loved the movie. He dozed off after watching a second movie and then it hit him. Diamonds. That was how he was going to keep the Foundation going. South Africa was the home of diamonds. The country produced 65% of the world’s diamonds. The Oppenheimer family had become billionaires from diamonds. In 1869 the De Beer family had discovered diamonds on their farm and had sold their farm to Ernest Oppenheimer for a tidy sum of just over six thousand pounds. They walked away rich, relatively speaking. The Oppenheimer’s became one of the richest families in the world.

Brooks knew that he would never be able to compete against the commercial diamond industry but he had an idea. One of his customers when he was running his little Mokoro, his dugout canoe business taking paying punters through the reeds of the Okavango Delta, was a gentleman from Namibia. He had mentioned that he was in the diamond business. Brooks expected that the might have

done quite well in the diamond business. He had his contact info back on the computer in his office. It was time to turn a corner with the International Association for Relief for Children with Heart Disease Foundation.

DOCTOR SIBELLA WAS PISSED. The doctors at the Royal Hospital London had missed some of the most obvious signs that Holly might have heart disease. First she was very pale. Second she was out of breath. He looked on her chart. They did note that she had been experiencing chest pain and an irregular heartbeat. Heart arrhythmia is usually found in adults but when a child has it, it’s a big warning sign.

Clive was on his fourth cup of coffee in the waiting room when the nurse asked him to follow her. “Dr. Sibella would like to meet with you for a few minutes,” she said. A few minutes sounded hopeful. Either he had figured out what’s wrong or figured out that there was nothing wrong. The nurse knocked on the door of the doctor’s office and let Clive in.

“Please sit,” Dr. Sibella said gesturing toward a chair. “I will cut to the chase. I think that Holly has heart disease but don’t be alarmed. We can treat her. We will need to keep her here for a few more days while we run more tests and come up with a treatment plan.

Clive said. “I had no idea that children can get heart disease. I hope National Insurance will cover this.”

Dr. Sibella said, “Don’t worry. We have an organization that helps us fund the research for this. I am sure that we can get them to cover most costs if NHS doesn’t come through.”

Clive left the office and called Elena. “I think it’s going to be OK,” he said. Clive and Elena had no idea what kind of hell awaited them.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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WHEN BROOKS RETURNED HOME he called a staff meeting. He had spoken the previous evening with Antoinette and she was keen on the idea. “I hated the idea killing all those beautiful animals even if it was for a good cause. I just hope that we can make a go of the diamonds.”

“Don’t worry,” Brooks said. Antoinette admired his confidence. Gert had driven down to their little office building. “Something’s up,” he thought. Brooks explained what had happened in India. He told them that they might all have to take a little pay cut until he got the new businesses settled. Elmarie said, “that’s going to cost you some Nando’s next time we are in Johannesburg.”

Brooks placed a call to the man who had been his client in the mokoro. “Hi Hugh, this is Brooks. Brooks Dintwa. From Botswana.”

“Brooks you old bugger how are you. This is a surprise. How’s things?”

“Great. Could never be better. I am no longer in the Delta. I’m living in Zim these days.” After some pleasantries Brooks cut to the chase. “Hey so here’s the reason for my call. Didn’t you tell me that you were in the diamond business?”

“Yes that’s right why do you ask?”

“I would rather not talk about this on the phone. Is there any chance that I could come and see you? You are still in Namibia, right?”

“I would love that. Next week work? I can clear my schedule for a couple of days. I can show you around a little if you like.”

“Thanks Hugh I will email you my flight info as soon as I have booked things.”

HUGH HARRIS MET HIM at the Hosea Kutako International Airport and they drove along the C28 toward the Indian Ocean. “What would you like to do first. Lunch or the office to talk business?”

“How about we talk business over lunch.”

You’re my kind of man Brooks. They found a place in Swakopmond, the Village Cafe, and ordered food. Brooks went for the soup of the day and a steaming mug of coffee. Hugh went for a fish sandwich.

“So what brings you here to Namibia. You’re not on the run from the police are you?” Brooks smiled at the irony. “Not this time,” he replied. Hugh gave him a quizzical look but Brooks didn’t elaborate. He was keeping his cards close to his chest. “I’ve made some money. A lot before I first met you and some since then but I am thinking of changing businesses. I have always had a fascination with diamonds,” Brooks lied.

“Go on,” Hugh said.

“I know that I can’t compete against the Big Boys so I am seeking alternate routes. I have some connections. I have a team in place. I have some ideas. I just don’t have diamonds and I am not talking about Department Store diamonds. I need some uncut diamonds, on the cheap.” Hugh laughed out loud. “Don’t we all my friend.”

“I heard that Namibia is a good source and I am more than sure that you have some sources.” Hugh sat back in his chair. “I may have but I need to know who I am dealing with here. I know you as my mokoro driver from the Okavango Delta. Let’s both put some cards on the table.”

It was well after dark when they left the restaurant. Brooks explained the child sex business in London, plus the child smuggling business to bring in fresh girls. He explained about the houses in Hackney where the girls were kept and how he had set up a shipyard in the Bahamas to launder the money. He explained how he had run from the police and finally made it to the Okavango where he was hiding out when the two men first met.

Hugh was gobsmacked. “All this time I thought that you were just a mokoro driver, not an international businessman and fugitive.

“Wait it gets worse,” Brooks said. He told Hugh about the rhino poaching and his foundation. Finally he told Hugh about the tiger.

Hugh said, “I don’t know where to start with all of that but I have had a lot of experience with big cats. They are wise beyond their years. We don’t understand a tenth of a percent about how animals communicate in their wider world. We think that we know, but we don’t.”

“OK,” Hugh said, since you have laid your cards on the table I am going to tell you a little about what I do and about diamonds. I’m afraid that my story is not as glamorous as yours but I have made a living. A very decent living by being a middleman, and a crook. We should get along just fine.

Hugh explained the nuts and bolts of his work. Namibia is awash in diamonds. So much so that if they were all flooded onto the market at the same time the price of diamonds would plummet. Instead De Beers, the largest and most powerful diamond conglomerate in the world, controls the flow releasing just enough

to keep the demand high and therefore the price high. Brooks understood supply and demand. His problem had been a little different. He had had too much demand and not enough supply. It was a good place to be if you wanted to make some money.

“There is an underground market,” Hugh continued. I run a network of smugglers that get me the diamonds. They have many ways of getting the diamonds out of there but the most common is in a condom shoved up their bums. Girls are worth more as smugglers because they can shove one up their bum, and the other, well you know where. Brooks smiled to himself thinking of all those wedding vows and diamond rings exchanged that might have started out up a smugglers bum.

“Now I have some distributors here in Namibia, and in South Africa too. But it’s a limited market and I could use some international connections. Sounds like your backdoor channel into Vietnam might be an interesting avenue to explore.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” said Brooks.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**B**ROOKS AND ANTOINETTE were sitting in their backyard under an acacia tree. Brooks briefed her on his visit with Hugh. “There is a lot of potential there,” he told her. “But the logistics might be a little tricky.”

“I’ll say. That may be the understatement of the year. Perhaps you need to go to Vietnam and scope things out. What do you think?”

“Where will we even start? We get payments for the tusks and rhino horn from what has to be a shell company. And of course it goes to our shell company. “I think that I will start with Lucas Shilling and see if he can find out any information, Brooks said. In addition to being their lawyer Lucas had also moonlighted as their accountant making sure that the money was well hidden.

Brooks and Antoinette met with him the following morning and explained what they were trying to do. They were trying to make contact with the company in Hai Phong that bought the ivory from them. It was as good a place as any to start. They might be interested in diamonds as well. “I will see what I can do,” Lucas said.

ELENA AND HER TEAM of lawyers were building a strong case against the government of Vietnam and the city council of Hai Phong. They were facilitating the illegal trade in ivory and had to be held accountable. The video footage that Clive had collected was key evidence but it would be a tangled web to get from there to getting the UK and other governments involved. "This may take some time," the lawyers had warned.

"I don't care if it takes from now until eternity. We are going to wipe this evil off the earth," Elena declared.

Holly was still in hospital in London. Clive was commuting between Broadchurch and London. It was clear that Holly had very early stage heart disease. The question now was how to treat it. They had received an assurance from the NHS, the National Health System, that they would cover the diagnosis and treatment with a caveat that at some point they would have to review the cost of it all. "Bloody hell," Elena said when she opened the letter. "Does Boris Johnson's pathetic government not think that my daughters life is worth investing in?" She was pissed but Dr. Sibella had told Clive that his office had been in touch with a non-profit that helps out with this particular disease.

"It's the one I had mentioned previously," Clive said.

A LITTLE OVER A WEEK later Lucas Shilling called. "I have some news," he said. "Some quite good news actually. I went to university with a really brilliant Vietnamese chap. He, of course, graduated at the top of class. We have stayed in touch on and off. I asked him to help. He found the shell company quite quickly but the jibs and jabs in terms of who runs the company was a little more difficult, as would be expected. It seems the company is owned by a gentleman by the name of Mr. Vu. He incidentally had been charged with murdering his wife. Gruesome murder actually. He

pushed her down a staircase and she smashed her head on the wall at the bottom. But I digress. Through some very clever legal work, and this is why we all need good lawyers, they managed to get it ruled an accident. So, Mr. Vu owns the business but there is a young lady by the name of Lee Lee Sing that manages the daily operations."

"How do we approach them with a business opportunity and not get shot?" Brooks asked. I am sure that they are not going to answer emails or phone calls. I'm going to have to go over there. Do we even have a street address?"

"Why yes in fact we do."

"What do you think Antoinette?"

"I don't think as of now we have many options. If they are in the business of ivory I presume that we were one of their major suppliers. Once they notice their supply drying up they may be interested in diversifying their portfolio, so to speak."

"OK let's do it. I will ask Elmarie to make some arrangements."

HOLLY WAS DISCHARGED from hospital and happy to be back home. She was nervous about her treatment and about what the future held. The town of Broadchurch had heard about her diagnosis and people flooded to their home to wish her well and to drop off food. Her older sister Jess took her under her wing like a school project, happy to be getting attention without the health problem to go along with it. Elena has glad to be able to focus on her business; Clive was happy that the commute was over.

BROOKS LANDED in Hai Phong. It was a little overwhelming at first. He thought that Dhaka had been bustling but this place was like Dhaka on steroids. Or more to the point; motorcycles. They

were everywhere zig zagging in and out of the other traffic on the road with no particular organized pattern. His UBER dropped him at his hotel and he plonked down on the bed and fell asleep with his shoes still on.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**B**ROOKS ATE A LIGHT BREAKFAST at the hotel and then headed out into the madness that was Hai Phong traffic. He was still trying to formulate a plan in his head. Elmarie had organized a translator for him and he was going to meet him in a street cafe downtown. The translator was young and handsome. They talked for a while. Brooks explained a little of what their mission was all about. The translator nodded his head. It seemed like he was thrilled to be going out on an adventure.

They found the address that Lucas had given him. It was a drab, nondescript building in the factory district. “What the heck,” Brooks said to his translator. “If we can find the front door I will just walk in and ask for Lee Lee Sing.” They found the front door and Brooks asked for Lee Lee Sing. “Just one moment,” the receptionist said. She returned a couple of minutes later with a small, very beautiful woman. Her hair was pulled up into a tight ponytail and she was wearing a sensible business suit. “Hi I am Lee Lee,” she said extending her hand. This was not what Brooks had expected at all. He asked the translator to ask her if there was some place they could sit and talk. Lee Lee said. “I can talk a little English,” and motioned toward her office. It was drab but there was one object that caught Brooks’s eye.

A small skiff carved out of ivory placed beside the computer on her desk.

Brooks got right to the point. He explained that his company had been the one supplying the rhino horns and ivory for the last many years. That took Lee Lee a bit off guard. Brooks explained that they were getting out of the ivory poaching business. That also took Lee Lee a bit off guard. "What are you doing here?"

Brooks explained his change of heart after seeing the tiger in India. But he told her that he had a business proposition. A way for her to diversify her portfolio. He explained about the diamonds. He could tell that Lee Lee was interested. She nodded and then gestured for the two men to follow her. She took them to a small room within the warehouse. It was stacked floor to ceiling with boxes. She reached for a random box and opened it. There was some of the most exquisite jewelry carved out of the ivory scraps that had once been left on the floor. "I think that if we include diamonds with ivory that we might just have a winner," she said. "We can use a lot less ivory and make a lot more jewelry by integrating the two." She smiled and offered them some green tea. When Brooks left he had her full contact information and a promise of an open mind when it came to moving forward.

BROOKS WAS ELATED, but also exhausted. He returned to his hotel room to take a nap. He was surprised when he saw that it was dark out when he woke up. He pulled on his shoes - this time he had remembered to take them off - and headed out to find some dinner. There was mayhem as usual but he found a quieter place down a side street. The night was hot and he was in a celebrating mood. By the time his food arrived he had already enjoyed six cold beers. He could not believe how well things had gone. "I guess that sometimes you just need to be proactive to get things done," he thought.

Brooks was taking it all in when he noticed two girls a couple of tables over. It looked as if they were trying to catch his eye. He ordered another beer and tried to ignore them but one came over. One of them spoke a little English. She had spent some time in New York. "You look so lonely," she said. "My friend and I are wondering if we can join you." Brooks thought, "why the heck not?"

"Sure," he said. Both girls were beautiful. He was not sure if they were hookers but with one of them using her marginal English to translate they were having a pleasant conversation. Then he felt a bare foot touch his calf. Brooks froze. Crap, now what? The girl looked at him with big brown eyes. "Why don't we have some fun," the English speaking one said. "The three of us."

Brooks was about to object when one of them took him by the hand. He had had his fair share of hookers in England but this didn't feel the same. Maybe he was being naive. An UBER pulled up and they hustled Brooks into the car giggling. Brooks thought that he would go along with it; for now. That was until one of the girls pulled out her breast and had Brooks touch it. That was when he knew that he was screwed. They pulled up to a three-story tenement. "Come with," the English speaking one said. Brooks followed them up the stairs to the third floor. They let themselves into a small apartment. The English speaking one said, "do you want a beer?"

"Sure." Brooks sat on the couch looking at the small apartment while the girls were in the kitchen. Then he heard a shower turn on. He took a long hard pull on his beer. He knew that Antoinette would not be pleased. The non English speaking one came up behind him and took his hand leading him toward the shower. She was naked, as was her friend. Brooks stripped off and joined them in the small cubicle. It was a bit of a tight fit. Even though the girls were small, Brooks is a big guy. One of them produced a bar of sweet smelling soap and that was when things started. Before he

knew it they were on the bed. The eight beers and the time change between Africa and Asia had Brooks feeling a little light headed. He tried the best he could but he was no match for the two girls. He soon fell asleep.

Sometime in the early morning he woke up.

“Fuuuuck.” The girls were asleep beside him cuddled in each other’s arms. He was naked. He had absolutely no idea where his clothes were. He was sure that he might have been robbed. Brooks moved slowly. He didn’t want to wake them. They didn’t stir. He made it out of the bedroom into the living room but didn’t dare turn the light on. He fumbled around on the floor sweeping his hand from side to side hoping to find his pants. He heard some stirring from the bedroom and froze. One of the girls farted and they stirred again. Then he got lucky. His hand touched his belt and he found his pants with his shirt alongside. He quickly got dressed remembering that he had been asked to take his shoes off by the door. He thought that his cell phone should have been in his pocket but it wasn’t there. He found his shoes and pulled them on. Then he very slowly tried to open the door. It was locked. Crap. He fumbled around in the dark trying to find some kind of latch, but no luck. He wished that he could find his iPhone. He could have used the flashlight app. Twenty minutes later he was still trying to get out the door and starting to feel a little desperate. He was locked in. Brooks had always said, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” He flicked the light on. There was no latch. Just a door handle. He turned the light off. He heard some stirring from the bedroom and another little fart. Brooks stood frozen in the pitch dark. Nothing. He turned the light on again and then he saw it. At the bottom of the door there was a deadbolt. He flicked the light off and his eyes looked through a negative print image emblazoned onto his eyelids. Brooks got on his knees and found the deadbolt. He slid it quietly and it clicked as it released

the door. Brooks flicked the light on again confident that he could now escape if the girls woke up. He saw his iPhone lying on the floor where his pants had been. He scooped it up opened the door and took off down the staircase as quietly as could be.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**B**ROOKS GOT OUT ONTO the street without any idea where he was. He had not paid attention to where they were going on the way over. He was too busy paying attention to the naked breast. Her friend had taken her top off as well and before he knew it there were four breasts right in front of him. He had noticed the taxi driver glancing in the rear view mirror. Brooks knew that the drive had been around 15 minutes. The cobblestones were still warm from the heat of the day.

He was walking the deserted alleyways not sure if it was a safe neighborhood. A car pulled up slowly behind him. Brooks turned around, nervous. It was a taxi. He jumped in and gave the driver the address of his hotel. The taxi wound through the quiet streets of Hai Phong. Brooks couldn't believe that things had finally quieted down. There was no mad dashing on motorcycles. That was when Brooks realized that he didn't have any cash to pay the driver. He did his best to explain that he needed an ATM machine. The taxi driver finally figured out what he needed and pulled over.

There was a stand alone ATM near his hotel and Brooks jumped out of the taxi. He inserted his debit card in the slot and heard the faint sound of the card hitting the ground. It was a fake



ATM. They set them up at night; it was also Brook's only debit card. He had a credit card and could get money from a bank in the morning, but for now he was screwed. He looked over at the taxi. The driver had just lit a smoke. If he had been in London Brooks could have explained, but there was no way to explain in Vietnamese. He noticed a side alley and ran for it. He heard the taxi driver yell and heard him get out of the car but Brooks was in full adrenaline mode and was through the side alley and out onto the adjacent street in less than a minute. He looked behind and saw the taxi driver in hot pursuit. There was another side alley and Brooks took it. He found himself at the entrance to his hotel and nipped in through the door. The taxi driver saw him go in and followed him. Fortunately the receptionist spoke perfect English and Brooks had him explain what had happened. The man was mad but soon settled down. He agreed to come by the following morning, after Brooks had had time to go to the bank, to get his money.

Brooks slid his key in the door lock, dropped his pants, and fell into a deep, guilt ridden sleep.

THE DRIVER CAME BY the following day. Brooks paid him double the fare. The driver was an elderly man. Brooks had not noticed his age the night before. He smiled gratefully and then spoke to the receptionist. The lady at the desk translated. "Mr. Hong here," she said, "he wants to buy you lunch. He says that he understood what happened and that he would have done the same thing if it was him. He understands that you had no choice."

Brooks looked at the man. He hadn't noticed how small he was but what he did remember how fast the man could run. Even though Brooks had been in full adrenaline mode the man had been catching up on him. "Sure," Brooks said, but please tell him that I will pay for lunch and I will pay the taxi fare to get there, and back."

Brooks jumped into the back of the taxi but the driver motioned for him to sit up front. He smiled a toothless smile. "We eat," he said. They took off through the noisy streets of Hai Phong until they got closer to the edge of town. The driver pulled over. Brooks noticed a bit of a street hustle going on. He had learned along the way that Mr. Hong's first name was Thuc. Thuc gestured, "follow me." On the edge of the street market there were vendors selling fruit and vegetables along with some fish. Brooks wanted to stop but Thuc motioned, "follow me." Soon they were deep into the bowels of the food market and Brooks had noticed that the food vendors were selling some foods that he had never seen before.

Thuc motioned for him to sit down. It was a small stall, just one lady slinging batter on a hot plate. "Banh cuon," said Thuc. "Rat pho bien o vietnam." Brooks had no idea what he was talking about. A lady with long blond hair stopped by and translated, he said that it's Banh cuon and that it's very popular in Vietnam."

