

THE
RAIN
BEETLE

WHEN A BOY CARELESSLY KILLS ONE OF THESE PRECIOUS BEETLES. ITS DEATH
WILL BRING DISASTER NOT ONLY ON HIM BUT UPON HIS ENTIRE TRIBE.

RYAN BLUMENTHAL

THE
RAIN
BEETLE



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The Rain Beetle
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First edition published in the UK in September 2012

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Print Edition ISBN: 978-1-78281-002-5

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THE
RAIN
BEETLE



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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THE OLD MAN



He had outlived them all.

He had outlived his children.

He had outlived his grandchildren.

He had outlived his grandchildren's children.

He was the last living survivor of his tribe.

And he was beyond loneliness. There simply was no one left to talk to and no one left to listen. He was trapped deep within his own mind, isolated and alone.

'For some, life is too long' thought the old man, 'for others, too short.'

The old man wore a lion claw around his neck.

All he had left were his memories – and these too were beginning to fade.

He remembered when the world had begun to change. He remembered when the tribe had decided to leave their traditional ancient hunting grounds. He remembered the signs. He remembered the omens. Yet he had chosen to ignore them all, forever hopeful that things would get better, that things would improve. But things never got better and things never improved.

CHAPTER ONE

The old man had reached the ripe old age of ninety-three. He had lived a life filled with trials and tribulations, failures and tragedies. His hair was grey and he was extremely frail. Some would have said that he had been a pillar of society, for he was a healer. Many people had come to him over the years seeking his advice, his council and his wisdom. His face was etched with goodness and kindness, yet at the same time there was a hidden harshness... or perhaps something else.

As he stood there among the ruins of his ancient village with the dusty winds blowing, he knew that his journey must begin at once. He had no more time left to spare. He had his calabash, filled to the brim with water. He had his sack, fashioned from old animal skins, strapped to his back. He had his bow and his quiver full of arrows. He had some dried meats and dried fruits. There was unlikely to be any other food or water along the way, for there was a savage drought ravaging the land. He had estimated that his journey would take him about seven days. If he were younger it surely would have taken him three, but now he was old and slow and weary and tired.

The old man knew deep within his heart that he had an important task to complete. And it was this single, simple task which had kept him going for the past couple of months. It was this singular task which had motivated him and which had given him purpose and strength. For he knew that if he did not complete this task, then surely all of mankind, from now and forever, would be cursed and doomed for eternity.

For in his possession, tightly clasped in his old arthritic hand, double wrapped with old brown leather, and tightly entombed within golden Amber, was *Africa's darkest secret...*

CHAPTER TWO

NEVER KILL A RAIN BEETLE



There was one golden rule which had been passed down in scripture and by word of mouth, through oral law, from generation to generation.

The rule was very simple – Never kill a rain beetle.

This very special little blue beetle was to be found nowhere else in the land. Turquoise and shining blue, it would emerge every springtime to herald the coming of the rains. Failure of the beetles to appear would indicate that the rains would not come.

This was why the tribe treated this little blue beetle with such absolute respect. They would ensure at all costs that the little beetles were revered and honoured and treasured. The tribe believed that if the beetles were treated well they would return, bringing with them the rains.

Tribal law was very strict and very clear regarding this rule: anyone who dared to injure or kill a rain beetle would themselves be injured or killed. This little blue scarab beetle was therefore immortalized and worshipped and carved into the very fabric of tribal society. Pictures of the beetle were carved into stones. Paintings of it decorated their earthenware. And stories of the little beetle were told around the campfires or under the old fig tree.

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It was the boy with the thin ribs who noticed the first beetle of the season. The boy was playing near the river when he noticed a strange blue beetle sitting on one of the black river stones. This little beetle was fascinating in that it seemed totally *unafraid* of him. It moved very little. It almost seemed dead. It just sat there on the river stone; one could not help but see it. The beetle just sat there, silently watching the boy.

The beetle had an unusual way of observing the boy. It was a very quiet, very strange and very surreal moment when he noticed that he was being watched by the little beetle, yet he made nothing of it. He quickly trapped the beetle within his cupped hands and placed it into his pouch. He would show it to the tribal elders.

The young boy was fascinated by his little blue beetle. It was strange in that it wasn't quite like any of the other beetles in the region. For one thing, it had the most unbelievable blue shine, like the finest turquoise blue stone from the clearest of freshwater streams. And then there was its *fearlessness*. It was totally unafraid of the boy. It would just sit there and be handled. It had a way of simply sitting and observing, almost as if it knew something, something secret or sacred that no one else knew.

The elders were all sitting under the old fig tree. They were in deep discussion and all seemed to have deep frowns upon their foreheads.

Surely the old men were discussing the drought which was busy ravaging the land. The boy knew not to interrupt such important meetings. But this, he felt, was important. He approached the old men.

One old man was clearly quite irritated by the boy. 'What do you want, boy?' he asked in a gruff voice.

The boy just stood there, hands cupped tightly in front of him. Slowly and gingerly he opened his hands to reveal the turquoise gem inside.

CHAPTER TWO

‘The beetles have arrived.’ said the boy, with a smile on his face.

The old man looked at the insect and carefully took it from the boy. Interestingly, the insect allowed itself to be handled by the old man. It just sat there on his leathery hand, quietly and fearlessly observing.

The old man showed it to his fellow elders. At first there was silence. Then smiles appeared. Eyes shone and frowns disappeared.

‘The beetles have arrived! The rain beetles have arrived!’ they shouted.

The news spread quickly through the village.

There was much excitement and much animation, for soon the rains would come.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FEAST OF THE RAIN BEETLE



As was custom, the first sighting of a rain beetle was traditionally celebrated with a great feast. Everyone would partake in the feast, both young and old, men and women, frail and healthy, rich and poor. Everyone would join in the celebrations.

Every year, on the night of the feast, the little blue scarab rain beetles would be celebrated and worshipped and honoured. Men would dress up in ornamental headgear and the women would sing songs of high praise and prepare the food. Large fires would be lit and the most delicious of foods – the last foods of the previous rainy season - would be served. Copious amounts of fermented beer would be drunk; it truly was one of the most joyous times of the year.

The beetles used to come year after year, from the south west. Good rains had always sprung up from behind them. Ever consistent and ever reliable, the little blue beetles would come in from over the mountains and across the valleys. They had never let the tribe down. Granted, once or twice they had arrived one or two days early and once or twice a couple of days late, but for as long as the tribal elders could remember, the beetles had arrived.

From where they came no one could tell, for there were sharp granite mountain ranges, deep slow-flowing rivers, wide green valleys

CHAPTER THREE

and endless, impossibly blue skies which they would have to cross, extending for miles and miles all the way down to the south western corners of the land. Nonetheless, they would always arrive. Then, several days later, torrential, nourishing and refreshing rains would come. This was the way it had always been and the tribe had always celebrated their arrival with the great feast. From time immemorial the tribe had celebrated the Feast of the Rain Beetle.

But this year things would be different.

For no more blue rain beetles would arrive. And neither would the rains.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEATH OF ELI



There was a rumour doing the rounds in the village that during the night of the feast, someone had killed a rain beetle.

It had been five days since the discovery of the first, solitary rain beetle, yet no more beetles had arrived since. What was more, there were no clouds brewing on the horizon.

As you can imagine, the tribe was anxious and tension levels were running high. There was great uncertainty in the air. And it was then that the rumour began to circulate.

The rumour was that Eli had been seen on the night of the feast with a little blue beetle crushed in his hand. Some said he had picked up the crushed beetle from the ground, while others said it had been accidentally crushed during the dancing and the festivities. However, an old woman from the tribe said she had personally seen Eli crush the beetle.

Everyone knew of Eli; he was the teenage boy who had been born with brain sickness. His brain and mind seemed to work much more slowly than those of the rest of the villagers. He was not independent and his mother had to take care of him. Some had to hunt food for him. Others had to fetch water for him. And at times, others had to feed and take care of him. He dragged his right leg when he walked

CHAPTER FOUR

and he drooled when he talked. Everyone knew of Eli.

‘Could this be true?’ they asked. ‘Eli is not very clever, but even he knows of the sacredness of the Rain Beetle. Even Eli knows the Rule. Surely he knows never to harm the Rain Beetle.’

His mother was always with him – surely she would not have allowed such a thing to happen?