"What is it?" Brooks asked. She replied, "It's just a steamed rice batter filled with minced pork and wood ear mushroom topped with fried onions."

"That sounds good," Brooks said. "May I ask your name?"

"Yes I am Jessica Clayton. I am a foreign language student at UCLA in California. I am in Hai Phong to learn the language and culture of this city."

Brooks said, can you please join us? This is Thuc. He doesn't speak a word of English and I don't speak a word of Vietnamese." Jessica took Thuc by the hand. "Hbn hanh duoc gap ban," she said. Thuc smiled and Jessica took the seat next to him.

The lady came over with the Banh cuon. Brooks tried to order one more for Jessica but she said that she wasn't hungry. She said, "the Banh cuon is good but it's the dipping sauce that really counts."

Which, if I am to be truthful, accounts for why I am not hungry.” Brooks looked quizzical. The lady came back with two bowls that had some kind of broth in each, and a bowl of noodles with vegetables. Brooks smelled the broth. It was mostly fish sauce and some vegetable broth. Even though it had a pungent smell Brooks liked it. Thuc was smiling. The lady returned with a small vial filled with clear liquid. Jessica explained, “it’s an extract that comes from a giant waterbug. You need just a few drops in your broth. Brooks slipped the top off and smelled the liquid. It was quite fragrant. The lady walked away and returned with two bugs, dried, and proceeded to cut them into the bowl. Now Brooks had eaten some funky stuff in his life. His step-father Pete had once been involved in a project that culled hippopotamus’s. It’s a long story but Brooks had eaten his fair share of hippo, but never any bugs; until now. Mr. Thuc was smiling. Brooks was hesitant but then he remembered that he had run from the taxi driver and felt an obligation. He tipped the fish sauce and bugs into his bowl of vegetables and noodles and, clumsily working his chopsticks, he took a bite. It was delicious. It had a nice crunch to it plus the broth suited his palate. He loved salty food.

Thuc got up and motioned for Brooks to follow. Brooks looked to Jessica. “Can you please come with us?” he asked. Jessica followed. Up ahead was another lady frying some stuff in a skillet. Jessica said, “you might want to miss this one,” but Thuc stopped just as Brooks had started to quicken his pace. He sat down on a small blue plastic seat and gestured for Brooks and Jessica to join him. The lady was frying up some kind of fritters in batter. Jessica declined and the lady dropped two fritters in front of Brooks and Thuc. “Don’t ask what it is,” Jessica said. “That’s my advice.” Brooks took a bite. “That’s quite good,” he said. “What is it?” Jessica said, “just enjoy it. It’s all good.” There was some hot sauce on the side. It really brought out the flavor. When Brooks

heard that it was worms in a dill batter he was not shocked. Well maybe just a little but it was quite delicious.

They moved on. Jessica followed. Thuc stopped at a vendor with a huge wok with something swimming around in it. Jess said, “this is good. It’s fried quails. I am getting hungry. Do you mind if I have some as well?”

Brooks said, “are you kidding. You have been my lifeline. Order up all you want.” The quails arrived head and tail intact.” Jess said, “first you eat the head, then the breast and then the rest.” It was delicious. Brooks paid the bill. Thanks Jessica, he said. They left the market and Thuc drove him back to the hotel. “I love Vietnam,” he thought before falling into bed with a gut full of bugs, worms and quail.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



**G**ERT GOT IN TOUCH with the shipping company in Durban. “I appreciate all the shipping that you did for us over the years,” he said. “But we have ceased the ivory business. Instead we need you to take something much smaller but just as valuable. Diamonds.”

“You know that I am no longer married to my wife,” he said. “So your video is worthless. She won’t give a shit. But you know what. For a small ‘consideration’ I will be happy to take over some diamonds. At least they don’t take up so much room.”

Gert said, “OK I will talk to Brooks. I am sure that we can make an arrangement.”

A couple of weeks earlier they had received their first bunch of uncut diamonds, thankfully condom free. Hugh had tipped them into a small coffeemaker and sent the package via Fedex. The problem still to solve was where to get the diamonds cut. Hugh had warned them that it may be an issue. De Beers had the diamond cutting industry very well regulated, well to be perfectly clear, they had paid off some government officials to tighten up on the regulations to make sure that there was little or no competition.

“Why don’t we look in Vietnam,” Antoinette suggested.

“Brilliant idea.” Brooks got on his email to Lee Lee asking if she could look into things her side. She answered in the affirmative. They were nervous. Hunting and poaching was a business that they knew. Diamonds, not so much but they were learning fast. They already had a lot of money tied up and the foundation was sucking up the rest. Despite all of this Brooks was excited by the idea of a new venture. He thrived on the thrill and risk; with a subsequent payoff at the end. Antoinette was just happy that they were still able to do some good in the world.

Lee Lee emailed back a few days later. There was an outfit in Ho Chi Minh City. They were unregulated and she could not vouch for how it all worked or if they were any good. He called Hugh who was a bit skeptical at first. “The way it works here is that the diamond cutters post a bond for the value of the uncut diamonds. You don’t want to send them the diamonds and never see them or your diamonds again. At least with a bond you are covered. They will cut the diamonds to the best of their ability and you will pay them out of the bond. There is always some risk. Here De Beers has a stranglehold on things so its unlikely that there will be any financial shenanigans but in Vietnam, who knows?”

Brooks and Antoinette were worried. What if we send Gert to live there for the first few months. Just to keep an eye on things. Brooks you will have to go over to check it all out and if they want to make some kind of arrangement and agree to some kind of oversight by way of Gert then we need to have some trust in our fellow humans. “Trust but verify. Wasn’t that Gorbachev who said that?” Brooks felt quite pleased with himself. “Smarty pants,” Antoinette jabbed at him. “Quite clever, but no it was Ronald Regan.

LEE LEE TOLD MR. VU about the diamond side of things. “Clever girl,” he said. “So are they sending us uncut diamonds or the finished product because if they are sending them uncut I have a friend who runs a diamond cutting business. The best in Vietnam. Lee Lee face palmed. She should have known. She emailed Brooks. “Change of plan. My boss has it covered. You should still come over yourself, or at least send Gert. I’m sure that this is legitimate and may solve that problem.” She attached some artist’s sketches showing some delicate earrings. They were tiny tusks and in the curve were nestled small diamonds. “That’s just a start,” she wrote. My designers are going crazy. I have let my distributors know that this kind of product may be coming soon and they are going crazy for it.”

BROOKS AND GERT flew over to Hai Phong the following week to meet with Lee Lee and Mr. Vu. “So you the man who made me very rich?” Mr. Vu said shaking Brook’s hand. “Yes and I plan to make you even richer. Just so long as I also get rich along the way.” Mr. Vu smiled.

They had a meeting planned with the diamond cutter for just after lunch. He was a round man with big bulging eyes. Gert said, “I think that he can probably cut a diamond without using that magnifying machine.” He had a small operation but it was state-of-the-art and he showed them some samples. He also gave them a lesson on diamond cutting. “I’m a bit of a diamond in the rough,” Gert joked. Brooks ribbed him. The whole process was amazing. Afterwards they had some green tea and discussed terms. This was where Lee Lee came in. She understood the risk that it took to get the diamonds in the first place. Then there was shipping, cutting and making the jewelry. She knew that carving elephant tusks and uncut diamonds smuggled out of Namibia were risky businesses. After three cups of tea she had hammered out a deal.

“Not much more difficult than selling pho on the Mekong Delta,” she thought.

“The first batch will be here in about six weeks,” Brooks said. “There is one piece of the puzzle that we still need to work out. The tusks came on pallets and you had a distribution networked figured out for after the ship arrived. The diamonds come in a box containing a coffee pot. You are going to have to meet the ship in person, or send someone. Let’s work on that in the next couple of weeks.” They left the meeting feeling satisfied.

Gert said to Brooks. “Shit fuck you know what I just realized. There was no way anyone could steal an elephant tusk, that’s why we used a ship, but a coffee pot full of diamonds. Now that’s another story. Sometimes you just can’t see the nose in front of your face.”

Hugh Harris said he could supply as many diamonds as Brooks needed. Brooks consulted Lee Lee. Send as many as you can. We can definitely do the bond thing but Mr. Vu is a trusted man and he and the diamond cutter have been friends for over two decades.

“Let’s do the bond thing for a while,” Brooks said. “I was born in the morning but it wasn’t yesterday morning.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**W**INTER IN THE OKAVANGO DELTA is perfect for just about everything. It’s the dry season meaning that all animals seek out waterholes to congregate. It’s the best time to spot game. At times you can see 30 or so elephant, hundreds of wildebeest, zebra, giraffe and of course a myriad birds all gathered at the same waterhole. Brooks and Antoinette decided to treat themselves to a few days off and flew to Maun. Brook’s step-dad Pete picked them up at the landing strip. He had arranged a vehicle for them and after a quick lunch with Pete they were off. First stop, Moremi Game Reserve. It’s a place where Brooks had camped many times growing up. He knew a good spot alongside one of the fingers of the Delta. “Are we going to be safe?” Antoinette asked. Brooks nodded. This was his backyard and knew to not take any risks.

The sun was setting when they pitched their small tent. In Africa it goes from day to night in seemingly minutes. They had the tent pitched and the fire lit when the night animals started to get on the move. The heat of the day was over. They would hunt in the cool night air. Brooks poured a stiff whiskey. Antoinette opted for Marula while they still had ice. They sat back in their picnic chairs and listened contentedly to the sound of the bush

coming alive. The first distinct sounds were the hyenas, their gruesome giggles carrying on the damp night air.

“Do you think that were going to make it with this diamond idea?” Antoinette asked. Brooks shrugged. “We have made it with other businesses and done quite well. I admit that this is all new but we are a team.”

“We really are, aren’t we?” Antoinette said. “I really love you. Thank you for taking some time off to spend with me. You have been traveling too much lately.” Brooks felt a twinge of guilt. “I love you too,” he said. Brooks got up to throw a log on the fire. Antoinette prepared some steaks and a salad. They had bought ample bottles of South African wine and Books slipped the cork on one of them. He set up a little camping table and dinner was served.

LEE LEE SING WAS constantly on the phone with her distributors. Their lust for ivory was insatiable. When she spoke of ivory combined with diamonds she knew that there would be a clamor. The designs that her team had put together were exquisite. A perfect balance between smooth polished ivory and high quality diamonds in very tasteful settings. There was a brooch that was immaculate. The oval setting was studded with diamonds set in white gold. It encircled a bull elephant with massive tusks. The elephant was obviously agitated, his head was up, his ears forward. “I know that I can get a hundred grand for this in Monaco or on Rodeo Drive,” she thought.

She had met with Gert earlier in the day. He was on station to keep an eye on the diamond cutting and told her that he was very impressed. “I don’t know anything about diamonds except that I know that I can’t afford them,” he said to Lee Lee smiling.

“I don’t know much about diamonds either except that I heard

that diamonds are a girls best friend.” Gert got the reference. “Ugh if my ex-wife could see me now.”

THE EMBERS HAD DIED DOWN. Brooks said, “let’s call it a night.” Antoinette used the gerry can of water in the back of the truck to freshen up. Brooks went to the waters edge. He kept a close eye out for crocodiles. There were some hippos close by grunting and snorting. He felt good to be back in the Delta. They laid out two sleeping mats and two sleeping bags which they had zipped to each other to make one big bag. They were just dozing off when there was a soft crack close by. The tent doors were open and in the darkness four elephant glided by just a few feet from their tent. Brooks could smell their sweet dung smell. They were absolutely magnificent creatures. Antoinette watched in horror and then started to weep silently. “How did we ever do what we did to those magnificent creatures?”

“We had a foundation to fund.” Brooks knew that his words rang hollow. He had been so detached from the actual animals by ordering up the slaughters looking through the lens of his drone. His guilt was real. The four elephant disappeared into the dark night.

In the distance a lion roared. Antoinette felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up strait. There was something so primal about the sound. Brooks said, “don’t worry he’s probably over a mile away. Their roars carry far on the night air.” A mile didn’t seem far enough for Antoinette. “Let’s at least zip up the tent flaps.” The heady feeling of a few drinks and a bottle of wine was long gone. She was stone cold sober. After a while she heard Brooks snoring lightly. “How can he sleep?” She thought. She lay there eyes wide open staring at the top of the tent. After a while her lids started to droop and she finally fell into a fitful sleep.

It was just starting to get light when Brooks felt a warm body next to him. He smiled to himself and snuggled closer. Then his eyes shot wide open. Antoinette was on the other side of him. He lay perfectly still. Then a long tongue started to lap at the dew that had collected on the tent overnight. It was a lioness. Antoinette was still asleep; thankfully. Brooks could tell that there was more than one lion. There was some general grunting among the pride. Then some more licking of dew. Antoinette was starting to wake up. "Darling," Brooks said softly. "Lay very still. Don't even blink."

"What's going on?" Through her sleepy eyes she could see the outline of some animal outside the tent. "Brooks what is it?" She whispered.

"It's a lioness, but don't worry she's friendly. We have been sleeping together for the last couple of hours." He heard Antoinette sigh softly beside him.

The sun rose and the pride started to get restless. Brooks could feel movement and his lioness friend moved off. "She's run out of dew," Brooks guessed. Ten minutes later they could hear the pride move on. Brooks tentatively unzipped the tent. The coast was clear. He climbed out and could see where the grass was flattened from where the pride had rested. "Jesus Christ Brooks Dintwa. Jesus Christ. I don't know what else to say. That was both terrifying and exhilarating. I have never felt so alive on the brink of being so dead."

Brooks kissed her. "This is the kind of thing that happens in the bush. The animals will only bother you when they feel threatened. Otherwise they will move on. They prefer small impala to beautiful South African ladies."

They ate breakfast and cleared camp. "I have a very special place where I want to take you," Brooks said. "If we move slowly

we will be there by lunchtime. There is a lot of game to see in this area.

The Okavango Delta is mainly flat but there are some high spots and Brooks stopped the truck. The store-bought sandwiches were still good and there was some ice left in the cooler. Brooks had secretly placed a bottle of excellent white wine on ice before they left their overnight camp. They brought that along with them with two plastic cups and started trudging up the hill. "My Step Dad used to bring me and Thalitha up here often when we were kids. Just you wait until you see the view."

It didn't take them very long to get to the top but the view stretched as far as the eye could see. "Oh wow," Antoinette said. "This is beautiful."

"Yes it's a special place and it's going to be even more special after I open this bottle of wine. The wine was chilled. It was one of Brook's favorite. Klein Constantia Sauvignon Blanc. It came from a small vineyard on the slopes of Constantiaberg just outside of Cape Town. They toasted. Antoinette said, "to our amazing life. What fun we have together." Brooks clicked her glass. "Now your toast," Antoinette said.

"To our amazing life that we have together. I hope that we will spend the rest of it together. Will you marry me?"

"Yes." Her answer was as simple as Brooks had hoped that it would be.

They got married two days later in a simple ceremony with a Justice of the Peace presiding and stepdad Pete the only invited guest. "To Daisy," was their toast.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



**T**HE DIAMOND SMUGGLING business was starting to flow. Hugh had hired additional smugglers (and bought more condoms). There was a steady flow of uncut diamonds that were placed in coffeemakers and drop-shipped to Hai Phong thanks to Fed Ex. The diamond cutters did their magic and passed the cut diamonds along to Lee Lee. Her team had started to make the jewelry and their workmanship was beyond exquisite. The first shipment went to her distributor in Monaco. He had been a loyal customer and Lee Lee wanted to reward him. “These are going to be collectors items,” she said.

“I know.”

Brooks and Mrs. Dintwa returned to work. Their bank levels were getting low and the foundation was not giving out as much money as it used to. Elmarie said that she had received a number of calls from a gentleman in England, Dr. Sibella from the All Saints Hospital. They had already received two grants, one for \$100,000 and a second for \$120,00 but were hoping for more. They had a little girl with heart disease and the NHS was balking at the cost of her treatment. “How much?” Brooks asked.

“For now just \$20,000.” Brooks looked at Antoinette. She



nodded. "Have Lucas draft up a money transfer. It's the least we can do." Brooks knew that it was the last twenty thousand in the foundation's account. Their own account was very low but they were still able to make payroll; just. Brooks knew that he could pay Elmarie in Nandos with an IOU.

THE DISTRIBUTOR in Southern France was a very attractive gay man who knew his stuff. His preferred dress wear were yellow Pierre Cardin suits. He knew his clients. His first stop was Misaki Monaco, a very high end jewelry store on Avenue Albert downtown Monaco close to the Casino. Madame Juliette knew her stuff. She knew that the first thing that people wanted to do with their winnings was to spend them and her small shop was just a hop, skip and a jump away from the roulette tables. Best yet, they were usually more than a little drunk and that always helped loosen up the purse strings. Her shop was also just a block from the harbor where massive SuperYachts would come and go with regularity. The flavor of the day to the owner of the yacht would suggest a walk and they would usually end up in front of Madame Juliette's shop. It was like shooting ducks in an enclosed pond.

The distributor, Monsieur Le Blanc, knew better than to just show up with samples. What if he was robbed, mon dieu. He always created some theatre and showed up with two hired gendarmes to escort him into the back of the small jewelry store. He opened his display case and Madame Juliette was enthralled. "Monsieur Le Blanc, how much of this can you get me. Just last week I had Paris Hilton in here looking for something ivory. These may be too refined for her. She's a bit gaudy, you know what I mean, but J Lo was also in here and this would perfect to her taste. "There is a limited supply. Let them know that. That will bring a premium price." Madame Juliette said, "that's my business and not yours.

ACROSS THE OCEAN and across America there was Rodeo Drive, the place where movie stars and Hollywood celebrities shopped. A single ceramic soup bowl went way north of six hundred dollars, but all the customers left feeling like they had got a steal. The higher the price, the more they wanted it. There were no less than five jewelry shops on the strip and they all wanted the latest ivory and diamonds jewelry. They were prepared to outbid each other.

THEN THE MONEY STARTED to flow. It was like a spigot had been opened. Lee Lee expanded her premises to a larger factory. She hired more designers and expanded her network of distributors. Mr. Vu was happy. He was getting old and that silly nonsense of his dead wife was starting to have cracks in the legal case. That gave him a headache. His main job was to bring green tea to the designers and a special cup, in a beautiful teapot, to Lee Lee.

Brooks and Antoinette also started to watch the money roll in. They lived frugally. No Tesla for Brooks, unlike his days in London. They were happy. Lucas Shilling had received a heartfelt letter, yes a letter, from a family in England whose 12 year old daughter Holly was benefitting from a grant from the International Association for Relief for Children with Heart Disease Foundation. He showed the letter to Brooks and Antoinette and they were thrilled. Their hard work was paying off. Antoinette wanted to write them back but Lucas said that it would not be appropriate. Grants from the foundation needed to remain anonymous.

PARIS HELD ITS FIRST real big fashion show since Covid had shut things down. Designer Gaultier was on edge. He wanted to make a splash, to make a statement, but unlike most of his fellow designers he was not beyond upsetting some people. He

remembered the whole mess around women wearing fur. “Save the raccoon. Save the beaver. Save the rat. What a load of crap,” he thought. “It should have been shave the beaver,” he told his assistant. It was time to mix things up a little. His top model was a stick insect who went by the name of Louise Fallain. She was as thin as a rail but had the most exquisite cheekbones and skin the color of honey. He dressed her in a low-cut silk blouse and very tight elephant toned stretch pants. Her hair was pulled back to accentuate her neck; where hung an intricately crafted ivory tusk studded with diamonds.