Had he really done such a hellish thing? Had a member of their own community done such a deed? Had he killed the rain beetle? Had his mother allowed this to happen?

His mother saw how the people suddenly changed their attitude towards her and her son. At first they distanced themselves from them. Then they saw them as enemies, Eli and his mother – traitors in their midst. The tribe cursed them with their eyes.

‘May the Ancestors save you, Eli!’ came the cries. ‘Dog!’ they screamed. ‘What have you done?’ they cried. ‘Die!’ they cried.

Eli’s mother remembered the hot sky and she remembered the bloody sun. She was still young and beautiful and she had only the one child. Her husband, Eli’s father, had died many years ago in a hunting accident and she had raised Eli all by herself.

Eli had been born with his brain sickness, and she had always taken care of him. She had always been present, everywhere Eli went.

She had never remarried. And she had never birthed another child.

She remembered the elderly women cursing her with her eyes. She had never seen such hatred in anyone’s eyes before.

‘Why has your son done such a thing?’ asked the elderly woman.

‘For what reason has he done such a deed?’ she cried.

Surely there must have been a mistake. Surely this was all unfounded, all untrue. Eli could never hurt a rain beetle. He could never bring himself to kill something so sacred.

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Surely they were all mistaken. Surely they were all wrong and Eli was innocent. Surely he had simply found the beetle crushed upon the ground. Surely he had simply been picking up the pulverized remains of the beetle when he had been spotted by the elderly woman. Surely they were all wrong...

Yet the crowd would not hear any of this reasoning. It was she, the elderly woman who had called for blood. And she called for blood loud and clear.

There was now a mutinous mood in the air. The tribal members were hungry for Eli's blood. The weather was hot and the people were maddened and hungry and thirsty and angry.

Eli found himself surrounded by a crowd of villagers. At the head of the group was the old woman, aggressive, vocal and animated. She had whipped the crowd up into a chaotic frenzy.

Eli could not understand. He could not communicate. His mother stood before him, guarding him, imploring the crowd. She begged and pleaded with the masses. She tried to talk reasonably to the old woman.

'What have you done, Eli?' shouted the old woman.

'What have you done to us?' cried another.

'You have cursed our people!' shouted someone else.

The crowd continued to gather. There were suddenly many villagers present.

'The rains will not come now!' cried a man.

'You have killed the rain beetle!' shouted another.

With this, the old woman threw a stone at Eli. He had difficulty understanding. He just stood there, awkward, his face pale, his eyes wide open. He stuttered to talk above the mutterings of the crowd. No one could hear him.

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Suddenly, another person threw a stone at the boy. Then another, and then another. His poor mother tried to block the stones with her body. Eli tried to guard his face, upon which there were now signs of sudden and very real fear. One of the stones hit his head and he fell to his knees.

Now the crowd became more violent, more vocal and more aggressive. One of the youngsters broke from the ranks and rushed in and kicked Eli on his leg. Another ran forward and grabbed his head. His mother held her arms outstretched before her son, trying to stop the madness.

‘Please stop!’ his mother cried. ‘Please stop – my son is innocent!’ She screamed as two men dragged her away.

Another young man went up and punched Eli, then another, and then another.

That was the signal. A mass of villagers swiftly and violently descended upon the boy. The crowd kicked and punched and stoned him. One boy had a stick. Another had a whip. Even a young boy of about 13 years joined in, throwing a heavy rock down upon Eli’s head.

And in a final gesture, the old woman – the one who had instigated the mob violence – took a flaming log from a nearby fire and set Eli’s clothing alight.

Later, when the crowds finally dispersed and the flames had died down, Eli’s distraught mother would return. And there she would sit sobbing and mourning over her son’s charred, mutilated and still smoking corpse.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HEALER



The old man who wore the lion claw around his neck had always been a bit of a loner, and he had very few real friends. He spent most of his time studying and watching and witnessing the things around him.

Most of his life was spent in quiet reflection. He seemed to have more insight into people and things than anyone else. That is probably why he had been selected to become the tribal healer. It appeared that he had been honed from a very young age to fulfill this role. His role as traditional healer had been hammered and forged into him. He would move in the high tribal circles as an advisor to the Chief and the elders. People would come from far and wide to seek his wisdom, his council and his advice.

People were funny, reflected the old man. They were, for the most part, very predictable – yet at the same time, they were random and chaotic. They would often surprise you.

He thought back to a time when he was supposed to have been the wisest healer in the land, a true justice full of wise sayings. Yet in retrospect, how little he in fact had known.

People would present themselves to him with health problems, relationship problems, family problems, love problems, work and education problems, wealth problems and travel problems. He would

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then set them at ease and advise them accordingly. He oozed knowledge and wisdom and kindness and goodness, and many people from far and wide had great faith in him.

Yet there was still something in his face, hidden behind those eyes, some sort of discontent... or was it perhaps something else?

The old man who wore the lion claw around his neck realized that very few people in this world were happy. He realized that the tribal people were rarely satisfied in this life. If his people did not possess something, they naturally sought it out. If they had attained something which they had pursued, they would seek that which would allow them to maintain and improve upon it. What was more, the old man realized that it was only the most thoroughly grounded and secure of people who were truly satisfied with their lot in life, although they too, at times, needed help.

The old man realized that most people in his tribe did not realize that the happy times in their lives were really only measured in moments, not in years. Most people in his tribe pursued fleet-footed and short-lived happiness. He realized that despite the gross unfairness that was this life, people were ultimately all equal. Some were born to wealth and others were not, but neither of these groups of people was necessarily unhappy or happy.

The old man realized that those villagers who had some skill, experience, advantage, gift or quality in one area usually had a detriment, handicap, disadvantage, weakness or shortcoming in another. All too often, people were blind to their own advantages and envious of those belonging to others. Those gifted with good looks, a loving family, influential friends, a quality education, wisdom, longevity, health and good fortune probably thought they lacked those self-same things.

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The old man realized that the average person typically had wonderful experiences, skills, traits, characteristics and other advantages – yet similarly lacked many others.

He also knew that anything which anyone lacked, or which deterred them from attaining their goals, would cause frustrations which typically would lead to anger, fear, greed, suspicion, worry, anxiety and guilt. It would also bring unfortunate unethical or immoral decisions and their consequences. Long-term problems could cause people to become emotionally restless and dissatisfied with their lives and make them seek constant change or momentary alleviation or diversion.

The old man believed that he had come to terms with – and had an understanding of – the deeper human condition. Yet when he heard the story of how his villagers had chosen to kill, mutilate and burn a young teenage boy – one with mental illness - this he simply could not understand.

Eli's mother had visited him, the traditional healer of the village, the old man who wore the lion's claw around his neck, the following day, for she could not come to terms with her son's death.

She was inconsolable. She could not speak. She was sobbing and crying. Nothing he could say or do could help the woman to lessen her pain. She was a mother who had lost her only son under very violent and very tragic circumstances.

The old man made her a soothing potion to take the pain away. He tried to speak to her. He tried to counsel her. He tried to calm and placate her. He tried his very best to comfort her in her time of loss; all to no avail.

The old man went further and tried to speak with the other villagers who still bore resentment. Yet there seemed to be no hope. The damage had been done. The rain beetle had been killed and the rains would not come.

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Eli's mother wept and wept and wept, and her pain ran deep within her mortal soul.

Early the next morning, it was the young boy with the thin ribs, the one who first discovered the single rain beetle, who was the first to find Eli's mother. She was hanging by her neck from one of the lowest branches of the old fig tree.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SECRET REMEDY



The old man thought back to another time; a time when all was lush and green and vibrant. He remembered a time in the distant, murky past when the birds and the animals and the river fish had been abundant. He remembered the huge feasts his tribe used to have. He remembered the music. He remembered how strong and lively his tribe used to be. He remembered how the children used to play and the old women used to gossip. He remembered how the tribal elders used to gather under the old fig tree to discuss the important matters of the day.

And he remembered the Chief. He remembered how the Chief used to say that it wasn't *who* was right, but *what* was right – that was of importance. He remembered how mighty and how powerful the old Chief was. On the one hand he was honest, admired and loved, yet on the other hand he was feared and loathed and hated. He even remembered, when he had been much younger, how the old Chief had called him and his best friend into his sacred hut.

'Greetings!' the Chief addressed the young boy with the lion claw around his neck and the young boy with the eagle feather in his hair.