THERE WAS NOW NO stopping the amount of money coming into the foundation. Lee Lee had expanded again and hired more designers. The press was in an uproar. The media exposure only turned on the money spigot. Every fake boobed trophy wife wanted to wear the same jewelry as Louise Fallain.

BROOKS AND ANTOINETTE sat outside their acacia tree in their yard. For a change a cool wind blew through the trees. Brooks had three fingers of whiskey; Antoinette, a Marula on ice. The mood was good. Brooks was a very astute businessman and had set things up to run like a well oiled machine. “So far so good,” he said taking Antoinette by the hand. “Yup,” she replied. “So far so good.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

MR. VU RECEIVED A CALL from his lawyer. “They are going to reopen the case. Your wife’s children are not satisfied and have been petitioning the court for the last two years. They hired a ‘splatter evidence’ expert and he has convinced the judge that maybe your wife may not not have slipped, but rather she was pushed.”

“Splatter evidence? What’s that?”

“It’s blood evidence. The way blood is spread when there is some kind of blunt trauma.”

“Well that’s just nonsense,” Mr. Vu said. “She slipped and fell.”

“Yes you know that and I know that but there are still some questions.”

“What about all the money I paid?”

“Well that may now be a liability. They have managed to trace the money back to you. It was a payoff, you know?”

“Yes.”

“We can put this off for a few months but at some point the court is going to summon you for another deposition. If they have new evidence they will push to reopen the case. And I don’t

mean to upset you but the person that they have hired to present the splatter evidence is the best there is. He's actually Vietnamese but has lived in the United States for most of his life."

Mr. Vu went to see Lee Lee. He came into her office with her tea. His head was down. "What's going on Mr. Vu? You don't look too well."

"I'm alright," he said. But he didn't leave the office. "What's going on?" Lee Lee asked. "Nothing." Lee Lee came over to him and put her arms around him.

"I can help," she said.

Mr. Vu handed her a piece of paper with a phone number on it. "Please call this man. Tell him who you are. Tell him it's about the death of my wife."

LEE LEE HAD FINALLY FOUND a decent boyfriend. The problem was her, not them. The rape's had closed her down and she didn't trust anyone. It had been over ten years and she was still shut down. Since her Mom had moved to Hai Phong a few years earlier she had found solace in her company but she never, not even once, hinted at what had happened to her. She was still coming over once a week and making noodles for Mr. Vu. Life had been good until this morning when Mr. Vu came into her office.

Lee Lee was not getting rich off the business. It was not her thing. She could broker any kind of deal but usually left herself out of the equation. It was a conscious decision. Her happiness came from her days selling pho on the Mekong Delta. It did not come from being wealthy. But now she needed help. Mr. Vu needed help and she was about to call in her chips.

She called Detective Xiao, a good friend. He had been a client of hers in the days when she sold pho from her skiff. He too had

moved to Hai Phong after he retired. Detective Xiao was getting well up in age but agreed to a meeting. Lee Lee didn't know much about the case but asked if he could please look into it to see if there was anything that Lee Lee could do to help.

She also called the number that Mr. Vu had given her. She told the man that Mr. Vu was in trouble and needed his help, that it was about the death of his wife. "Ah yes," the man replied. "Please tell Mr. Vu that I will take care of things."

HER BOYFRIEND WAS CONCERNED. "You look worried, Lee lee," he said.

"I am a little."

"Is there anything that you want to talk about?"

"No." She was shutting down again, quite able to deal with her own problems, not needing anyone, or so she told herself. Her boyfriend put his arms around her. It was a simple and sweet gesture. Lee Lee melted into his arms. She had been working long hours for a long time. She leaned into him. "I can't tell you now but I promise that I will."

THE SPATTER EVIDENCE was confusing. Detective Xiao tried to explain it to Lee Lee. "You see there are various patterns that happen to blood when there is some kind of blunt trauma, especially head trauma. You have to look at how far the blood spatters. If you take an ax and hit someone on the head there is a sharp cut and not much splatter," the expert said. "But if the back of the head hits a wall the blood goes everywhere. It spatters. The more force that the head hits the wall with, the more it spatters."

"OK so what does that mean?" Lee Lee asked.

"Well this is the main reason why the judge is going to agree

to reopening the case. The prosecution have figured out at what velocity a body would have fallen at if the person had tripped and fallen, and then extrapolated a blood splatter pattern based on that scenario. They have also figured out what would happen if a person was pushed. That would increase the velocity of the falling body and therefore increase the blood spatter pattern. In Mrs. Vu's case there was blood on the ceiling, the adjacent wall and all over the staircase. It's fairly convincing evidence that shows that Mrs. Vu was pushed."

MRS. VU HAD FOUR CHILDREN from a previous marriage when she married Mr. Vu. They never liked or trusted their new step-father. Now they were out to get him once and for all. He had most definitely killed their mother, the evidence was overwhelming. The judge had agreed to reopen the case and the children were on hand. They were staying at a small hotel near the courthouse, nothing fancy. Mr. Vu's contact, the one that Lee Lee had called, had staked out the hotel for a week and discovered that the children loved pizza and ordered it every night; from the same place; at the same time. On this particular night Mr. Vu's contact waited in a small alley close to the hotel. The pizza deliveryman used a bicycle because the pizzeria was close to the hotel and he could avoid the madness of the motorcycle traffic by pedaling along the sidewalk. Clever. He was almost at the hotel when someone grabbed him and yanked him off his bike and dragged him into the alley. He felt a heavy blow and was knocked unconscious. When he came too a few minutes later and he had been stripped to his underwear. His bike was gone, along with the pizzas.

Mr. Vu's contact had the bike, the uniform, and the pizzas which were still hot and smelled delicious. He opened each box and sprinkled what looked like Parmesan cheese on each pizza. It wasn't Parmesan, it was strychnine designed to stop the heart

from beating. The time between taking the first bite and dying would be painful but that was not Mr. Vu's contact's problem. He had an order and he was carrying it out. The pizza delivery man, despite being knocked unconscious, figured that there was some dirty business going on. It was less than two blocks from the narrow alley where he had been mugged, to the hotel, and he ran for it, in his undies and T-shirt. He ran right past reception and up the stairs. He had delivered pizza to the children a few times and knew which door to pound on. "Don't eat the pizza," he yelled. "Don't eat the pizza." The four children were startled. There was their pizza delivery man in their hotel room, almost naked, yelling. The oldest daughter was about to take a bite of the pizza when the pizza delivery man lunged at her. "Don't eat the pizza." He knocked the slice of pepperoni and mushrooms to the floor. It landed with a splat. "I was mugged. Someone might have tampered with your pizza." He took my uniform, and added as an afterthought, "also my bike."

The pizza was analyzed and sure enough there were strong traces of strychnine on each slice. Pizza delivery man had thwarted an assassination attempt. This would not help Mr. Vu's case, not one little bit.

THE COURT CASE WAS relatively short. Mr. Vu had led a secret life and no one was really interested in some old man that had killed his wife. It happened all the time. Lee Lee and her mother sat in court every day. Detective Xiao had found a really good lawyer who argued that Mr. Vu was too old to have done what the court was accusing him of. He could not possibly have shoved her down the staircase with such force. Then the lawyers for the state produced some rather startling evidence. They had followed the money and found that Mr. Vu was one of the biggest ivory traders in the world. That he had run an illegal rhino horn and

ivory trading business and that his now dead wife was going to turn him in. That was the motive. It didn't matter that Mrs. Vu had been having an affair with the chicken seller who worked the corner of Nguyen Vann Thuc and Dai Thang. Mr. Vu knew about it but chose to say nothing; for five years, or it might have been four, he wasn't sure.

MR. VU'S LAWYER convinced the judge to postpone the sentencing even though the evidence was overwhelming. There had been a previous trial where Mr. Vu had been acquitted so the judge agreed. What about the attempted assassination of Mrs. Vu's children? "There is no evidence, yet, that Mr. Vu was involved in that," the judge said. "But there will be a full investigation. I am granting a ten-day extension. He will be released on bail. He needs to surrender his passport."

LEE LEE WAS NOT VERY GOOD at sex. That night she was even less so. Her mind was distracted. Her boyfriend was pissed. It was not his fault. She was restless. "I am going to get a glass of water," she said.

"Ok."

Lee Lee went into the kitchen and poured herself a long cold glass. It went down nice and cool. Then she panicked. She ran outside and hailed a taxi. UBER would have been too slow. She arrived at their factory. It was dark out and Lee Lee felt uneasy. She knew what she was going to find and she was right. She found Mr. Vu hanging from a rafter above the desk in her office.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THERE WAS A BRIEF INVESTIGATION into Mr. Vu's business but rhino horn and ivory trading was, ironically, almost a protected species in Vietnam. Mr. Vu was dead. The show had to keep going on. Lee Lee was devastated and threw herself into her work. She demanded more from her workers. For a few weeks she yelled at her designers but then quickly realized that they were the heart and soul of the business, well, along with the carvers who were producing the most intricate and exquisite pieces of jewelry. Lee Lee calmed down.

Her boyfriend left her.

The factory now covered almost two city blocks. She still had sources bringing in rhino horn and tusks but she was relying less and less on the amount of ivory. Jewelry does not need that much ivory and her focus was almost all on making jewelry. She was now exporting all over the world. There was a buyer in Sydney, Australia who was begging for more product. He had jewelry stores all over the country and was calling her daily for new jewelry. Australia was newly rich, even by European standards, and the newly rich were gagging to show off just how rich they were. They would pay just about anything for one of her pieces.

Lee Lee still lived frugally in a small apartment that oddly felt bigger once her boyfriend had taken his stuff and moved out. Her Mom was getting frail. The death of Mr. Vu had really affected her. She was still making noodles but she missed her visits with Mr. Vu. The days of her small food stand seemed like a distant memory. “Lee Lee,” she said. “Remember when I added cinnamon basil to the noodle soup how everyone went crazy for it?”

“Yes Mom,” Lee Lee replied. “Those were good times.”

HUGH HARRIS WAS ON the phone to Brooks. “Mate I need your help,” he said. “They have taken in one of my smugglers. They found a half million rands of diamonds in her pussy. And they haven’t even looked in her arse yet.”

“What can I do?”

“She needs a lawyer. A good one. I’m afraid that I made some bad investments recently and I can’t afford to pay for one. Well, I can afford to pay for a crap lawyer but I am worried that this may all come down like a house of cards if we can’t spring her out of custody and they go after some of the other smugglers.”

“I can help. Do you know the name of a good lawyer there in Swakopmund?”

“Yes, a fellow by the name of Sid Shister. Yes I know that his name doesn’t instill much confidence but he’s the best. I will text you his number.”

Brooks called Shister. “Yes I heard about this situation from your friend Harris,” Shister said. “You see the problem is that these smugglers are getting more and more brazen. The authorities want to make an example out of Ms. Chabalala. I can help. It will cost some money to pay off some of the officials but you and

Mr. Harris are going to have to tighten ship, so to speak.” Shister named his fee and Brooks wired him the money. A day later Ms. Chabalala was released from custody. They had confiscated the diamonds.

Hugh called Brooks again. “Thank you,” he said. “I have an idea how to end all of these problems with the authorities. The buggers. All they want is money. They don’t care about the diamonds. They are a corrupt bunch. They arrested Chabalala because they are after kickbacks. We might have to factor this into the price of doing business. I can have Shister keep his ear to the ground and see who needs what, if you know what I mean.” Brooks shrugged and said, “let me know what you find out.”

HOLLY WAS RESPONDING WELL to the medication. Her blood pressure was back to normal and Dr. Sibella told Clive and Elena that there had been no further progression of the disease in the last year. He asked if they would be willing to tell their story to Science and Medical News, a publication that focused on scientific breakthroughs in the medical field. “How would that happen?” Clive asked.

“I can have one of their correspondents make contact with you and Elena and set up a time for an interview. You can tell them what happened, the concerns that you had when Holly was ill and then diagnosed, and how things are progressing. You might even want to mention that there has been an anonymous Foundation that has helped so much financially.”

Clive looked at Elena. “Yes we can do that,” he said. “We are so grateful for everything that you and your team have done for Holly and we are grateful to the Foundation for helping.”

The correspondent called a week later. They had set up a Zoom call so the three of them could be on the call and see each

other. Clive and Elena talked frankly about how scared they were when Holly was first diagnosed. They had never heard of heart disease in children. They were scared about what the future held not only for Holly, but also for their whole family. They knew that the cost of treatment would escalate over time and they were terrified that they may not be able to pay for it. “I understand there has been an anonymous Foundation that has helped cover some of Holly’s medical costs,” the correspondent said. “They have been an absolute godsend,” Elena replied.

“Do you know the name of the Foundation so that we can give them a mention in the article?”

“No, they are in contact with Doctor Sibella and want to remain anonymous. We did write them a letter to thank them but Doctor Sibella mailed it and we never received a reply.”

BROOKS, WITH THE HELP of Sid Shister, arranged a monthly wire transfer into a secret bank account in South Africa. It could be accessed by various Namibian officials. It was their problem how they distributed the cash. It seemed to do the trick. Ms. Chabalala and her fellow smugglers were not harassed again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

JENNY GRIGGS GREW UP in Australia, Kalgoorlie to be specific. In the middle of nowhere to be more specific. On the edge of the Nullabor Plain to be even more specific. She grew up covered in red dirt and usually a rash from the intense heat. Her friends called her Griggysy. Everyone in Kalgoorlie had a nickname and she didn’t mind hers. The schoolhouse was always hot and she was used to sweat trickling down her legs as she tried to study math. She hated math. But she loved English. She loved words. She loved the way that she could string them together to make a sentence that made sense, at least to her.

“Griggysy,” her teacher would say. “You’ve got quite a way with words. But I don’t think that your parents would approve of some of your writing. Jenny would blink back at her teacher. “But Prime Minister Hawke is a bullshit artist. Everyone knows that.”

“Yes we do know that but it’s the latter part of bull that’s not allowed to be spoken on school grounds. You know the rules, don’t you?”

“Yes M’am. I’m sorry. But he really is a bullshit artist and he’s conning the aborigines into taking a rotten deal. He knows what tribal lands are and what they are worth but he and his stupid

cabinet have twisted the legislation into such a pretzel that no one can understand any of it, least of all the aborigines. Their leaders are practically illiterate and Prime Minister Hawke knows that.”

“I know that you know your stuff Ms. Griggs but this class is not only about you but about all the students, even some who find literature fun.”

“Hard to believe,” Griggsy said under her breath.

NEWS WIRE SERVICES was an up and coming online news outlet. It was started by two brothers in their grandma’s apartment. She had a spare room and liked their company. The brothers wired the place with the best high speed internet and their grandma’s spare room looked like a command center about ready to launch the space shuttle. They were looking to break into the lucrative world of online news in a fast paced world. All they needed were correspondents willing to work for a penny a word, payable in 30 days.

GRIGGSY FOUND THEM through a chat space for up and coming journalists. She was still indignant about the plight of the Aborigines even though by now she was in her late teens and the conversation with her fifth grade teacher was a distant memory. She had blossomed into a beautiful young woman, long tan legs, a whack of bleached blond hair and perky boobs that had men walking into lampposts. She had moved from Kalgoorlie to Fremantle and found a job waitressing at the Fish Hook Lodge and Marina, a place right on the beach just south of the city. It specialized in the local catch of the day as the chef’s special, but also offered steak and other food that any red blooded Australia would enjoy. Their specialty, other than the fish of course, was the size of the drinks they poured. The owner had once been to

Ft. Lauderdale and came to understand that booze is cheap. And ice is cheap. He told his bar tenders to fill the pint glasses all the way to the brim with ice, fill it with whatever alcohol had been ordered and splash a little mixer over the top. It worked like a charm. Two drinks in and the customers were leaving with some new lady draped on their arm. They might be leaving early, but he knew that they would be back the next day. Fish Hook Lodge and Marina was the most popular pick-up place on the whole west coast of Australia.

Griggsy prided herself in never having gone home with a customer. There had been hundreds of offers, some from very good looking men and it was not that she was a prude; she was a professional and this was her job, not her hobby. She worked late and when she got home she was full of adrenaline. She would get in her chat rooms or on the internet and surf until the sun was starting to rise over the palms that marked the edge of the property where she was renting a bungalow.

She started to correspond with the brothers. She wanted to air the grievances of the aborigines to a broader audience. At first the brothers were skeptical. Who in their audience would care about an indigenous people living on the other side of the world? But then they realized that Jennifer Griggs could write; with clarity and compassion. They published a few of her articles and the social media about them was at first lackluster, but it soon started to pick up. Griggsy was starting to develop a following and it was a fast growing following. The brothers took notice.

President Trump had just taken office and the world shifted massively on its axis. He was starting to order that children be separated from their parents at the southern border of the United States and that the children be kept in cages. The brothers were horrified. “We need to tell this story to the world. We need someone who can feel this disgrace at a bone marrow level.”



“What about Jennifer Griggs?”

“Brilliant.” They made Griggsy an offer. It wasn’t much but it did include an airfare and a bed in Boston. Griggsy thought about the offer for a nano second and hit the send button. “When do I start?”

She landed at Logan Airport a week later. It was February and a cold nor’easter was howling down Commonwealth Avenue. Griggsy had never experienced temperatures below 70 Fahrenheit. “What the fuck have I just done?” She asked herself.

“Don’t worry it will get warmer,” one of the brothers said.

“When?”

“In June, hopefully.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

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HER FIRST REPORT got some online traction but not as much as the brothers had hoped it would. She had written beautifully and articulately about the terrible situation that was developing along the Mexico border but it lacked heart; and soul.

“How do you expect me to write with heart and soul when I have never been to the cages to see first hand what’s going on. I can watch CNN and the other news outlets and make up a story but I need to see first hand what’s happening. I won’t cost you much money. I just need an air ticket and if you can find one, a photographer. We will share a Motel 6.” The brothers agreed and the following day she flew out just ahead of an ice storm that was about to freeze the city to a standstill.

Griggsy and her cameraman Ag Agmeco landed in Texas and made their way to Brownsville where one of the biggest detention centers was located. The guards told her that there was no access but she flashed her press credentials and the guards told her, with even more force, that she would not have any access. “Fuckers.” They had underestimated Jennifer Griggs from Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. She waited until it was dark and the guards were drowsy. The place was lit up like Gillette stadium on a Sunday evening, but defenses were down and she was able

to get past the first perimeter of guards without any problem. Ag had ditched his fancy camera equipment in favor of a couple of iPhone's and they managed to get closer to the cages without getting spotted. What Jennifer Griggs saw shook her to the bone. There were hundreds of small children huddled together sleeping on the dirt floor. Some had covers, most didn't. Ag got what he needed and they slipped out of there without being seen.

News Wire Services published the photos and her story and paid for some social media spread to promote it. Other journalists had published pictures and news stories but none had the close up photos that Ag had captured and none had the compassion that came through in the writing as much as the story that Griggsey had told. The news piece went viral and the world was outraged. The brothers were not resting on their laurels. "We need more," they said. The first night had been a fluke. With most news outlets carrying their story and Trump raging in the White House things looked a lot different when Griggsey and Ag tried to get close for a second time. They watched from afar as other journalists tried to get a scoop just like they had, but were rebuffed. It wasn't going to happen. The disgrace that was kids locked in cages was going to be well guarded.