'Greetings Umfundizi!' They replied in unison, kneeling on the floor of the hut.

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'I have called you to my hut because I need your assistance.'

'Anything. We will do anything for you, Umfundizi!'

'You are my greatest warriors – it is only you who can help me.'

'We are here for you, Chief.'

'Ndila, my daughter, is sick and I need to get her special *muti* [medicine].'

The old man remembered vaguely the rest of the conversation. He remembered sitting on the floor of the huge ancient thatched hut and the smell of the room. He remembered seeing Ndila lying at the back of the hut.

The old man remembered the five ingredients he and his friend had had to get which would form part of the secret remedy. He remembered how he had travelled to the far corners of the land. He remembered how they had got back just in time for Ndila to drink the *muti*. And he remembered how it had saved her life and how she had thanked him. Suddenly the vagueness of it all changed and he was flooded with fresh, crisp memories. He remembered the story vividly in bright colours, for it was the story of how he had first fallen in love with Ndila.

The old man walked heavily and slowly through the dry powdery sand, his thoughts weighing down upon him as the memories flooded over him. It was hot, and drought gripped the land. Now the details seemed even more vivid and even brighter; he could smell the smells, he could hear the sounds and most importantly, he could remember and still feel the *pain*.

The old man remembered all five of the ingredients, although one of them he remembered particularly well: The single tail feather from the rare *Isiphungo phungo bird* was the most difficult ingredient to obtain. He remembered how he had lain in wait at the nest of this

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rare and elusive bird. Highly secretive and often overlooked, it was typically found in slow-flowing streams with thick green overhanging branches. He remembered how he had covered himself with mud and dung and how he had hardly breathed as he had waited for the bird to return to its nest. Deathly silent he had waited. It seemed as if he would wait forever.

Few men had ever seen this rare bird. It was extremely shy and paddled silently in slow-flowing deep waterways, looking for insects and small water creatures. If the bird heard something – anything - it would instantly fly away and disappear.

He remembered how, in total darkness, in total silence, in the middle of that long-ago moonless night, he had swiftly grabbed the bird as it returned to its nest, killing it and plucking out its tail feathers.

The old man felt a very deep, very real and very painful emotion.

Ndila was the only woman he had ever loved. He had loved her body and the texture of her skin. Her skin had been so soft and dry and he remembered fondly what it was like when his hand moved over her back and stomach.

They had gathered all the ingredients for Ndila's *muti* and they had saved her life just in time. He remembered how he had loved and yearned for her.

Yet she had married another man. She had married his best friend; the one with the eagle feather in his hair. Ndila had married his best friend in the village and she had borne him three sons.

The old man with the lion claw around his neck felt sickened by this thought as he remembered the past. The memories flooded him with bitterness, resentment and hatred. It still hurt him, to this day. The only woman he had ever loved had not loved him in return, even after he had saved her life. He had tried everything in his power to

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get her to love him, yet the other man, once his best friend, had won her heart. In all his years as a traditional healer he still could not come to terms matters of the female heart.

He remembered trying to speak with Ndila. He even remembered picking the rarest flowers in the land for her. He remembered how he had pined and yearned for her each and every night. The memory of her body and her mind haunted him till this day. Her skin was so soft and tight and serene and her smile was still so vivid in his mind, all these years later. He could still remember the touch of her hand.

‘Ai ai ai!’ he thought. ‘She died 15 years ago, and I am still thinking of her.’

And now, alone, he walked.

He had outlived them all.

He had outlived his children.

He had outlived his grandchildren.

He had outlived his grandchildren’s children.

He had outlived Ndila, her husband and all three of their children.

What a tragedy, he thought. What a tragedy!

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LION CLAW AROUND THE NECK



The flies were irritating. They buzzed, landed and crawled on his old and weathered face, and as he swatted them away they would land, settle and crawl somewhere else on him. After a while he tried to ignore them. Yet the old man's mind was in another time, in another place. It was almost as if his mind and his body were not travelling together. He was being constantly haunted by flashbacks from his past.

The old man's decision was not an easy one to make. The tribe was leaving its traditional village to find a new place to settle. The drought was simply too severe for them to remain in one place, so the Chief had decided to move the entire village. It was a judgment call, and all the elders were in favour of the decision.

But the old man with the lion claw around his neck had decided to remain in the village. He realized that he was old and frail and weak and that soon he would die. He knew that a mighty trek lasting weeks and months would not be possible for a man of his age. So he told the tribe, in plain and simple language, that he would stay behind. He told his children and his grandchildren and his grandchildren's children that he would remain in the village until the rains came, knowing secretly, deep within his heart of hearts, that the rains would never come and that soon he would die.

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He knew how important it was to give hope to those around him. That was why he lied through his teeth. He told his tribe that the rains would come, yet he knew deep within that they would never come. He also secretly knew that the tribe had a long journey to walk before they would find food and water. And he was doubtful if they would be able to make it. For this was the worst drought in living history.

He bid the tribe farewell. It was an unemotional affair. It was early morning and the temperature was already like that of midday. Already the vultures were floating in the sky. All around the village was dry, parched wilderness.

The tribe must have numbered about a hundred members. Young and old were present. There were also some thirty cattle and some sheep and fowl. The water supply was nearly finished in the nearby river, so the tribe filled some old sheep bladders, sheep stomachs and calabashes with the remainder of the water scooped from the brackish and muddy puddles.

The tribe departed, and the old man with the lion claw around his neck stood silently and sadly and watched them depart over the horizon. There are some things in life that are beyond words, and this was one of them. Watching all his loved ones depart, knowing that he would never see them again was beyond words and beyond tears.

The old man knew that his time would be short now. There was no food left and no water. He reasoned that he would be dead within a day or two. Alone in the village he walked back to his hut. It was quiet now, very quiet. Usually the village would be full of sounds of children playing, cattle grunting, women chatting and sounds of activity. Now all that remained was an echo of silence and a hot dry wind.

'Not long now' thought the old man to himself. *'I should be dead within the next day or two.'*

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Yet the old man did not die. He nibbled on what little food remained in the village. He sipped at what little water remained in the dry river bed. And he continued to survive. Days became weeks, and still he would not die! He was trying to die – but he simply could not. Something was keeping him alive. And all the time he was haunted by his past. For some life was too short, for others life was too long.

The loneliness was deafening. It was so loud. There were no sounds in the village. There was no one left to talk to, nothing left to hold his interest. The animals had all disappeared and there were no birds left in the sky, not even vultures. Even the insects were gone. Dry, sandy wasteland surrounded the small, decaying village. The old man was truly alone, trapped inside his own village; trapped inside his own head.

The first week was a great shock to the old man's spirit. He wandered around the village and entered the different huts. He looked at the old structures and sat under the old fig tree, which was now beginning to show signs of severe drought and decay. The old fig tree – the one under which the tribal meetings were held. The old fig tree – the one from which he ate the succulent figs, the one he had watched grow as a child. The one Eli's mother had hung herself from. Now it lay crooked and bent and dry and cracked, with not a leaf upon it.

He walked to the part of the village where the young boy Eli had been stoned and burned. All that remained was a dark sooty patch on the ground. Eli had been buried on the western side of the village, where all the traitors used to be buried. His mother was buried nearby.

There had been a time in his life when the old man could not sit still. There had been a time when he had felt a sense of urgency – to hunt, to play, to meet with friends, to explore – and then there had been the time during which he thought about his beloved Ndila. He remembered how many hours, days, weeks, months and years he had sat and obsessed over that woman.

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The old man remembered how he had tried to distract himself from his love for Ndila. After she had married his best friend, he had tried to convince himself that her heart belonged to the man with the eagle feather in his hair. And so the old man who wore a lion claw around his neck took *many* other women after Ndila. Some women he had even taken in revenge. He remembered how the other women used to look at him and listen to him. He remembered how they used to love him. And yet he did not feel any love for any of these other women – nothing compared to what he had felt for Ndila.

His heart was with Ndila. It had always been with Ndila. And yet, Ndila's heart was with his best friend. So the old man had become bitter and withdrawn and brooding and pensive and angry.

Three of his wives had borne him children. But all through the years, he remembered, his heart had not been there. His heart had been elsewhere...