JENNY GRIGGS ESTABLISHED herself as a leading voice on the issue of migrants at the southern border. Her reporting, along with her photographer Ag Agmeco's photos was getting picked up by all the major news outlets and News Wire Services was riding the wave. At the end of 2018 she was nominated for a Peabody Award, but she did not win. It didn't matter to her. She was making a name for herself and more importantly, she was doing some good in the world. On her third visit to Brownsville, after a long night staking out the detention centers, and admittedly after she and Ag had hammered down a six pack of Yuengling; each,

they ended up in the same bed. For Griggsey it was more about relieving stress. She had no idea that Ag had fallen in love with her but the following evening when Ag suggested a rerun of the previous evening she didn't say no.

After a couple of months of covering the kids in cages story they flew back to Boston and one night, after filing three stories, one with News Wire Services, another with Science and Medical News and the third with the Associated Press, she found herself wrapped around the toilet bowl throwing up. She had no idea what she might have eaten but she was not well. The nausea continued for a week before she called her doctor. "I don't mean to be too forward here," her doctor said, "but have you taken a pregnancy test?" She stopped by her local CVS to pick up a test pack and peed on the stick. Jenny Griggs from Kalgoorlie, Western Australia was with child. The little blue line didn't lie.

"Fuck."

THE ARTICLE IN SCIENCE and Medical News was published. It was a heartfelt piece written by a master, who, despite throwing up a few times a day, had captured the pain and anxiety of parents who had a child with heart disease. Jenny had taken leave from News Wire Services in the weeks leading up to the birth of her baby, and had freelanced the article in Science and Medical News. Her story had even more compassion than it usually would have because Griggsey was feeling emotional. Ag had suggested that they tie the knot to make them legitimate parents, but Jenny told him that they could keep having sex but that she was not ready to commit to being someone's wife.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

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**L**EE LEE WAS TAKING SOME TIME for herself. It didn't happen very often but her Mom was getting more frail by the day and years of working long days and nights and weekends were starting to take it's toll. One night, while working late, she randomly clicked on Priceline and an ad for a resort and spa on the island of Tuan Chau popped up. She saw the white sandy beaches and the beautifully appointed accommodations and clicked the "book now" button. She was not sure why she was doing it, the business needed her more than ever, but without thinking too much she entered her credit card information and booked a week in one of their more expensive rooms.

Lee Lee checked in and unpacked her bags. The place was exquisite. She made a reservation for a massage and relaxed reading some financial reports for the company. The company was printing money. Brooks had recently suggested that she might want to add opals to her jewelry line. He had a connection in Australia where most of the world's opal is mined. Brooks being Brooks he was not looking at bringing in opals through mainstream channels. He had a connection that was mining them and looking for outlets where he could sell them and avoid paying taxes.

The beach in front of her room was lined with palm trees that stretched as far as she could see. Lee Lee took a walk and found a small restaurant that specialized in fish. Their sign out front said that their catch-of-the-day would have been caught within the last two hours. She ordered a plate of sardines and a Saigon Red, a local beer. The Saigon Red went down 'singing hymns' as Mr. Vu liked to say. It was delicious and soon she was in a mellow mood. She ordered another beer and felt the weight of the world slip from her shoulders. Her waitress was tall and lean and wearing a very short skirt and Lee Lee was sure that she was flirting with her. She ordered another beer which the waitress dropped off and said, "this beer is on me, not literally, but you know..." Lee Lee knew and she felt a slight tingle in her tummy. They both laughed. It had never occurred to Lee Lee that she might be gay, in fact she was sure that she was not, but the waitress's dark brown eyes and honey skin were almost irresistible. She knew that she had a massage appointment and would have to leave soon but she asked the waitress, whose name by now she knew was Tam, "are you working the dinner shift as well?"

"Yes."

BROOKS HAD MET Craig Dundee randomly in a bar in Swakopmund. Brooks had been visiting Hugh Harris and late one night, when he couldn't sleep, he had pulled his pants and shoes on and gone to the Tiger Reef Bar and Grill, a short walk from his hotel. The place was clearing out and there was space at the bar so Brooks took a seat and ordered a beer. The beer was purely medicinal; he wanted to get to sleep but after his third he was more wide awake than ever. The bloke at the end of the bar strolled over. "Giddyay," he said. "My name's Craig." They talked for a while and pretty soon Craig opened up about his opal business. He was in Swakopmund on the chance that

he might be able to get into diamonds. They agreed to meet for dinner the following evening.

LEE LEE WAS FACE DOWN on the massage table. She had a small towel draped across her backside and that was it. The room smelled amazing, a combination of tulips and nectarines. The masseuse was a strong Slovak woman who had been in the business for a dozen years. She knew her trade. She managed to ease the knots from Lee Lee's shoulders and was working her way down her back. Lee Lee had rarely felt so content. Her mind was drifting to the waitress at the restaurant when she felt the towel being removed. She stiffened slightly but quickly relaxed again and subconsciously spread her legs; just a little. The masseuse took it slowly. She was a professional. She worked Lee Lee's lower back then her upper thighs gently trying to measure any level of interest on Lee Lee's part. There was none until the masseuse let her hand lightly touch her vagina. It was barely a touch, more like a light breeze passing, but Lee Lee felt it and her body was on fire. The Slovak masseuse tried one more time but Lee Lee had closed her legs. The masseuse moved lower to her calves, which felt amazing. It was when the masseuse got to her toes that she knew it was over. The woman was rubbing oil on her feet taking one toe at a time to gently rub the oil into her skin. Lee Lee turned over and spread her legs. It was then and there that she understood why she had been a lousy lover to all her boyfriends.

BROOKS AND CRAIG met the following evening for dinner. Craig was originally from Sydney, Bondi Beach to be exact. He had surfed since he was able to walk but in his late teens he decided that he wanted to go on a 'walkabout.' While walkabout's were part of the Aboriginal culture, more and more young white Australians

were taking time off to go and find themselves. Craig was not looking for any kind of spiritual awakening, he was more looking to break his ties with home, have some fun, and hopefully have some adventures along the way. Six months later he wound up in the Outback town of Coober Pedy which was about 400 miles south of Alice Springs. There was not much there until Craig realized that most of the houses were built underground. It was baking hot in the Outback and the best way to keep cool was to build underground. He found himself a room and settled into enjoying the town. It was just the kind of place he liked. Rough, minimalist and with a promise of riches. He soon found a way to make some money, the only way most people make money in Coober Pedy; mining opals.

LEE LEE TOOK A LONG NAP. She could not believe what had just happened. There was no love involved, just lust, and the Slovak masseuse knew how to please a lady. She awoke just as the sun was setting feeling better than she had felt in a decade. She pushed Mr. Vu's suicide and her mothers failing health out of her mind as she prepared to go out for dinner. Lee Lee took longer than usual to get ready. She rarely wore make-up but on this night she added some eye shadow and moisturized her skin to the point where it could not take any more Oil of Olay. Lee Lee was so used to her hair being pulled back into a tight ponytail that when she let it fall loose it felt strange; and very feminine.

She walked along the beach, the air feeling cooler. There was a strong smell of frangipani as the flowers closed for the evening emitting their fragrance which carried on the light night breeze. As she got closer to the restaurant she could see Tam moving from table to table. She had not noticed it earlier but there was an elegance about the way she managed to work the restaurant. Lee Lee watched for a while from behind a palm tree and she noticed

that every now and then Tam would look her way. She was sure that Tam could not see her in the shadows. She felt a warmth in her tummy when she realized that Tam was probably looking to see if she was coming to dinner.

LEE LEE'S MOM was walking from her bedroom to the bathroom when she collapsed. She had gone to bed early, well very early to be exact. It was still light out but she was not feeling well. The couple in the downstairs apartment heard the noise. Lee Lee had given them a key to the apartment and they rushed in to find Lee Lee's mom on the floor in a fetal position. She had a pulse, barely. She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

LEE LEE BRUSHED THE HAIR off her face and was about to head toward the restaurant when her phone lit up. Her heart sank. She recognized the number. She fell to her knees sobbing as she learned that her Mom had moved on beyond her noodle shop, beyond the fun times she had shared with Lee Lee, beyond the Mekong Delta to a place where the air is spiced with cinnamon basil.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

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CNN INTERNATIONAL REACHED OUT to the editor of Science and Medical News. Their medical correspondent had read the article that Jenny Griggs had written and they were interested in learning more about childhood heart disease. They called Jenny at a bad time. She was wrapped around the toilet bowl throwing up. She saw her phone light up but it was from a blocked number so she ignored it. She always took calls. “You never know,” she once told Ag, “one phone call can lead you to a story that might change your life.” The call went to voicemail.

Jenny wiped the spit from her chin and drank some water to get rid of the sour taste in her mouth. She swiped up on her iPhone and listened to the message. “Hi Ms. Griggs, this is Elizabeth Cohen. I am a medical correspondent at CNN.” She didn’t mention that she was their Senior Medical Correspondent. “I read your article in Science and Medical News. To be honest I was unaware of the prevalence of childhood heart disease and would love to talk to you more if possible.” She left a callback number.

Jenny waited until she felt that there would be a gap between visits to the bathroom and returned the call. “Hi, I’m Jenny Griggs,” she said. The lady on the other end of the call had a soft, reassuring voice.

“Ms. Griggs, thank you for calling me back. You wrote a beautiful article for Science and Medical News. I was so moved by the family’s story and how their daughter had been diagnosed with heart disease and how she is being treated. I think that we might be interested in doing a report on it.”

This was just the kind of break that Griggsy had been looking for back when she left Australia to find herself as a journalist.

“Let me know how I can help.”

LEE LEE BURIED HER MOM in a simple ceremony. Her Mom was an atheist, like most Vietnamese, and she had told Lee Lee that she didn’t want “any fuss.” The funeral home dressed her in white, as was tradition, and she was lowered into a shallow grave in a simple pine box. Lee Lee made sure that there was a large sprig of cinnamon basil in her hand. Mr. Vu had paid for a plot near where he had purchased one for himself. He had once told Lee Lee, “when your Mom and I are both gone, I want her nearby to bring me noodles.” Lee Lee had smiled at the time but now it was real. The two people that she loved most in life were gone. All she had left was the business.

CNN INTERNATIONAL did an hour-long piece on children with heart disease. They interviewed Clive and Elena as well as Holly. The family had moved from Broadchurch and bought a plot of land on the Bursledon River where Clive had resumed his passion filming Brent geese. Jenny Griggs spoke passionately about the subject. She beat up on the National Health Service for only partially funding Holly’s care. “Bloody Boris Johnson and his bunch of wanker ministers would rather let this beautiful child die than help.” That clip ended up on the cutting room floor.

The only part that was missing from the segment was where

the funding for Holly’s health care was coming from. Doctor Sibella at All Saints Hospital had told Elizabeth that he could not or would not divulge the source of the funding. The Foundation that sent them grants wanted to remain anonymous. CNN needed to air the piece so they let it slide but both Jenny Griggs and Elizabeth Cohen had their journalistic radars fully up and tuned in. There had to be a back story there, of that they were sure.

LEE LEE WENT BACK TO WORK. She was miserable. She could barely concentrate. The factory was humming, the money was coming in fast and furious. Her mind kept wandering to Tam. She booked another week at the resort in Tuan Chau. She asked for the same room but this time she did not book a massage.

The rain started mid-afternoon and came down wet and heavy. It added to the humidity and Lee Lee could feel beads of sweat dripping between her breasts. She was nervous about going back to the restaurant. Other than burying her mom and mourning her death, her thoughts for the past weeks had mostly been about Tam. She had thought of calling the restaurant and asking for her but every time she started to dial the number she felt a bit foolish. What if Tam didn’t even remember her?

Her room overlooked the ocean and the rain was coming in horizontally. The ocean was churning gray, contrasting with stark whitecaps and spindrift being flung until the foam disappeared into thin air. Lee Lee felt foolish taking a taxi for a half mile ride, but if she had walked she would have been soaked by the time she got there. The restaurant had zippered their plastic shutters and the outdoor dining area was dry despite the howling wind and driving rain. Lee Lee took a table in the corner. There was no sign of Tam. She ordered a Saigon Red and a plate of sardines and waited. No sign of Tam. The beer tasted flat and the sardines were too salty. Her waiter came back to ask about dessert.

Lee Lee asked, "is Tam working tonight?"

The waiter smiled. "Tam left about three weeks ago. I think that she was offered another job. Would you like to see a menu for dessert?"

"No thanks, just another beer please."

Lee Lee was starting to feel a little tipsy. The tropical storm was swirling around and the plastic flaps were making a racket. The waiter came back to her table. He said, "Something happened with Tam about three weeks ago. She was always happy working here but she suddenly quit. I am not sure why but I am sure that there is more to the story." He poured the beer and left.

"Thank you."

The waiter came back to her table. He had a quizzical look in his eyes. "I know where she is working now," he said.

Lee Lee took a taxi. The roads were awash. Vietnam weather. The restaurant was on the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. She ran from the taxi hopping over puddles and hoping to not get blown off the edge of the cliff. The first person that she saw when she walked in was Tam. She was stunning. Her dark brown eyes and honey skin were accentuated by her wild hair. She had recently been outside and the wind had done a number on her long black hair. She was just trying to make something out of the mess when she looked up and saw Lee Lee standing there right in front of her. "I get off in ten minutes," she said.

Lee Lee had never experienced anything quite like it. Tam had a small cabin that shook with each gust. The rain hammered on the tin roof and the windows heaved and sighed. There was a lot of sweat and not all of it was caused by the humidity.

"I thought that I would never see you again," Tam said.

"I'll explain," Lee Lee replied.

"Listen, I think that the storm is winding down."

Lee Lee raised herself onto one arm. She looked at the beautiful woman beside her. The sheets were a tangled mess. The wind was easing but every now and then a gust would shake the cabin. The rain had stopped and there was a calm, eerie silence. "I think that I'm in love with you," Lee Lee said. "I have never experienced anything like that in my life."

Tam said, "I guess that I will have to find myself a job in Hai Phong."



## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

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C LIVE AND ELENA HAD BECOME minor celebrities after the CNN piece aired. Other news outlets had contacted them and Holly's story was getting a lot of traction not only in the UK but all across Europe. Jess was still making the most of the attention they were getting secretly happy that she was not the one with heart disease. Elena was working closely with her lawyers. "The wheels of justice move slowly," one of the lawyers said.

"You are not kidding," Elena replied.

BY THE TIME CRAIG DUNDEE left Swakopmund he had come to an arrangement with Brooks. There had been a number of conference calls between the two of them along with Lee Lee and Lucas Shilling. Lucas was going to keep track of things but the plan was to increase the number of diamonds being smuggled out of Namibia. Hugh Harris said that he would hire more smugglers. Hugh had suggested and they agreed to increase the amount of the payment that went into the secret South African bank account accessible by only a few Namibian authorities. Some of the diamonds would go to Craig's operation in Australia and in return he would get opals to Lee Lee via some back channels. If they

could execute the plan there would be no monies paid and no trace of any transactions.

BROOKS HAD HIRED MORE of Elmarie's friends from her days living under the intersection of the M1 and M2. The business and Foundation were ticking along nicely as was his marriage to Antoinette. They had talked about starting a family. He had given the elephant poaching side of the business to Gert. After the night that he and Antoinette had spent in the tent on the banks of the Okavango, the night when the elephants walked by, floating like giants on the breeze, he knew that he would never harm any animal ever again. He also knew that Lee Lee needed ivory to make her jewelry with his diamonds, and soon opal's. After this Gert would deal directly with Lee Lee. Brooks didn't want to know about any of it. There was also the tiger.

TAM RELOCATED TO HAI PONG and moved in with Lee Lee who offered her a job working in the business, but Tam declined. "I like my own independence," she said, "and believe it or not, I like waiting tables. I will find a nice cafe or restaurant and will contribute to the household. Lee Lee was living in bliss. She missed her Mom and Mr. Vu but she felt like somehow the two of them had conspired to send Tam her way. That gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach that had been there since she was a teenager, was gone. It really hadn't occurred to her that she preferred women over men, but looking back on it she had never had a successful relationship with a man. She blamed it on the rapes, but now being with Tam she knew that she had been lying to herself for decades. She felt liberated; and extremely happy. She had the factory running smoothly and had let her designers know that they would need to start thinking about how to incorporate opals into the jewelry. She also let

her distribution channels know. Monsieur Le Blanc was over the moon.

"I will let Madame Juliette know right away," he said.

THALITHA CALLED BROOKS. "Pete is sick," she said. "He got a cut on his foot and it's now badly infected. He has septicemia and it's spreading through his body. I am going to ask for time off work and go to Maun to take care of him." Brooks was shocked. He had talked to his stepfather a few weeks earlier and Pete had not mentioned the cut on his foot. It was just like him to keep things to himself and to not bother anyone with his problems. "That sounds pretty serious," Brooks said. "You go ahead and if you need me to be there. I can come right away."

JENNY GRIGGS WAS GETTING closer to her due date. The vomiting had stopped and Ag was being overattentive. Too overattentive and he was starting to get on her nerves. She was writing an occasional article for News Wire Services but mostly she was getting the spare room ready, for the baby. She and Ag had decided to find out the sex of the baby and were told that they could expect a girl. Her due date was in the Fall. Jenny was getting used to the change of seasons in Boston. "Hey Griggys," Ag said, "You might even get to love the snow."

"I doubt it."

Her mother was coming from Kalgoorlie. It would be the first time that she had ever left Australia. She had been double vaccinated and the travel restrictions were being eased. She did, however, need to get a negative Covid test in order to get into the United States. "Bloody fools," she texted Jenny. "How can I have Covid if I am vaccinated. Land of the bloody free and the home of bloody over regulated over there."

Griggsy replied. “Mom, just go along with it. Things are easing up here and soon this will all be over.”

Jenny Griggs was restless. She was thrilled about the baby but hated being stuck in one place. She had been on the move since she left home and being stuck inside four walls was driving her crazy. She was also being niggled by something. The story about Holly and her disease had given her some notoriety and she was receiving two or three emails a day asking if she could do a story, but they all involved air travel and she did not want to put her baby at risk. The thing that niggled her most was about the Foundation that was funding Holly’s care. Usually Foundations and nonprofits loved the publicity. It was very unusual for them to want to be left completely out of the story. There had to be something to it. She knew where to start. She would follow the money.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

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ELENA WAS MEETING WITH the lawyers. They had a swanky office in the center of London. The boardroom overlooked the Thames River and the massive table that they were sitting at was inlaid with an intricate design of different kinds of wood. “We are making progress,” one of the lawyers said. “We are also getting some pushback from Boris and his buddies. “You see the problem is this. The art of carving ivory dates back hundreds of years. Yes I know that’s crap but the craftsmanship is an integral part of Vietnamese and Chinese culture and the skill has been passed down through generations. To them it’s like an investment in their family. Kind of like, if you will, inheriting the taxi medallion from your dad.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Elena said. “While Boris and his wanker cabinet are dancing on a pinhead hoping to not upset their relationships with the Asian governments, these beautiful animals are getting slaughtered. And for no good reason other than some decorative piece that collects dust on some mantelpiece.”

“Yes we know all of this,” one of the lawyers said. “We told you that the UK signed onto a manifesto which pledged in 2010 and again in 2015 to ban ivory sales in the UK, but no one is enforcing anything.”

“It’s all just bullshit,” Elena said as she stormed out of the office.

Her father had worked closely with an Italian woman who had moved to Kenya in the 70’s. She became more African than the Africans that lived there, but had tragically lost her husband in a car crash and her son to a snakebite. In her grief she formed the Gallmann Foundation with the intent to bring more biodiversity to the land as well as to work to stop the senseless slaughter of elephants. She, Kuki Gallmann, and Elena’s father had convinced Kenya’s then-President Daniel arap Moi to ignite 105 tons of elephant tusks in a display that would bring world attention to the disgraceful business of ivory trading. It worked, but only for a while. The fire was broadcast globally and people were shocked, but after a few months things went back to normal. If anything, ivory poaching increased.

JENNY GRIGGS WAS GETTING close to her due date. She had constant back pain from trying to counterbalance the heavy lump in her tummy, but other than that she was in good shape. She had hired a personal trainer to come to the house five times a week. Jenny was determined to keep in good shape despite the pregnancy. Her phone rang. She was in the middle of doing some stretching exercises with her trainer but she noticed that the call was from Elizabeth Cohen. “Wait a sec,” Jenny said. “I need to take this call.

“Hi Jenny, this is Elizabeth Cohen. From CNN.”

Jenny said, “hi.”

“How’s the baby? You haven’t had the baby yet have you? How’s pregnancy?” Griggys said, “It sucks. I can’t pee even though it feels like I need to pee all day, every day. This bloody little monster is sitting right on my bladder and worse yet, she likes to kick.”

Elizabeth Cohen said. “My sister said the same thing. It means that you are getting close.”

“Not close enough. This bloody thing is as big as a VW Beetle and I have no clue how I am going to get her out when the time comes. This wasn’t even in the plan book. Oh I am sorry,” she said. “You didn’t call to hear me complain, what’s up?”

Elizabeth said, “I have asked my staff to do some digging. You know, about the Foundation that is funding the hospital bills for Holly Lonsdale. I found it strange that the Foundation wanted to remain anonymous. Most of these charities want the publicity. It feeds their bottom line. There may be a story there. Since you were the one that wrote the article about Holly and her family I thought that you should be the one to investigate this story. CNN can contribute financially.”

“It’s funny that you should call,” Jenny said. “That part of the piece you ran has been niggling at me. I was just thinking about it yesterday. What did your team dig up, if anything.”

“There is a family in New York who have gone through a similar story to Clive and Elena. Their young son has early heart disease and they have also been getting some funding from an anonymous Foundation. The Director of the hospital refused to give out the name of the source of funding which of course made me even more suspicious, but things are a little different in the States, as you might know since you live there. There is this thing called the Freedom of Information Act and while this applies to Government agencies not private businesses, our investigative team was able to get their hands on the most recent tax filings of the hospital where the young boy was being treated.”

“Interesting,” Jenny said. She could feel her baby doing a back flip in her tummy. She needed to pee; badly. “I’m interested,” Jenny said. “Let me just get this little monster out of me and I will

get to work on this. This is just what I need to get my head back around being a journalist.”

THALITHA CALLED BROOKS. “Pete is in rough shape. He asked me to set up some calls with his brothers and his sister. He wants to call them to say goodbye. He says that he is not strong enough to take a flight to Johannesburg where he can get better treatment than here in Maun. He does not look good and I am scared.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

**B**OSTON IS A BEAUTIFUL TOWN but it can have some seriously balmy weather. The locals say, “if you don’t like the weather just wait a minute,” and sure enough it can go from driving rain to warm sunshine in a matter of moments. Or the other way. It keeps the locals on their toes. It was a sunny morning in late Fall when Jenny Griggs felt certain that today was going to be the day. She and Ag had gone to see their pediatrician and he had told them that it was only a matter of days, if not hours, before her water would break.

“Ag rub my neck please. I need some relief from this knot in my stomach. I am worried about giving birth.” Ag, always eager to please soothed her. “Don’t worry baby, you are going to be just fine.” Her mom was due to arrive in Boston on Thanksgiving eve. She wanted to be there to help with the baby.

Ag flicked the TV channel to WCVB Boston. It was their local favorite and Ag was hoping that he could distract Jenny from her worries. “It looks like we might be getting some snow on Thanksgiving,” the pretty weather lady said. “This one is a strange one. There is a small low pressure system coming up from the Carolinas which is usually fine and usually just gives us some rain. The problem that we see is that the Jet Stream is dipping well

south and bringing in cold air from Canada. It looks like the two weather systems will collide either on Thanksgiving eve or on Thanksgiving Day.” Jenny looked at Ag and said, “Fuck.”

She texted her Mom on WhatsApp. “Mom there might be some bad weather when you get to Boston. Make sure that you pack warm clothes.” Her Mom replied, “I already have, but how bad can it be?”

“I have no idea. The local weather channel is predicting some snow. Ag says that it’s Boston. That anything can happen.”

“OK I will see you soon. Take care of that baby and love you.”

“Love you too.”

THE LOW PRESSURE SYSTEM off the Carolinas was gathering strength, and starting to intensify. Ag pulled up the CBC app on his phone. The Canadian Broadcasting Company was reporting record cold temperatures across much of the country. He didn’t say anything to Jenny. She already had a lot on her mind. Ag called around to a few of his friends. “What do you think?” They all agreed that there would be snow but none would speculate on the amount. “This is New England, you know. So you never know.”

JENNY’S MOM TEXTED FROM DUBAI. Quantas had a layover there and Jenny’s Mom had noticed that her flight to Boston had been delayed. She went to the ticket counter and asked about it and was told that there was some concern about a developing weather situation in the Boston area. She asked Jenny, “what’s the weather situation over there? My flight has been delayed and they tell me it’s because of weather.”

Jenny looking out the window. It was just starting to get

dark, storm clouds gathering to the west. “It looks OK here now but one of Ag’s friends called earlier and said that there was a big storm brewing. How long is the delay?” Her Mom replied, “I dunno.”

IT WAS JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT when her water broke. The snow had started earlier in the evening and was coming down at a heavy clip. All the news channels were on the story some predicting that they might see as much as three inches of snow an hour. “Ag it’s time,” she said. Ag shot out of bed. He was ready. Their bag had been packed for a week. What Ag was not ready for was what he saw out their bedroom window. Earlier in the evening there had been some snow but now it was coming in horizontally. “We need to get to the hospital,” Jenny said. “NOW.”

“OK let me dig the car out. Are you ok getting dressed?”

“Yes, but hurry, this bloody monster can’t wait any longer.” Ag bolted down the stairs of their Brownstone, shovel in hand. He started to shovel snow furiously but it quickly became clear that the snow was accumulating about as fast as he could shovel it. He had most of the front and side of the car cleared when a snowplow drove by piling two feet of snow up against his car. Ag went back to digging furiously. It was cold and the strong wind was not making things easy. The car was running and was warm and he had it mostly dug out when he ran back into the house to get Jenny. “Griggysy,” he yelled. “Let’s go.” Jenny was in the corner of their bedroom sobbing. “This bloody baby is coming and I can’t stop her. We need a bloody ambulance.”

“It’s OK,” Ag said, “the car is clear and warm. Let’s go for it.” He helped Jenny to her feet and together that made their way

down the stairs. Ag helped Jenny onto the back seat of the car and was moving around to the front when another snow plow came by dumping a foot of heavy wets slush on the street side of the car.

“Fuck.”

Ag dug frantically. He could hear Jenny moaning on the back seat. He tossed the snow shovel onto the sidewalk, jumped into the driver’s seat and gunned the engine. They took off down Boylston Street toward Mass General Hospital. The road had been plowed but it was still a mess. Jenny was moaning. “It’s too late,” she said. “Pull over. I need you to deliver this baby.”

Ag glanced in his rearview mirror. Jenny was pale and clearly in a lot of pain. “Pull the fuck over,” she yelled.

“There is nowhere to pull over,” Ag replied. There are snow banks everywhere. Suddenly up ahead he saw a gas station. Someone was out shoveling snow with a small BobCat. Ag pulled into the station. The BobCat driver said, “Sorry sir you can’t park there.” Ag ignored him and climbed onto the back seat of their car. Jenny had removed her underpants and was trying to remember her breathing exercises. “Holy shit,” Ag said. “I think that I can see the baby’s head. There was a knock on the window. “Fuck off,” Ag yelled. He saw the BobCat driver through the frosted pane. “Fuck off can’t you see that my wife is having a baby?” The BobCat driver opened the car door. “Sir are you a doctor?” he asked. “No I am not a fucking doctor. I am a TV cameraman,” Ag yelled.

“Sir, let me help. I have delivered all six of my children. I know what I am doing.” Ag looked at him closer. He was a small Indian man. “Move aside,” the man said. “Now, lady, you need to be more calm and work on your breathing. This is going to be just fine.”

Jenny said, “Ag get out of the fucking way.” Ag climbed over onto the front seat of the car and watched the BobCat driver talk his girlfriend through the birth of their child. He had a reassuring manner about him. “Don’t push just yet,” he said. “Just concentrate on your breathing. I will tell you when it’s time to push.”

Just then Ag saw some blue lights pull up alongside them. A police officer got out and approached the car. “What’s going on here?” he asked but then quickly took in the situation. “Let me get an ambulance,” he said. “It’s too late,” the BobCat driver said. “The baby is coming. Push,” he yelled at Jenny. Her face was scrunched up and she was sweating but Jenny Griggs from Kalgoorlie Australia was not taking any shit from anyone, not even her own baby. She pushed three times and the baby came out with a flood of blood and water. “She’s beautiful,” Ag said, although all he could see from his vantage point was a tiny little thing covered in some kind of white stuff. The police officer said, “The ambulance will be here in less than five minutes. The BobCat driver said to Ag. “Get back here and take your baby. The baby still had not taken her first breath but as soon as Ag picked her up she started to cry. Jenny started to cry. She couldn’t remember the last time that she had cried but the sobs started and she could not stop them. The BobCat driver started to cry. The policeman said, “the ambulance will be here in less than a minute.” Then he started to tear up. The snow kept pounding down. Ag could hear the sirens getting closer then there were red lights and in seconds there were EMT people taking care of Jenny and the baby.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



JENNY'S MOM JANET was completely blown away by all the snow. She had grown up in the Outback of Australia and never seen snow let alone experienced the intense bitter cold that a howling wind adds to a snowstorm. She and Ag had gone directly to the hospital and Jenny was propped up on pillows holding her baby when her mother walked in the door. Janet immediately started to cry and that started Jenny off as well. Ag was fighting back tears. "Oh my, she's perfect," Janet said. "Do you have a name for her yet?"

Jenny looked at Ag. "Yes," she said. "We were going to call her Tracy but I think that Storm might be a better name for her."

"Oh my," Janet said and started crying even harder. "I'm being silly," she said. "I think it's just the jet lag."

"It's OK Mom," Jenny said reaching for her hand. I can't believe that you are here with us in Boston on this most special day to all Americans." Just then the nurse came into the room. She had a lovely Jamaican lilt. "So would that be three Thanksgiving meals then?"

Janet asked, "What's in a Thanksgiving meal?"

"Why lady, roast turkey of course. Plus mashed potatoes,



squash, two types of bread and most important of all, gravy and cranberry sauce. Don't worry, when I came to the United States for the first time I had never heard of Thanksgiving either. Now it's my favorite day, even if I have to work."

The nurse came back ten minutes later with three trays. "I'm not that hungry but I will have a little," Jenny said. "I'm starving," Ag said. Janet said, "This looks really good. They didn't feed us much on the plane. Storm started to fuss and the nurse took her. "Just enjoy your dinner and I will bring her back in a little while." She flashed her big Jamaican smile and left the room with Storm wrapped tight in a tiny blue and white blanket.

LEE LEE CALLED BROOKS. "The opals were a brilliant idea. I can't make jewelry fast enough. Our distributor in Monaco is begging for more as are the stores on Rodeo Drive. Plus Florida and especially Australia. It's crazy. Are you getting your payments in a timely manner?"

"Yes," Brooks said. "Thank you. We have added staff to the Foundation and we are giving away as much money as we can. Sometimes it seems harder to give money away than it is to make it." Lee Lee laughed. "Well OK then, give my love to Antoinette. Let's see how much more money we can give away." Brooks had never heard her so happy.

Brooks was at the O.R Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. He had flown down to visit with a specialist, an expert in septicemia. They had talked for an hour and the specialist had convinced Brooks that he needed to get his stepfather to Johannesburg for treatment. He was at the airport waiting for his return flight to Zimbabwe when he heard the presenter on TV introduce her story. It was about a family from Bursledon, a small town on the south coast of England. Their teenage daughter Holly

had a rare case of early heart disease but it had been detected early and she was receiving treatment.

"Currently there is no progression of the disease and her prognosis is for a full, normal life. If this issue had not been diagnosed earlier the outcome might have been very different," the announcer said. The shot cut away to Clive and Holly on a small raft in the middle of the Bursledon River. Clive had a battery of cameras behind a makeshift hide. Brent geese were coming in to land and Clive was filming with concentrated intensity. The announcer continued, "there is another part to this story. Some Foundation, who, for their own reasons, want to remain completely anonymous, has been funding a large part of Holly's medical expenses. The part that the NHS won't cover."

"Shit," Brooks muttered. On one hand he was thrilled by the story. This was exactly what the plan had been from the very beginning. On the other hand he knew that some journalist somewhere would start digging into who was behind the anonymous Foundation. Closer scrutiny was the last thing that they needed. What if they found out that the money for Holly came from the illegal grim business of slaughtering elephants and smuggling diamonds and opals? He swiped up on his phone and clicked a name in his Contacts.

"Lucas," he said. "I need to see you as soon as I get back to Zim. Can we meet first thing tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, but we just got some very unwanted publicity on CNN.

AG, JENNY, JANET AND BABY Storm were sitting in the small living room of the apartment that Ag and Jenny were renting. "I just can't believe all that snow," Janet kept repeating. It turned out that their UBER driver, who gave them a ride home from the

hospital, was also from Australia and he was also having a hard time with the snow. “None of this bloody stuff in Brisbane,” he said.

Jenny got Storm settled in a bassinet and was rocking it back and forth. The baby was asleep. Ag had not been able to wipe the grin off his face since they first arrived safely at the hospital. It was as if he was the only man in the world that had ever fathered a child. “If you are all settled,” he said to Jenny, “and with your Mom here to help I am going to try and see if I can go and get my car.” Ag had gauged that his car would be completely snowed in and had been using UBER to get around but he was anxious to have his own wheels back. He also had a surprise for the BobCat driver. As he approached the gas station he could see his car. It was covered in snow and a little blocked in by snowbanks in front and on the one side. Ag entered the door and was met by the smell of stale coffee. There was no one there. He rang the silver bell on the desk and the BobCat driver came out from an office in the rear. At first he did not recognize Ag, but when Ag told him who he was the man came over and hugged him. “How is the baby?” he asked.

“She’s doing great. She is home now and my girlfriend’s mother is here to help.” The BobCat driver smiled broadly. “We I am glad that I could help. As I told you that night, I have six children and I delivered all of them myself.”

“Yes I remember,” Ag said.

They talked for a while about raising a family then Ag asked the man if he had a phone. “Sure,” the BobCat driver said, pointing to the phone on the wall in the back of his garage. “Do you need to make a call?”

Ag laughed. “No, an iPhone or an Android phone.” The man pulled his iPhone out of his jacket. “Here you can use this one.”

“That’s OK,” Ag said. Write your phone number down and open the wallet App on the phone. The BobCat driver gave him a quizzical look but moments later he received a pop-up message on his phone. “What’s this?” he asked. “Take a look,” Ag said. The man flicked open his wallet app and there were eight tickets to a Boston Red Sox game for later in the summer. “Take your family,” Ag said. The man started to tear up and gave Ag a hug in the hope that he might not notice, but Ag noticed, only just. His eyes had also welled up. “I have one more question for you,” Ag said. “Are any of you children girls?”

The man answered, “Yes I have one daughter. She was my first born.”

“What’s her name?” Ag asked.

“Her name is Lakshmi.”

“Thank you,” Jeb said. “It’s a beautiful name.”

The man said. “Come back later and I will have your car cleaned off and completely dug out from under the snow. “Or if you like I can deliver it to your house. I would love to see the baby.” Ag jotted their address down on a piece of paper and handed it over. “Come by anytime. You will always be welcome in our home.”

Ag took an UBER back to the apartment. Storm was awake and breastfeeding. We all least that was what Jenny was trying to do but Storm was not having any of it. Ag took her. He put his pinky finger into Storm’s mouth and she immediately started to suck on it. “Sit up a little,” Ag said.

“Janet,” he said, “please forgive me for this. Jennie open the front of your shirt a little more.” Jenny unbuttoned her pajama top. One small breast popped out and Ag leant forward. Storm was still sucking on his finger. He moved closer to Jenny and just as he touched her chest he removed his finger from Storm’s mouth.

Storm started to complain but Jenny moved slightly sideways and Storm latched on.

“You are a good man Ag,” Jenny said. “I think that we are going to be good parents.”

Ag was pleased with himself. He sat next to Jenny watching his daughter and her mother with utter contentment. “Jenny, I have one thing to ask you and you can say no if you want.”

Jenny looked at him. Storm was making contented sounds. “I had chat with the BobCat driver. My car is still snowed in but we got to talking about children. He told me that his only daughter’s name is Lakshmi. She’s the oldest of his six children. We still have not chosen a middle name for Storm.”

Jennie looked at him for a long second. “You are a good man Ag,” was all she said. They sat there for a while in silence. Storm was getting restless. Jenny said, “Can you please take your daughter, Storm Lakshmi Agmeco.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

**B**ROOKS AND ANOINETTE were sitting outside listening to the night noises. Brooks was sipping on a coke. Antoinette had poured herself a rose. A few months earlier Brooks had gone to a friend’s bachelor party and smoked his first Cuban cigar. The thick, peppery smell got him hooked immediately. He ordered some through Amazon and Antoinette said, “We all have our vices.”

“I smoke these to keep the bugs away,” Brooks said.

“Sure.”

Brooks first brought up the visit to the specialist. “We are going to have to convince Pete to go to Johannesburg for treatment. It’s the only way that he will survive this thing.”

“That’s if the plane trip doesn’t kill him. Plus how do you think Pete will do stuck in a hospital bed for a few weeks? If the plane ride doesn’t kill him, that surely will.” Brooks knew that Antoinette was right. Pete had made it abundantly clear that he was not interested or that he could even survive a flight on South African Airways.

“What if I charter a jet?” Brooks said. “They can pick Pete up in Maun and drop him at the airstrip at the hospital.”

“You know that Pete is going to ask who’s paying for the jet

don't you? He will be pissed if he finds out that it's you. You know how Pete is." Brooks thought for a moment. "I think that I have an idea. How about I have Lucas make contact with someone in Maun who knows how to get an emergency flight from Maun to Johannesburg. I will tell Lucas that our Foundation will make a substantial donation so long as it all can all remain anonymous."

"Hmmm, that might work," Antoinette said.

The following morning Brooks met with Lucas Shilling. He had two big agenda items. The first was getting his stepfather Pete a flight door-to-door from Maun to the main hospital in Johannesburg. The second was, well, about the CNN report. "Lucas listened to Brook's concerns. The Foundation is behind so many firewalls I doubt if it can be traced."

"But when hospitals apply for grants they come in through our website and fill out a form, right?" Brooks asked.

"Yes, but that's where the public part of this operation ends. We get their information and money request, and then we start going through back channels. You will get dizzy trying to figure it all out but all the hospital administrators' want is the money. They are hospital administrators, not detectives, and as soon as they get their money we close things out as quickly as possible. There is never any mention of the name of the Foundation. Believe me, hospital administrators' jump through hoops every day to find funding to help their patients."

"If you say so," Brooks said.

Later that day Lucas called. "Brooks I can sort a private plane for this weekend. The small operation was thrilled by the idea of a cash payment."

"OK, thanks," Brooks said. "Antoinette and I will drive to Maun and talk to Pete."