And the old man became even more brooding, even more pensive and even more angry. He had given up his life as a Warrior. His father had given him the lion claw which hung around his neck. The claw had been handed down from generation to generation. All those generations of Warriors suddenly came to a halt with him. After Ndila had married his best friend, he had given up his life as a Warrior.

He realized that the world consisted of four types of men: Peasants, Warriors, Chiefs and Healers. He had given up his life as a Warrior and moved into the realm of the Healer. The Warriors always got the prettiest women, he mused to himself – never the Healers.

In fact he had given up everything in his life. And he had thrown all his time into his studies. He had decided to learn the true nature of the human heart. For this he studied nature. When people came to see him, they would come only to ask him advice. They would come

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to seek his wisdom and his council. The old man hardly spent time with his wives and his children. All he would do was study nature.

Soon he had found himself becoming an understudy of the old traditional healers of the tribe. And in time he found himself being honed, hammered and forged into a Healer himself.

Now he would sit the whole day staring at the world. His knowledge, for his time and his world, was immense. The world was changing before his eyes. The dry hot winds would blow and sap the life out of everything.

‘When am I going to die?’ said the old man to himself. ‘Why can I not die a swift death?’ he cried aloud.

In the second week the old man began talking to himself. He would call out and shout deep into the night. He would even do it sometimes deep into the day. He was beginning to lose his mind. As a youngster he had been a mighty Warrior, and when he was older he was one of the most respected Healers of the land, both in body and in mind. Yet this was not going to be the way he was going to die, he thought. He was not going to go mad, nor would he die from hunger. No, he had been groomed over the years for a mightier purpose. He believed he had a deeper and more powerful purpose.

For the old man understood what was occurring. Deep within his heart of hearts he understood what was happening to the world, and he knew what would happen if he did not intervene. He knew and understood why the drought had come to the land. He knew that it was only he who could stop the drought.

For he knew that it was actually he, not Eli, who had brought this curse upon the land.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HILL OF GUMBANDEBVU



The drought would continue for half a century. Not a single drop of rain would fall upon the earth and not a single cloud would form in the sky. Relentlessly and ruthlessly the sun would beat down upon the valleys and upon the hills. Such a drought had never been seen before in the history of the continent of Africa.

The drought had killed all the animals and all the people. All the waterholes had dried up. All the rivers ran dry. All the trees and grasses had dried up and withered away and all the birds and insects disappeared. All that remained was sand and desert. Bone-dry sand and powder-dry desert.

The strangest thing of all was that this devastating drought had been predicted by the elders of the tribe who had once lived there. They had once been a mighty people; yet strangely, not a single member of that tribe remained alive to tell the story.

Had any of them lived they would surely have told the story of the little blue rain beetle, the one that always came from the south west to herald the rains and whose absence would mean natural disaster.

All the elders and the traditional Healers knew of the significance of the little blue beetle, the beetle whose absence heralded drought and famine. Yet at that time, no one fully comprehended its warning.

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Life was good and everything was in abundance. There was plenty of rain, fruit and vegetables were plentiful and meat was in excess. No one could have dreamed of what was to come. People focused on their daily existence. The men hunted, the woman gathered, the old folks talked and the children played. No one could have planned for this unforeseen future. Because everything was so lush and so green and the animals and the fish and the birds were in such abundant supply, there simply was no need for foresight and planning.

There is a hill in the northern part of southern Africa which is steeped in mystery. Gumbandebvu is the name of the hill, and it is sacred ground. When asked to explain their specific belief system, the locals would tend to become secretive and evasive, saying that this belief has always existed. They would go on to say that no man should set foot upon the hill, for no man would ever come off it alive.

This hill is not very high, only about 50 metres, and not very big at about 800 square metres. Furthermore, it is covered with dense thicket and contains all the wild and dangerous animals one would expect to find in that part of the world, including some rare plant and bird species. Lions, leopards, elephants and buffalo have been sighted on the hill and strange and exotic birdcalls heard from the top.

When pressed to say what specifically it was that made the hill so mystical, the local tribesmen would say nothing. They would become quiet, and fear would pass across their faces.

Chiefs and traditional healers had been buried on the hill for countless centuries. It had been around since time immemorial. It was said that one had to shave one's beard before stepping upon the hill, indeed the name Gumbandebvu translates as 'shave one's beard'. Those who did not respect the rules of the hill would surely die. The hill could only be visited by the eldest and most respected of the tribal members.