THEY ARRIVED IN MAUN the following day. They had asked Thalitha to meet them at the Akacia Cafe in downtown Maun. It was a very dry and dusty day and baking hot. Plus there was a hot wind blowing. They found a spot in the shade and ordered coffee. "I think it might have been smarter to order ice coffee," Antionette offered. Brooks outlined the plan to get Pete some help. Thalitha looked skeptical. "You know Pete," she said, "he never wants to be a bother to anyone."

"Yes that's why we are meeting here before we go and see him. You know that if Daisy was still alive that she would make him go to Joburg. Thalitha you can persuade him. Channel Mom," Brooks said. "It's what she would want."

They drove the dusty side roads to Pete's house which was on the banks overlooking the Thamalakane River. Thalitha had called ahead. She knew that Pete didn't like surprises. The road ran alongside the river and every now and then they spotted a crocodile. Just before they arrived at Pete's house they saw five hippo grunting and snorting in the shallow water. Pete was sitting out in the sun listening to the wildlife. He and Daisy had built the house years earlier. Daisy wanted a fence around it. "The baboons get into my vegetable garden," she had told Pete. "Baboons get hungry too," Pete relied, and that was the end of that discussion.

Pete was frail. His once deeply tanned skin was almost translucent. Brooks said, "Howzit Dad."

Pete said. "It's nice of you to come and visit but I hope that you have not come here to say goodbye to me."

"No Dad we are not here to say goodbye, but we are here with a proposal."

Pete looked at Brooks. "You have known me since you were just three years old. You know that I don't react very well to

proposals.” Brooks laughed. “You always were a cranky old bastard.”

Pete smiled. Brooks looked off into the distance. “Pete how about tomorrow we take a drive along the river. We count how many hippos we see and then we suddenly find ourselves at the airstrip? There will be a plane waiting for us there. It will be an emergency flight. How’s about the four of us get on that plane and we take a trip to Johannesburg. And how’s about you don’t ask any questions?”

Thalitha said simply, “It’s what Daisy would have wanted.” Pete sat quiet for a while. “Yes I will agree to this plan,” he said, “bit only on one condition.” He had a wry smile. “You need to tell the pilot of the plane that I don’t want to go directly to Johannesburg. Tell him that I want to fly out over the Okavango Delta first. Tell him that he will need to fly low and slow so that I can see everything. Tell him that it might be the last time that I get to see the Delta.”

The following morning they drove on the road that paralleled the Thamalakane River. They didn’t see any crocodiles but they did see a fairly large pod of hippos and when they arrived at the small airstrip there was a small blue and silver jet waiting for them. “Did you tell them?” Pete asked.

“Yes Dad.”

“OK, and one last thing. I don’t want any special treatment. I will wear my seatbelt, but I am not a patient. I am just someone who wants to see some of the Delta before I get to that awful place, Joburg.”

“You’ve got it.”

They took off and headed west. Brooks recognized where he and Antoinette had camped that night in the Moremi Game Reserve, the place where the elephants had walked by their tent.

The same place where he had slept up close with a lioness. The pilot had his foot off the gas. He knew that he was carrying precious cargo and that one of the ways that Pete was going to survive his illness was to have a will to live. Returning to the Delta and perhaps camping there again would be a huge incentive to live. The plane banked south and they flew over the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park. There were massive herds of wildebeest running, frightened by the sound of the aircraft. Brooks spotted a large herd of elephants in a thicket. They were not bothered by the noise from the plane. They were feasting on mopane leaves. Brooks could pick out the matriarch keeping a close eye on things. Before long they landed at the private airstrip outside the best hospital in Joburg.

“OK Pete, this is it,” Brooks said. “We need to get you all tuned up like a race car so that we can go camping again.”

Brooks noticed a tear in Pete’s eye but he quickly looked away to not embarrass him and he didn’t say anything. Pete said simply, “thanks.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

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JENNY WAS HOME ALONE with Storm. Her Mom had flown back to Australia but not before begging Jenny to come back and live in Kalgoorlie. “I can’t Mom, my home is here with Ag. I’m sorry that it’s so far away but I just followed the breeze and ended up in Boston.” When Storm is a little older we will make a trip back home.” Storm was asleep. Jenny suddenly realized that she had called Australia home. Even though she had just told her Mom that Boston was her home. “That’s a funny thing,” she thought. “I guess there will never be another place to call home like the place where you were when you took that first breath. It’s imprinted on my heart. Like the stripes on a zebra.”

Ag was away on an assignment for News Wire Services. They had asked him to cover Biden’s trip to Philadelphia. The President was there to promote his almost two trillion dollar infrastructure bill. He would give a speech at the Amtrak Station. Biden had been a huge fan of Amtrak when he was a senator riding the train from the Capitol in Washington, to Scranton, Pennsylvania where he lived. Ag liked Biden. “Thank you little baby Jesus that the orange monkey is no longer in charge.”

Jenny was bored. She flicked through the TV channels until she landed on a show called Nurse Jackie. Jenny had been a

huge fan of Edie Falco when she was starring in the Sopranos. She decided to linger a while and watch. The show was good; really good in fact. How strange it was to see Mrs. Tony Soprano dressed as a nurse. No long fingernails. No bouffant hairdo. She was just settling in when she heard Storm fussing. She went to the nursery and picked her up. “How strange it is to have a child of my own.” Storm settled down and went back to sleep, boob in mouth.

LEE AND TAM WERE OUT ON A DATE were out on a date. A real date, not just an at-home date. The Covid restrictions had been mostly lifted in Hai Phong and Lee Lee was craving noodles. They both wore their masks until they got to the street vendor that Lee Lee liked. His noodles were good, not as good as her Moms but then he didn’t know the secret of cinnamon basil. Instead Lee Lee had a small sprig stuffed in her pocket and after the owner had brought over their food Lee Lee said to Tam, “Don’t start eating yet. I have something special to add.”

Tam gave her a look. “Actually take a taste,” Lee Lee said. Tam sipped the broth. It was really good. “Now wait.” Lee Lee pulled some of the delicate leaves off the basil and dropped them into the broth. “Give it a minute at least and then you can try it again.” Tam waited patiently and then dipped her spoon into the broth. “Oh my goodness,” she said out loud. “Oh my goodness this is amazing. What a difference.”

“I know,” Lee Lee said. “I wish that you could have met my Mom. She was a genius when it came to noodles.”

They left the noodle stand and walked out into the nightlife. The air was warm and thick with the smell of cooking heavy in the air. Vietnam was slowly coming around to the fact that there were gay people, even in Vietnam. Lee Lee so wanted to hold

Tam’s hand but she didn’t want anyone to take offense and say something that might ruin their evening. “Maybe tomorrow night I will dress as a boy,” Tam said. “Then we can hug and kiss.”

Lee Lee said, “fat chance. Do you ever look at your legs in the mirror?”

AG WOULDN’T BE HOME for a few days and Storm was asleep. Jenny had binged watched five episodes of Nurse Jackie but was still wide awake. It was well after midnight and she figured that she might as well just stay awake as Storm usually woke up around three to eat. She flicked open her laptop and signed into her LexisNexis account. The journalist in her was coming back after being a bit dormant while she became a Mum. She wasn’t sure how to go about it. Shell companies and the firewalls that they erected around them in order to remain anonymous was not her thing but she knew how to work the website and after an hour of digging she had figured out that the shell company behind the hospital grants was located somewhere in Southern Africa.

Jenny heard Storm fussing in the other room and went to pick her up. She was hungry. “Come here you little wombat,” Jenny said snuggling the baby to her breast. Storm latched on and Jenny went back to her laptop. She Googled ‘illegal operations in Southern Africa.’ There were millions of hits but the two that stood out were the illegal smuggling of diamonds out of Namibia and poaching throughout Southern Africa.

“Hmmm.”

BROOKS WAS ON THE PHONE to Antoinette. She had flown home a few days earlier. Brooks and Thalitha had stayed on in Johannesburg to monitor Pete’s treatment. “He’s doing much, much better,” he said. “He’s still a little out of it. The doctor said

that the septicemia might have killed him within a few weeks if we hadn't gotten him to the hospital in Joburg."

"That's good news. When do you think that you might come home?"

"I don't know love. Let's check in again tomorrow. Maybe I will have a better idea by then.

"OK. Love you."

"Love you too."

WORD GOT TO THE LOCAL Tswana leader that Pete was in hospital; in serious condition. He gathered a group together and they congregated at Pete's house on the banks of the Thamalakane River. The same group had been there before to mark Daisy's death. They had come to pay their respects to both Daisy and Pete. Daisy was Tswana and Pete had devoted much of his life fighting for the rights of all Botswana's indigenous tribes.

The leader of the group was a tall man who went by the name Shelo which was short for Botshelo. He gathered the group together. "We are going to dance and sing," he said. "We are going to appeal to Modimo to heal Pete." Modimo was the God of the Tswana people and he had the power to heal, even people that were not Tswana. The men started first, moving slowly, swaying to some kind of internal beat. They were dressed in just a loincloth, their bare feet stomping the dry red dirt. Their eyes were closed. They were starting to feel the power of Modimo. They really started to feel the power of Modimo when the women joined them. They were dressed in bright colors and they started to clap and ululate, their shrill voices carrying on the light summer breeze. More dust picked up and the group started to dance the setapa. The name of the dance comes from the Setswana phrase "go tapa tapa" which describes the tapping motion of the feet

during the dance. After an hour the group left. They were sure that they had reached Modimo.

Two days later Brooks called Antoinette. "The doctors are amazed at Pete," he told her. "They said originally that he had a 50:50 chance of survival when we admitted him here. Now they are saying that he will be able to go home next week. The one doctor told me that it was some kind of miracle. He said that they had never seen anyone recover that quickly."



## CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

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JENNY SPENT MOST EVENINGS on her LexisNexis account digging and digging. She used Google quite a bit but Google was no use when it came to following the money. Ag was back home and they went out to their favorite BYOB Thai place. Spring was in the air, and even though Governor Baker had eased many restaurant restrictions because of Covid, they decided to eat outside anyway. Storm was under three layers of down and snuggled in tight as a bug in a rug.

“Ag,” Jenny said. “I have been doing some digging.”

“Here it comes,” thought Ag.

“You know that story that we did on Holly Lonsdale, the girl with heart disease?”

“Yes.”

The waiter came over with menus and water. They both declined the water. Jenny had once done a story on the amount of water that was drunk at a restaurant versus the amount of water that was poured away and it shocked her. She found out that only 2% of people ever drank the restaurant water. It was just an old habit that no one could get rid of. If the restaurants didn’t serve water people complained; but they never drank it.

“I have been trying to find out where the money for her care comes from. The organization that provides grants to hospitals to care specifically for early childhood heart disease has requested to be anonymous. That’s highly unusual. They need the publicity to grow their bottom line. Ag nodded. “Go on.”

“I think that I may have found something interesting. I had to take various different routes but I found the name of a man by the name of Lucas Shilling who works as an accountant for a company that goes by the name of Brooks Industries. It seems like he also does their legal work as well as their accounting. Brooks Industries has some employees but they don’t seem to do much. They don’t make anything. They don’t seem to buy or sell anything. It seems to be just a shell company for something. I’m suspicious about these kinds of operations. They always seem to be hiding something illegal.”

The waitress took their order. Ag went for the Honey Sesame Chicken while Jenny went for the Tamarind Duck. She was craving the house special, the Hot Basil Crispy Chicken but worried that Storm might not like the flavor of her breast milk.

“Why are you doing this?” Ag asked.

“No particular reason except that I am a journalist in my bones and I can’t help myself. Plus I have a hunch about this. I think that it might end up being a big story. At some point I am going to need to get back to work.”

LEE LEE AND TAM were out on the streets of Hai Phong. They were walking down one of the cities leafy boulevards enjoying being mask-free for the first time in what seemed like a very long time. Tam said, “you know what Lee Lee, I am sick of hiding who we are. We are a couple and we are in love. I don’t care what other people think. It’s time that this backward country came

around to the fact that love is love. There is nothing wrong with loving another person. I love you Lee Lee and I know that you love me.”

Lee Lee guided her toward a bench overlooking the Cam River. “I do love you Tam but at the same time I don’t want to offend anyone. We can make love and be in love when we are in our apartment but some people out here are uncomfortable with two women being in love.”

“Screw them,” Tam said. She placed both hands on Lee Lee’s face and asked, “What would your mother have thought about this? About us?”

Lee Lee said, “don’t bring my mother into this. She was from a different generation. Her generation thought that it was bad to love people of their same sex. Well not just love but to be physical, if you know what I mean.”

“The world is changing Lee Lee and we need to be part of the change.” Her soft brown eyes got watery. She looked directly at Lee Lee. There was a strong smell of frangipani in the air. Lee Lee leaned forward and kissed Tam on the lips. She stayed there for a while embracing her. After a minute she pulled away. A couple walking by started to clap. They were an elderly couple who had watched the embrace. Lee Lee could feel the tears coming but blinked them away. The elderly couple turned around and walked back to the bench where Lee Lee and Tam were sitting. The man said, “our son lives with another man. At first we were very unhappy with the situation. It didn’t seem right. But over time we came to realize that love is love.”

ELENA LONSDALE HAD ENOUGH. “Those fucking lawyers just suck up money and don’t get anything done.” Clive knew what was coming. Elena picked up the phone and within minutes

had Minister Jacob on the phone. “What’s it now Elena?” he asked.

“I am well and truly fed up,” said Elena trying to stop herself from yelling. “You and that bloody wanker Boris know about the laws surrounding ivory sales in the UK and across Europe but you do nothing to enforce them. While you drive around in fancy limousines and eat fancy meals there are beautiful animals being slaughtered by the hundreds, in fact by the thousands. And for absolutely no reason whatsoever. They take the horns from rhinos so that Chinese men can get a hard on, which you and I know is just a joke, and they take the tusks of elephants just to carve into trinkets. You tell that bloody wanker Boris to get his shit together or I am going to tell him about you and his daughter.” Elena slammed down the phone. She turned to Clive. “You didn’t spend time in that prison for nothing. I am going to get that fat fuck and his boss Boris and they are going to pay for the mass murder of innocent animals.”

PETE WAS DISCHARGED from the hospital. He said to Brooks, “I don’t know who paid for that last flight and I don’t want to know, but we are going commercial back to Maun.

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

LUCAS SHILLING felt his radar go up. He was not sure why. Call it a sixth sense if you will. He called Brooks. “I think that we need to change the name of the company and the name of the Foundation. Ever since that CNN report I have been worried. We are well protected, believe me, but it would not hurt to add another level of protection.”

“Do what you think is necessary.”

Brooks hung up and leaned back in his chair. He too had been worried. For the last month there had been a gnawing feeling in his gut. Brooks knew something that Lucas Shilling did not know. Even Antoinette didn’t know. Only Thalitha knew. Brooks was on a number of “Most Wanted” lists. He was still on the run from Interpol because of the whole child sex operation that he had run in London. The case had gone cold when Brooks disappeared into the Okavango Delta but the fact that he was a wanted man was never very far from his mind. He decided that he would need to come clean with Antoinette.

That evening when they were sitting out by the fire pit Brooks decided to bring it up.

“Honey, can we talk?” The moment that he said the words he

knew that they had come out wrong. “No it’s nothing like that,” he said.

Antoinette said, “yes. What’s on your mind?”

“I am a little worried about that CNN report. I don’t know why. I have spoken with Lucas and he says that the company and the Foundation are well protected.”

“Then what are you worried about?” Brooks was not sure what to say next.

“There is some stuff in my past that I haven’t told you,” he said. “Some not so good stuff.”

“Go on.”

Brooks said, “OK but I have to trust that this will remain between just the two of us.”

“I love you Brooks. There is nothing that you can tell me that will change that.”

“I’m not so sure,” Brooks said. Antoinette shot him a glance.

“Just come out and say it.”

“Do you remember that I told you that I used to hustle people on the streets in Maun?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember when I told you that a businessman from London had offered me a job and I moved to London?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember that I told you my job was managing a number of pubs in and around London?”

“Yes.”

“Well that was a lie.”

Antoinette shot him another glance. “I used to drink at a lot

of pubs in London,” Brooks offered trying to make a little joke.

“Go on.”

Brooks looked at the ground for a long time. “I ran a child sex business.” The words hung in the air. Antoinette looked at him.

“Go on.”

Brooks heaved a sigh. “I ran a child sex business, but that was not all I did. There was such a demand for sex with underage children that I started a refugee smuggling operation bringing kids into England. They were mostly from Syria. They were promised a better life in England but they went into the sex trade as soon as we got them over the border.”

“Antoinette said, “go on.”

“If that’s not bad enough there is more to it. The sex thing was a cash-only business done through TicTok. It was a multi-million pound business. You have no idea the number of high profile people, cabinet ministers and so on that were our customers.”

“Antoinette said, “go on.”

“The only way to hide the money was to form some shell companies and squirrel it away offshore. I did tell you about the shipyard in the Bahamas didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“The way that we hid the money was buying ships and using the shipyard to wash the money clean. There are any number of people in this world that want to pay with and receive only cash.”

“OK.”

“There’s more,” Brooks said. “I had a side hustle going on. I rigged up tiny cameras in the rooms where the sex was happening. It was at first just an insurance policy in case things went bad. There were prominent politicians, even policemen on those tapes.”

“What was the side hustle?”

“I uploaded them to PornHub and a bunch of other porn websites and made a lot of money. In fact, and I am embarrassed to say this, but those videos are still making us money.”

“Does Lucas know about any of this?”

“No. None of it. The porn money comes in via a shell company that I set up. Lucas never looked into the company. He didn’t question where the money came from. He has no clue about my past.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Antoinette I love you. I love how much good we have been able to do with the money we make but I am worried that some journalist somewhere will dig into things and find out about my past. I don’t have anywhere to run. I don’t want to involve you but the more that you know, the safer we can be.”

Antoinette sat for a while. She didn’t say anything. The fire was down to just embers so Brooks threw some logs on it. Antoinette looked Brooks directly in the eye. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” she said.

JENNY HAD COMPLETELY changed her schedule. She worked at night when Storm fussed the most. Ag was away quite a bit working on assignments for News Wire Services. Jenny was digging. It had not gone unnoticed that Brooks Industries had suddenly vanished. There was no record of the company anymore but Jenny dug deeper. She found out that the company, formerly Brooks Industries, was now called Antoinette Investments. Jenny kept digging. Sometimes she would resent Storm waking up especially when she was hot on the trail of something. She was never sure where any of it would lead but one night she clicked

a link in the Deep Web and found the name of a shell company in Vietnam that was making jewelry out of ivory. The source of the ivory linked back to Antoinette Investments, formerly Brooks Industries.

## CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

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NAMING THEIR SHELL COMPANIES after themselves had been a big mistake. Lucas Shilling should have known better. It didn't take long for Jenny to put two and two together but she had to dig deeper to find the name of the Foundation. Then she started to follow the money. She decided that it was time to call Elizabeth Cohen.

"Hi Elizabeth, this is Jenny Griggs. I think that we are getting somewhere."

BROOKS MET WITH LUCAS Shilling the following day. "I am starting to shit myself," Brooks said. "I have a gut feeling that the walls are closing in on us."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno. I lie awake most nights with some kind of feeling that someone is digging into our business and Foundation. I have no clue why but I'm worried."

Lucas said, "Brooks your Foundation is well hidden. This is Africa. The laws here are shoddy at best. We can switch and change anything that we need to do in just a matter of ho

JENNY HAD FOUND LUCAS Shilling's number and placed a call. She was using an encrypted number that couldn't be traced. She didn't expect anyone to answer but Lucas did answer.

"Hi, this is Jennifer Griggs. I am a reporter with CNN and if I may, may I ask you a few questions?"

Lucas hung up. That was when Jenny knew that she was onto something.

LEE LEE WAS IN HER OFFICE at her desk when the phone rang. "Hi is this Lee Lee Sing?" the Australian accented voice asked.

"Yes, who am I speaking to?"

My name is Jennifer Griggs. I am a business reporter with CNN. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about your business?"

"No of course not," Lee Lee answered.

"I know that you are in the business of carving ivory. It seems to be a big business in Vietnam."

"Yes it is. We are one of the biggest suppliers of jewelry made from ivory and diamonds. We recently added opals to some of our designs." Jenny and Lee Lee talked for a while. Jenny said, "Thank you Lee Lee, I appreciate all the information. This is going to be an interesting business report. May I ask you one more question?"

"Sure," Lee Lee said.

"May I ask where your ivory and diamonds come from?"

Lee Lee slammed down the phone. "How could I have been so stupid," she thought. "Fuck." She called Tam.

"Tam I have just done something really, really stupid. I talked to a reporter from CNN who said that she was a business reporter but she was trying to find out who my suppliers are. I don't

think that she was a business reporter. I think that she was an investigative reporter. I think that I might have told her too much."

BROOKS WAS WITH ANTOINETTE outside by the fire pit when Lee Lee called. "Brooks," she said. "We need to move quickly. I had a call from a reporter from CNN. I thought that she was from their business segment and so I told her a lot about the business but now I think that she might have been an investigative reporter?"

Brook said, "It's OK Lee Lee, I will have Lucas Shilling deal with this."

Brooks placed a call to Lucas. "We need to move fast. CNN seems to be on us."

"What do you mean?"

"Lee Lee got a call today from a reporter at CNN." Lucas thought for a moment and then said, "so did I."

"Fuck."

JENNY GRIGGS FROM KALGOORLIE, Australia knew a good story when she stumbled upon one. She knew that this was going to be a good story. Too many people were hanging up on her. She was happy that Ag was traveling a lot. Storm was growing. She was starting to smile but Jenny had read somewhere that the smile in babies was mostly just caused by gas. Either way she didn't care. Her schedule had completely flipped. She would sleep when she could during the day and stay awake most nights. She was digging and digging. She dug until she found the back story behind the International Association for Relief for Children with Heart Disease. Elephant poaching.

"Fuck, this is going to be big."

ELENA DECIDED THAT enough was enough. She had paid the lawyers more money than she had and so far they had not accomplished much. She called her friend, an editor at The Sun newspaper. After a bit of pleasantries she came to the point. “I have no idea why you lot have not written about this but you do know that Minister Jacob is fucking the PM’s daughter don’t you?”

The editor was quiet for a while. “How do you know this?” She asked.

“Because I have a fucking video.”

The editor was silent. “Does anyone else know about this? And also, why are you telling me this.”

“I am sick and tired of these wankers that we elect just going on as if life is just fine and screwing the rest of us.

“What do you mean you have a video. Do you actually have a video of them doing it?”

“I don’t have any close-ups but I have plenty. A lot of it is grainy. Clive was not at his best. He had just been released from jail in Vietnam and I think he was spending more time in the pub than doing what I had told him to do. We have video of that wanker Jacob going into the PM’s daughter’s house. We have video of that wanker Jacob leaving the PM’s house. We have still footage taken through the bedroom window. It’s a bit grainy but you can see his naked arse and you can quite clearly see the PM’s daughter. It’s all time stamped.”

“Hmmm.”

“Don’t give me hmmm. You know as well as I do that this is going on.”

“Yes we have long suspected it.”

“OK, I have numerous tapes of my conversations with Minister Jacobs. I have the bald fucker dancing on a pinhead. I need him

to enforce the laws around the global trading of ivory. He is bloody incapable of managing a piss-up in a brewery but I need to put his feet to the fire. He never admits to the affair, they never do, but each time that I bring it up he folds. He folds like some fucking maid folding laundry. Do you want this story or don’t you?”

“Let’s meet.”



## CHAPTER THIRTY SIX



**L**UCAS SHILLING WAS sweating bullets. He had reconfigured the whole company including the Foundation. Each day at the same time he got a call from the same encrypted number. Whoever was calling was relentless. He and Brooks had met a few times to discuss things. He had reassured Brooks that all was OK but he too had a knot in his stomach. Things might not be OK after all.

There was a knock at his door. His secretary was out for lunch. “Come in.”

“Hi I am Jenny Griggs. I am an investigative reporter with CNN. Can we talk?”

BROOKS AND ANTOINETTE were sitting out by the fire pit when the phone rang. “Leave it,” said Antoinette. “Those telemarketers can’t help themselves. “Brooks picked up.”

“Hello.”

“Hi is this Brooks Dintwa?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi my name is Jenny Griggs. I am a reporter with CNN. Can I ask you some questions?”

THEY HAD LUCAS over a barrel and he spilled the beans. Elizabeth Cohen from CNN had pulled in some of her Southern Africa correspondents and they were all digging deep into the story. They offered Lucas a deal. “Tell us what you know and we will leave your name out of this. If this goes to court we have connections. We can help you but we need to know what’s going on here.”

Lucas had few options. His wife was pregnant and his oldest son was in a special needs situation at school. He needed to keep working. He told them about the elephant tusk and rhino horn poaching. He also told them about the diamonds.

HOLLY LONSDALE WAS NOT RESPONDING to the treatment as well as she had before. Dr. Sibella asked both Clive and Elena to come in and talk about the steps they needed to take to move forward. “I’m afraid that we are going to have to change course a little. There are some new experimental drugs that I am certain will help Holly, but they are not covered by the NHS. I have applied for more money and I think that we will get it but for now let’s just go ahead with the experimental drugs and figure out how to pay for it all down the road. Does that make sense?”

Clive and Elena agreed. There was nothing more precious in the world than their two girls. The following week Holly went on the new experimental drug.

JENNY AND ELIZABETH were on a Zoom call. “I talked with the lawyer that set up the foundation that funds the money for children with early heart disease. To be honest he had it all buried but I was able to piece it all together. It’s an interesting piece. I am not at the bottom of it yet but it seems that the money in the past came from elephant poaching. Some rhino horn as well. There seemed to be a crisis of conscience at some point

and they stopped the killing and moved into diamond smuggling. There is a lot, and I mean a lot of money involved. But as far as I can figure out 95% goes to funding children with this rare heart condition. It’s kind of a Robin Hood situation.”

“A Robin Hood Situation. I like that,” said Elizabeth. “That would be a good headline.”

“I think that we should wait a little,” Jenny said. “Let me do some more digging. There may be more to this story. As I told you earlier Brooks Dintwa was not interested in talking but we can probably get some leverage on him and he will talk. I think that the thing that we need to think about is once we air this the cops are going to be all over it. Lucas Shilling spoke freely. We need to figure out some kind of immunity for him.”

“I will have our lawyers look into it.”

BROOKS CALLED LUCAS. There was no response. He had not responded to any calls, texts or emails in the last week. “Strange,” he thought. “Antoinette I am going over to visit Lucas. I hope that he’s OK. He’s not returning any of my calls or answering any of my emails.”

“OK love.”

Lucas saw Brooks pull up in front of his office. “Fuck.” The back window was open and he jumped out of it and started running. He knew that he couldn’t run forever but he did not have a good explanation. Not yet anyway.

JENNY GRIGGS WAS BACK in Boston after her short visit to Zimbabwe. Storm, luckily, had taken to the bottle and Ag had juggled his work schedule and his parenting obligation. “How did it go?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jenny replied. “I know where this story is going but I don’t yet know where it’s going to end. My gut tells me that there is a lot more to uncover.” She told Ag about the visit with Lucas Shilling and also the other calls that she had made that went unanswered. Lucas had given her the street address where Brooks lived and for a week she had tried to meet with him but no one seemed to be home. Finally she gave up and had to return back to the States.

BROOKS AND ANTOINETTE had gone back to Maun to check up on Pete. Well that was the reason that Brooks gave Antoinette. He knew in his gut that things were not good. Lucas was avoiding him. The cup of coffee on his desk was still hot but there was no sign of Lucas and no sign of his assistant. The lady from CNN kept calling. The number was different each time but he knew that it was from the same person.

“Fuck.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

JENNY GRIGGS KNEW IN HER GUT that she had a big story. The lawyers at CNN had already made it clear that if a hospital was receiving grant money to spend on patients who were receiving care that was not covered by the NHS, that they needed to disclose where the money was coming from. Everyone understood their reluctance but the law was the law.

Jenny called Elizabeth. “Please ask the lawyers there at CNN to hold off for a bit. I got their email and I understand their point, but I have a feeling that this story is going to be a lot bigger and, well, CNN is in the business of breaking news and not breaking balls. I think that we should see how this all plays out.”

“Agreed.”

She tried calling Brooks again but he did not pick up. “Figures. The guy has a chance to save his arse and he won’t even talk.” Jenny had received much of the financials from both Antoinette Investments and the Foundation. Lucas Shilling was beyond sweating bullets, he was now shitting himself. He had received a call earlier in the week from a lawyer at CNN who had been quite pleasant, but also quite direct. They would cover him when push came to shove but until then he needed to cooperate. He agreed to cooperate.

Jenny and Ag were out for a walk. Storm was in the snugly. “There is more to this story,” Jenny said.

Ag said, “can’t we talk about something else?”

“No, there is a reason I agree to have sex with you and that’s because I need you to be a sounding board for me.”

“Great,” Ag said. “OK go on.”

“I have pieced the elephant poaching and diamond smuggling side of things together but I have a gut feeling that there is a lot more to this story. I am not sure why or where but I just have an instinct.”

IT WAS JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT. Jenny was awake feeding Storm when it suddenly hit her. “How could I have been such a bad reporter?” She went on LinkedIn and searched Elena Lonsdale. Bingo. It had been hiding in plain sight all the time and she had missed it.

It was early in the morning in London. Elizabeth Cohen was just getting out of the shower when her phone rang. She hesitated for a moment. She recognized the number but she was naked standing in a pool of water. “Jenny, hi is that you?”

“Yes,” sorry to call you this early, but I think that I have something.”

Elizabeth said, “yes it’s early for me but what are you doing up at this time?”

“I have Storm on my boob which leaves both of my hands free and I did some digging.” She outlined what she had read and pieced it together.

Elizabeth said, “well done you. This is indeed a big story. Can I call you back when I have some clothes on?”

“Oh sorry,” Jenny said.

BROOKS SAID TO ANTOINETTE. “We need to fold the operation and make a run for it. I went back to see Lucas. He wasn’t there but his computer was on. No screensaver which means that he had been there recently. The window in his office was open. I think that the fucker jumped out of it but anyway his MacMail was open and I saw an email from a CNN reporter. I think that it’s the same person who has been trying to call me. I scrolled down and saw that Lucas had sent all the company financials to the reporter.”

“What do you mean fold the operation and make a run for it?”

“I mean fold the operation and make a run for it. We need to get as much money as we can out of all of our accounts. Bankers cheques preferably. I have cash and can give a pile of it to Elmarie to give to the other girls. I didn’t tell you this before but I have fake passports for both of us. It won’t be long before the police come sniffing. By that time I want to be west of Australia. Anywhere. I don’t care.”

JENNY GRIGGS placed a call to Elena Lonsdale.

“Hi Jenny it’s nice to hear from you.”

Elena asked about the baby and Jenny asked about Holly’s treatment. Then she got to the point. “Elena, I didn’t realize that you are huge into wildlife conservation. When we talked for the article you mentioned that you ran a small environmental movement. I should have dug deeper on that but the article was about Holly and her disease so I focused on that. I now know that you have spearheaded the effort to stop elephant and rhino poaching and from what I have read, you take no prisoners.”

“Yes,” Elena replied. “There is no place for prisoners in this disgusting business. I want them all dead. Not the elephants, but the poachers. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Jenny replied. “But there is something that I want you to know and understand. I am not taking sides here and CNN will break the story soon about the money that has paid for Holly’s treatment...” Her voice trailed off. She didn’t have the words to say it.

“Are you still there Jenny?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. Storm was fussing,” she lied. “Look, Elena there is no easy way to say this and I am sorry to even have to tell you this but the company, well the Foundation rather, that has been giving grants to All Saints Hospital to pay for Holly’s care. Well...” her voice trailed off again.

“What is it?” Elena said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry about this but I did some digging. I am a reporter after all. I’m really sorry but the Foundation that has paid for much of Holly’s care is an outfit in Zimbabwe.”

“Go on.”

These days most of the money they have comes from smuggling diamonds out of Namibia. And opals from Australia.”

“Yes.”

“However their original source of income, back when they started to pay for Holly’s treatment came from...” Jenny could not get it out. She knew that it would change things and as a new mother she understood a parents love.

“The money that paid for Holly’s treatment, and as far as I can figure out, still pays for her treatment, came from elephant poaching.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

**B**ROOKS MET ELMARIE on the corner of George Ave and Windsor Street. Elmarie looked worried. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Look, Antoinette and I are hitting the road. CNN is going to break the story about the Foundation getting its money through illegal means. There is something that you don’t know about me. I had a bad previous life. They will find out that I am a fugitive on the run. It’s only a matter of time.”

“What do you mean bad previous life?”

“It doesn’t matter. Look, here is some money. Quite a bit of money actually. Get the girls together and split the cash. Then get out of town. The cops will come for you and I want you well out of here before they come knocking on your door.”

“Where are you going?” Elmarie asked.

“I dunno and if I did I probably would not tell you. The cops here are crap. They might make you talk and it’s best if you don’t know anything. Look, Elmarie, we had a fun run. I truly love you and the girls and we really accomplished something great together but I have to go. I have set up a secret TikTok account but you never know. These days the

cops can trace everything. Here is the information.” Brooks handed her a piece of paper. “Hide this. Give it some time and I will be in touch.”

THERE WAS A CONVENIENCE STORE on the opposite corner. Brooks bought a burner phone, paid for the SIM card and called Lee Lee. She didn’t pick up. He called Tam’s cell but she didn’t pick up either. They didn’t recognize the number and both were a bit wary since the call from the lady at CNN. Brooks left a message and moments later Lee Lee called back. Brooks explained the situation.

“For now anyway we are going to lay low. You should be fine. The Vietnamese government protects its ivory industry. Keep on with Gert. Don’t tell him about this. Keep on with Craig and you should be OK. For now you might just have to make jewelry out of ivory and opals but I will figure out how to get you the diamonds. My next call is to Hugh.”

“Why the panic?” Lee Lee asked.

“There is something that I never told you. I ran an illegal operation in London a few years ago and had to run from Interpol. It’s doesn’t matter what the business was but I am wanted by the police in most of Europe and they will come for me. They will come for you too but for now I think that you will be OK. Vietnam is Vietnam. I will text you my TikTok information. Memorize it and then delete the text. I will be in touch Lee Lee but for now I am going underground. With Antoinette, of course.”

ELENA WAS THROWING UP. Jess and Holly could hear her. Clive was out on the Bursledon River filming his beloved Brent geese. “Please go and get your Dad.

ANTOINETTE HAD TWO BAGS PACKED. Brooks said that it was highly unlikely that they would ever come back. “Just take what you need for now,” he said.

JENNY WAS UP EARLY. Storm was latched on. She still preferred the boob to the bottle. Jenny had woken long before Storm started fussing and had lain in bed. Ag was snoring. The thing about him that really annoyed her is that he farted in his sleep. Jenny pulled on her pajamas and slipped her feet into her slippers and quietly went downstairs. She started digging. She knew that she was going to break a huge story, but she also knew that there was more to the story. Her gut told her so. She dug deeper and there it was. Again, hidden in plain sight.

She called Elizabeth. This time she was fully clothed and drinking an espresso with two of her girlfriends. “Hi Liz here,” she answered. She had not recognized the number. Jenny had called through her encrypted WhatsApp number.

“I’ve got the story,” she said. “And it’s going to blow your mind. We are going to need to get on a call with the lawyers before you can break this but believe me it’s going to be big. Brooks Dintwa, the man behind the Foundation that is funding all this care, is also on quite a few Most Wanted lists. It seems that he was the guy who was behind the child sex ring. You remember. The one where half of Boris Johnson’s cabinet got marched off to jail. Interpol have been after him but they must have given up. I presume that he changed his identity but he didn’t change his name. I did some digging on the dark web. I wish that I hadn’t tried to call him. I think that I might have inadvertently given him the head’s up.”

“You didn’t know,” Elizabeth said kindly. “You were just doing your job as a reporter. You didn’t know that there was more than

one story. I will call the boss and the lawyers right now. Perhaps they can arrest him. We can have a TV crew there and scoop two major stories at the same time. I will talk to the boss and call you right back.” She hung up the phone and excused herself from her friends.

CLIVE CAME RUNNING into the house. Elena was upstairs on their bed. Jess and Holly looked worried. “Girls can you give me and your Dad some time? We need to talk.” The girls left but they didn’t go far. The bedroom door was a cheap one and they knew that they would be able to hear the conversation.

Elena was a mess. She told Clive about the phone call. “What the fuck are we going to do? My whole life’s work has been devoted to eliminating this elephant poaching scourge from the earth. Now I find out that we have taken money from this very same industry and that money has probably saved Holly’s life.”

“We didn’t know,” Clive offered.

“If we had known would we have taken the fucking money? Holly has a rare disease. The fucking NHS won’t pay for her care. No I would not have taken the fucking money if I had known where it came from.”

“I would have,” Clive said.

## CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

ELIZABETH COHEN placed a call to her boss. “Can we meet? ASAP? I need to run something by you.”

“His secretary let her in right away and Elizabeth came strait to the point. “We have a story, a big one. You remember the child sex scandal that happened a few years ago? The one where Boris Johnson’s cabinet ministers were involved?”

“Yes.”

“I have been working with a freelancer, Jennifer Griggs. We did that piece about children with early heart disease.”

“Yes that was a good piece.”

“Jenny has been digging and found that the money the hospitals that treated some of those kids with heart disease, the portion that was not covered by NHS, has been coming from a foundation based in Zimbabwe. They have been funneling millions of dollars to the hospitals and quite likely saved a lot of lives.”

“That’s the story? And how does it connect with the child sex scandal?”

“Jenny went onto the dark web and found out that the person that ran the child sex business is the same person that now runs

that foundation that is funding all of this care. His name is Brooks Dintwa. He has been on the run from Interpol and various other police organizations since escaping from London. He managed to change his identity but he, for some reason only he knows, probably ego, did not change his name.”

“And the story is?”

“The foundation makes their money from smuggling diamonds out of Namibia. There is also some kind of connection with opals in Australia but that part is not clear yet. But here is the story. One of the families that has benefited from the funding is the same family who we featured in the piece we ran. The Mom, Elena Lonsdale, is a fierce conservationist who has devoted much of her life to ending poaching, specifically elephant tusks and rhino horn.”

“Yes.”

Before the foundation was smuggling diamonds their main source of revenue came from poaching. Elephant tusk and rhino horn to be specific.”

“Holy shit.”

CNN MOBILIZED their Southern African correspondents. The boss wanted them on the scene before he had his lawyers alert the police.

Taking the time to get the TV team in place was all the time that Brooks needed to get out of town. He and Antoinette hired a kid to drive them to Harare where he had chartered a plane to get them to Malawi. Before they took off Brooks placed one last call on his burner phone. “Thalitha,” he said. “I am going to have to run for it again. You know the situation. Please give Pete my love. I will be in touch when I can but for now it’s best that you don’t know anything.

THE POLICE ARRIVED at the home where Brooks and Antoinette had just fled. The CNN crew was on station but it was a bust. The police could tell that they had done a run. The local police chief had hoped that he could break open a big case and had purposefully not involved Interpol or any of the other police agencies that were looking for Brooks Dintwa. Now he needed them; badly.

They had very little to work on. Africa is a big place. Interpol alerted all airports in Southern Africa to be on the lookout, but Brooks and Antoinette were using fake passports.

They landed at a small airstrip on the outskirts of Lilongwe. The pilot had called ahead and there was a car waiting for them. Brooks looked at Antoinette. “We will be lucky if this thing makes it two miles.” It didn’t. The car quit after half a mile. “Fuck,” said Brooks. The driver said, “Don’t worry. I have a friend.”

“You have a friend? I have friends too.”

The driver said, “one moment please.” He dialed a number and spoke in Chichewa. Brooks didn’t understand a word he was saying but he could tell by the drivers animation that something was happening.

“Don’t worry, my friend will be here in five minutes.”

Brooks and Antoinette arrived at Lilongwe International Airport. “I’m scared,” Antoinette said.

“We’ll be ok. We have nothing on us to trace us and we are flying on fake passports.”

“But what if they find out that the passports are fake?”

“I dunno, let’s check in and see what happens. Get ready to run if we have to. You have your burner phone and my number programmed. If we get split up call me and we can go from there.”

The tickets were First Class. There was less scrutiny of First



Class passengers and they made it through without any trouble. Brooks and Antoinette found their seats and the plane took off into a black night. They held hands until they reached cruising altitude. The flight attendant came through. "Can I get you something to drink?" Brooks looked at Antoinette. "I will take five of whatever kind of whiskey you have. And some ice."

Antoinette looked at him. "I know," he said. "I know. I am getting sick of Pepsi."

## CHAPTER FORTY

**T**HE PLANE TOUCHED DOWN in Rabat. "Do you think that we are going to be OK?" asked Antoinette.

"I have no idea. I really don't. I have planned this escape for years but you never know. The world is so interconnected these days and the police can trace your every move. They listen in on your phone, they read your emails. TikTok is probably the only app that we can trust. The Chinese have their shit together when it comes to encrypting things but you never know. They are probably listening as well and when it suits them they will sell us out. Lucas was able to get me a new identity but I was so stupid to want to keep my name. We cleaned everything out except my name and we went and named the company Brooks Industries. How could I have been so stupid?"

They left the terminal and walked out into the bright sun. The Moroccan air was hot and humid. It smelled of rosemary and mint. Their UBER took them downtown to the hotel where they checked in as Mr. and Mrs. Clarence. "Why Clarence?" Antoinette asked. "I dunno. I once met a guy, a really nice guy. His name was Terry Clarence. I liked his name. It was either that or Jones but I don't think that we could pass as the Jones's."

THE STORY BROKE ON CNN. It led with the footage of the two ministers in Boris Johnson's cabinet being led away in cuffs after they had been exposed as two of the most frequent customers of the child sex ring. Elizabeth couldn't help herself. She was a hard nosed reporter but the footage was just too juicy. She knew that her audience could not get enough of the scandal and this was the perfect opportunity to bring it up again. Then they cut to a herd of elephant making their way just below the escarpment, out of sight, out of danger, or so the matriarch thought.

"Breaking News. CNN has learned of an illegal ivory and diamond smuggling ring that provides elephant tusks and uncut diamonds to an outfit in Vietnam where it's turned into fine jewelry. It's a multi-million dollar industry fueled by the death of thousands of elephants and paid for by the rich and famous who would not be seen dead in public without the latest trinket designed by the most recent fashionable designer.

We are calling it the Robin Hood Situation

They cut to a drab building. There was a man in a bad suit being led away in handcuffs. The reporters were yelling questions. "Where is Brooks Dintwa? Do you know where Brooks Dintwa is? You know that you have the blood of a thousand elephants on your hands?" Lucas Shilling could not believe it. He thought that he had protection from the lawyers at CNN but suddenly found out that the network needed a villain and without Brooks he had become the face of the story.

Elmarie was eating at the Nando's in central Joburg. She had taken Brook's advice and fled. All the girls had fled and were scattered across South Africa. She had ordered the Street Corn and was about to take a bite when CNN cut to Breaking News. She saw Lucas being shoved into a police car. His wife was yelling out of the window. "Lucas what have you done now?" Elmarie

enjoyed her street corn and ordered a plate of peri peri prawns and a Pepsi. She had never liked Lucas.

Jenny had been given a "head's up" tape. It was still raw footage but Elizabeth had told her that they would clean it up and run the story as the lead on the evening news. She told Jenny that Anderson Cooper wanted to do a full hour on the story at a later date. "He wants to talk to you. His team will contact you and if you are OK with it, he will fly to Boston to interview you." Jenny turned to Ag. "The great Anderson Cooper is going to fly to Boston to interview Jenny Griggs from Kalgoorlie, Australia. Can you fucking believe it?"

Lee Lee and Tam took a picnic lunch with them. They spread a blanket between the graves of Lee Lee's Mom and Mr. Vu. Earlier in the day Lee Lee had received a call from one of the ministers in Nguyen Xuan Phuc's cabinet. "Lee Lee," he said. "We have heard from CNN and they are going to break a story about the illegal ivory trade and focus it on Vietnam. Don't worry. The President has told me that the government will protect you."

"OK. Thanks. I think."

She turned to Tam. "Chicken or beef?"

"Beef please."

Lee Lee slowly and deliberately took the plastic wrap off the beef bowl. She added the pho and let it sit for a few minutes. Then she added a little oil and some dried basil leaves. She handed the bowl to Tam.

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

"I can't believe that I forgot." Lee Lee reached into her pocket and found the cinnamon basil. She pulled some of the delicate leaves off and dropped them into the soup. "Let it sit for a minute," she said. Tam leaned forward and kissed her on

the lips. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

Brooks and Antoinette watched the coverage from their hotel room. They had left Rabat and found an AirBnB in Marrakesh. "You know what I feel bad about?" Brooks said. "I feel bad about all the elephants that died. That night when we camped at Moremi. That was when it really hit me. They are quite simply the most beautiful creatures that ever graced this earth. I remember them gliding by our tent as if floating on air." He felt Antoinette starting to sob beside him.

"Was it worth it?"

"I don't know, my love, but we saved the lives of many children."

"Yes, but which life is more precious?" Antoinette asked. "The life of an elephant or the life of a child?" Her question hung in the air.

Antoinette sniffed and said, "I think that I might be pregnant."

Then there was a sudden, loud knock on their door.

## LOOKING BACK



# CINNAMON GIRL

Published in 2022 by Great Circle Press

**A** LEAFY LINED LANE led up to the main house and Jack, the family pet pig was sauntering slowly on his stick thin legs. He had been out for his morning walk and was returning to the main house hoping for some scraps from the kitchen. On the way into the house he stopped to scratch an itch, rubbing against the doorframe, tilting his head slightly. Aaah that felt good. His tiny tail wagged with pleasure.

"Get out," Ms. Lillian yelled, shooing him. "You already ate this morning. Twice. Don't you remember? Plus you are dripping mud." Ms. Lillian was acting mad, but inside, well, seeing Jack was like a tiny balm to her. He reminded her of her home in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica where her childhood was spent living close to the earth. Her Mom kept chickens. Her Dad raised the livestock, a couple of pigs and always a goat. The pigs were sent to market but the goat was slaughtered at the end of summer. It

was a big deal. All the neighbors came, their colorful clothing adding a festive touch. The goat was usually dispatched early in the day and would be simmering in a large pot filled with spices. The fragrant aroma wafted on the warm late summer breeze and the guests crowded around drinking beer. Strangely enough they were drinking Guinness, the thick syrupy beer from Ireland. It was a status symbol, a small point of pride that they could afford more than Red Stripe, the locally brewed beer that was much better suited for drinking in a sultry hot climate, but status is status and so Guinness it was. Ms. Lillian's father was not only a good cook, but he also knew; The Secret. Keep your guests around the fire where the heady aroma would have them craving something to eat. Keep them there for hours and feed them drinks in the hot Jamaican sun and by the time the goat was ready they would eat anything as if it was the best meal that they had ever had.

Ms. Lillian smiled at the memory. Those small moments kept her grounded. She had left Jamaica looking for a better life for herself and found it in the farming countryside of Hamilton, Massachusetts. She turned back to the sink to deal with the dishes and heard a low snort behind her. Jack was in the garbage. While her head had been in Jamaica, Jack had used his snout to open the door to the recycling area and was retreating guiltily out the door with the crusts of last night's pizza. Heaven in a box to a hungry pig. "Shoo," Ms. Lillian said scooting Jack out the kitchen door. "You are a bad pig. You eat too much," but Jack was gone, his curly tail wagging in delight. He knew that Ms. Lillian loved him, she had in fact told him so.

Ms. Lillian turned back to the sink while Jack ambled off to lie in the shade of the old oak. He flopped down on his side and was instantly asleep. Ms. Lillian could see him out the kitchen window. She smiled to herself. "That pig," she thought.

"What are they going to do with him when they take off on the boat?"

JAY HAD LONG DREAMED of doing another circumnavigation. When he was younger he made a living as a professional sailor. Well professional sailor might be a little highfalutin for what he did. He was a sailor for hire and went from regatta to regatta, his duffle bag always at the ready. Back then it was a letter, or if there was a budget, a phone call asking if he was interested in a boat delivery or some yacht race somewhere. Letters were always a bit of a worry. It meant that there was little money. Perhaps his expenses would be covered, food included, but nothing extra for rent and even less for beer. A call, on the other hand, meant that there might be some money involved. Either way it didn't matter. Jay was young, looking for adventure, and ready to go at the drop of a dime. Or a stamp.

He looked around at his home. The kids were asleep. Jess too. She had headed up early which was unusual for her. It was normally Jay who turned in early. But tonight he was restless, his brain working overtime. They, well he to be more specific, had just bought a boat. A solid Bristol 40. He fell in love at first sight. The brilliant blue of the polished hull, the soft glow and sweet smell of teak warmed by the afternoon sun was almost more than he could bear. He had to have her. Her name was Cinnamon Girl. She won his heart and earlier in the week Jay had met with his old friend Bump, the yacht broker, and they made a deal. Jay might have paid more than he needed to but love is love and he was in love. With a boat, and Jess, his kids, and Jack if he was to be honest. "What the hell am I going to do with the pig," he thought?

He was also secretly in love with Lillian.

SUNDAY MORNING AND THE FAMILY were walking down the dock at the Eastern Yacht Club in Marblehead. It was a sunny Sunday morning but the world seemed surreal. Everyone was wearing a mask. A Covid-19 Sunday. The kids were excited and ran ahead. "Hey Jackson," Pattie said to the launch driver. "Did you see our new boat?"

"I did indeed. It's beautiful. Really, really beautiful."

"My Dad says that we are going to sail 'round the world."

"Oh, that sounds like fun."

Pattie smiled. "Jackson you should come with us."

"Just get in the launch. You know I can't do that. I just got accepted to BU and my classes start this Fall.

"Oh, OK I will send you some Insta pics."

Jay climbed on board, helping Jess with the bags. Jackson cast off and gunned the engine.

"It's a real beauty Mister J," he said. "I love the color." Jay felt a surge of happiness. Despite Covid they were going to have life carry on just as it should. They were going to socially distance out on the open ocean far from any virus. As the launch pulled closer to the boat Jay felt a shiver. He was not sure if it was a shiver of pleasure; or fear. He would soon find out.

"WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO with Jack?" Jess asked. Jay knew that she would ask and he had no good answer. He had had this idea of a boat trip long before the kids fell in love with a tiny pink pig they found at the Topsfield Fair. Jay went along with it at the time because they were so excited, but now two hundred pounds of bacon stood in the way of his dream. "What are we going to do with Jack?" she asked.

"What was he going to do with Ms. Lillian?" he mused.

LATER THAT NIGHT when Jess and Jay were in bed she asked him again. "Jay," she said. "I love the boat and the kids loved the day out on the water. I love the idea of an adventure and I know that it's been your dream, but we have a life here. A home, our children have friends. We have Ms. Lillian and, well, we have a pig. What are we going to do with Jack?"

Jay rolled over feeling uneasy. Why did she mention Ms. Lillian? His nose was sunburnt and itchy so he distracted from her question by rubbing it vigorously. "I'm not sure Honey but I will figure it out." Figure it out. It was always his fallback position. Yup, the great Mr. J could always figure it out. Jay was sure that he could find a nice home for Jack but he was not so sure about Lillian.

She was Lillian to him, not Ms. Lillian.

COMING SOON



## LEE LEE

Coming spring 2025 from Great Circle Press



**L**EE LEE AND TAM were picnicking on the banks of the Song Cam, the beautiful river that wraps itself lovingly around the city of Hai Phong in northeastern Vietnam. Their home was not far away and it had become their routine to spend most Sunday afternoons lounging in the shade of a large banyan tree drinking wine; secretly of course. The Vietnamese officials frowned on public drinking, but Lee Lee had it all worked out. Their thermos was filled with one of the more expensive wines that the high-end gourmet shop on the corner not far from their house sold, and the red solo cups gave nothing away.

“I love these times, Tam said. “I love when I don’t have to share you. You are go, go, go all week and when you come home at night you are too tired to even think about sex.”

Lee Lee kissed her. “I know. I’m sorry. I love you to the ends

of this earth and back and all of the other earth's inbetween, but the business is exploding and I am the only one there that can run things. Tam lay back on the blanket. She let a lop of her long brown hair flop in front of her left eye. She knew that it turned Lee Lee on. "I know," Tam said. "I know. But I have been thinking. I am getting tired of waiting tables. I was thinking of sending my resume to the Hilton Hotel, you know the new one near the airport that they are building? They are looking for receptionists."

Lee Lee rolled over. "You know that I can support both of us?" she said. "I make a lot of money and I could make a lot more if I wanted to. I'm the boss and I set my own salary."

Tam sat up cross-legged. "I guess, but I need to find something more to do with my life other than wait tables." She brushed the hair off her face.

Lee Lee was leaning in to kiss Tam when the first gunshot went off. There were two punks on a motorcycle. The guy on the back had the gun, but luckily he was a bad shot. The bullet was meant for either Lee Lee or Tam, it didn't matter, but instead it hit the banyan tree and ricocheted off and hit a small stray cat that had been begging for scraps. The cat yelped and ran off.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Tam yelled. They were running toward their home when the punks came by a second time. The second shot also missed. "Nhưng ngudi dong tinh chet tiet," they yelled. "Fucking gays."

LEE LEE GREW UP ON THE Mekong River Delta in Vietnam. Her Mom had a stall where she sold pho; not just any pho. She sold the very best pho on the whole Delta. She was a legend. An absolute legend. People came from all over Ho Chi Minh City to enjoy her food. She had a secret ingredient; cinnamon basil. Plus there was a lot of love that went into in each and every bowl.

Lee Lee was running to the edge of the park when the bullet hit her; in the calf. She fell to the ground faster than a moose dropped by an AK47. Tam screamed. She turned, but the shooters were gone. She could see a trail of blue smoke where their motorbike had been. There was a strong smell of gunpowder in the air.

Lee Lee was clearly in pain. The back part of her leg was gone. Tam grabbed for her cell and called the emergency number. Five minutes later an ambulance arrived. "You fuckers," Tam yelled, but Lee Lee said simply, "the only way to change any of this is to change all of it." Then she slipped into a place where only people with massive pain go.

DUC GREW UP MODESTLY. His family tree went back many generations and they had all made a decent living. Duc was looking to make more than just a decent living. He was young and ambitious. He was willing to try anything and for a time had run a food truck. It was an OK way to pass a day, but he needed more. There were a few years when he ran his own limo company but UBER took over most of his market and within a few short months his cars sat idle. That pissed him off more than just a little. One morning, while reading the papers with his cup of hot green tea, he saw a brief article about a young businessman who had declared that he was running to unseat President Nguyen Xuan Phuc's.

Duc was intrigued. He had recently read an article which outlined how to make a lot of money; in the shortest amount of time. It was in the New York Times and the gist of it was that there were only two easy ways to make money quickly; politics or religion. Duc was an atheist so politics it was. He contacted the young businessman. His name was Nguyen Phu. He was part of the Vietnam Parliament and was a rising star mostly because his

platform was to pass new laws and to tighten up on existing laws, especially when it came to homosexuality. His stump speech was the same every place that he went. “I am an atheist,” he said, “but if there is a God I am sure that that God would not approve of men sleeping with men or women sleeping with women. It’s just wrong. Wrong,” and to make his point he said “wrong” a third time. He was gaining a following not only in Ho Chi Minh City, but across Vietnam. Nguyen Phu came close to toppling President Nguyen Xuan Phuc but the President had the machine behind him and he prevailed. Nguyen Phu might have lost but he had sowed a whole lot of hate across Vietnam.

Duc had played a small part in the campaign. He didn’t approve of the message, but he understood charisma and Nguyen Phu had charisma; in bucket loads. The day after the election Nguyen called a meeting with his team.

“What did we do wrong?” He asked. “There was a groundswell of support all across Vietnam. We should have won.” Duc looked at him. He looked feeble, like a man who had just lost his dog. “We did win,” Duc said. “We did win, but Vietnam is changing. Your charisma got us only so far, but I think that your message was a little off. People in Vietnam are becoming more tolerant of gays, both male and female.” Nguyen stared at him. “If that’s what you think then you are fired.” Duc stood and left the room. He had known all along who he was dealing with but he thought that Nguyen might change. It wasn’t to be. Nguyen remained in Parliament and ran again five years later but lost by an even larger margin. Duc watched from the outside looking in. The man was sowing hate across the country, but it wasn’t working.

Thankfully.

**Lee Lee will be published in early 2025 by Great Circle Press**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**B**RIAN HANCOCK is an acclaimed author, adventurer, and expert in the world of offshore sailing. His extensive experience on the open seas and deep understanding of the intricacies of sailing have made him a respected figure in both the maritime community and literary circles.

Born in South Africa, Hancock's fascination with the ocean began at a young age, leading him to a life that would be defined by exploration, challenge, and a relentless pursuit of adventure. Hancock's sailing career spans several decades, during which he has accumulated over 300,000 sea miles including three Whitbread Round the World Races which is considered one of the most grueling and prestigious sailing competitions in the world.

His first-hand experience with the trials and triumphs of ocean racing lends a palpable authenticity to his writing, allowing readers to feel the wind, waves, and raw emotion that come with a life spent on the high seas. As a writer, Hancock has a unique ability to translate the complexities of sailing into

compelling narratives that resonate with both seasoned sailors and avid readers alike.

Brian is the author of 12 books including two memoirs (Two Bricks and a Tickey High and Lapping the Planet), a murder mystery (Murder at your Convenience), two novels (Cinnamon Girl and Brooks), two books of short stories (Twisted Tales and More Twisted Tales) and four children's books in the Adventures of Fat Cat series. He also authored the definitive guide to all things sails and sailmaking (Maximize your Sail Power). In addition Brian has written for numerous magazines around the world and is a heralded public speaker.

Brian lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts with his wife Sally and their cat Ziggy. Their five children and a grandson stop by every now and then for a free meal and a warm bed.

From the Okavango Delta in Botswana to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam this is a wonderful story about love and danger and some treacherous business all in the name of doing good. Brooks is a Skabenga, the Zulu word for troublemaker and he sure makes some trouble, but with a heart of gold and a song in his heart.

*“This is such a fun read. It’s not high literature but it’s a fun story, well told. Hang in for a great ride and enjoy the landing. Brian sure knows how to craft a good yarn.”*

--- Lindsay Bassett



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