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Countless generations of tribal members had used the hill for ceremonies and burials. Passed on from generation to generation, the rules and rituals of the hill were well known. Indeed, it was on *Gumbandebvu* that the first of the little blue rain beetles was discovered.

The tribal Chief, feared by all, used the hill as the centre of his kingdom. He was a ruthless Chief who used to rule with such tyranny and such force that even the mere mention of his name would paralyze all with fear. For initiation purposes, he would line young teenage boys up naked on the hill, and then bring in a group of young naked women. It was said that if any boy dared to get aroused at the sight of the naked women, the Chief would execute that boy right there and then in front of everyone.

The hill also served as the home of the oldest and largest baobab tree ever to have grown on African soil, believed to have been about 2000 years old. There never had been a baobab of such magnificence and such girth and awe-aspiring splendour as the tree that once thrived upon that lonesome hill. The tree had witnessed over two thousand years of life and history. It had seen wars, and deaths and droughts and famines; it had also seen great festivities and births and acts of great heroism, and it had even seen the true meaning of love.

When the tree was a mere 500 years old, a swarm of bees constructed their nest in the upper branches. The bees would live there, generation after generation, for some 1500 years. They would supply countless generations of tribesmen with the sweetest, the most fragrant and the most delicious of honey. Indeed, there once was a tribesman who hammered into the leathery bark of the tree 15 iron pegs to make a ladder which would serve as an easy access route to the hive for countless generations of tribesmen. The honey was so sweet

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and so fragrant and so delicious that the bees that guarded it had to be particularly vicious.

At the top of the ancient tree was a hollow filled with the purest rainwater in the land. It was said that he who drank from the pool of rainwater at the top of the old tree would be endowed with invincible strength. It was said that he would live long, be strong and be healthy.

The tree was also used for many other medicinal functions and rituals over the centuries. Its leaves, fruit and bark were all used by the local traditional healers, throughout the ages, to cure and remedy a vast array of illnesses and maladies. The tree also served as one of the holiest shrines in the land for well over two thousand years.

And it is on this tree, on this lonesome hill, in the middle of Africa, where the old man's story begins and ends.

CHAPTER NINE

THE INITIATION CEREMONY (THE SOLDIER)



The boy who wore an eagle feather in his hair stood drunk and naked on the hill beside his drunk and naked peers. He knew very well what was to come. He was being initiated to the rank of Tribal Warrior. He knew what would happen if he reacted. He knew what would happen if he got aroused.

There were six boys at the initiation ceremony. The sentries, massive, black, expressionless and muscular henchmen, guarded the boys on the top of the hill. At the foot of the old and mighty baobab tree sat the tribal Chief upon his chair fashioned from carved rock and stone. He raised his hand, ordering the young, naked women to be ushered into view.

The tribal Chief ruled the land with an iron fist. He had total control of everything he laid his eyes upon. All knew of his cruel and ruthless ways. He was beyond reason and beyond question. He ruled with fear and he had a vicious army of Warriors, more vicious than any swarm of bees or any army of ants. No one dared challenge him, for his army was heartless and without remorse. This was the final initiation ceremony – the final rite of passage for the young boys. The boys were given copious amounts of alcohol to drink, made from the juice of old fermenting *maroelas*.

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The beautiful young women would be brought in to line up right in front of the naked teenage boys. If any of the boys dared *react*, if any of the boys dared get aroused, if any of the boys dared to get an erection – the Chief would order that boy's immediate execution. This was the way it had always been done. This was the way of the tribe. This was the law of the land.

The boy who wore an eagle feather in his hair caught a glimpse of the girls being ushered up the hill. There were ten young women. They were all very beautiful. All of them were virgins. Their breasts were firm and full and they bounced when they walked. He could see their firm young buttocks and their dark-bushed private parts. The women were so lovely and so inviting, they smelled so fresh and fragrant and so wonderful and their skin was so soft. He could feel himself getting aroused...

He suddenly caught himself drifting. He snapped back to reality. Focusing on the sentries and his peers, he took control of his mind. He steeled himself to remain focused. He had to be strong. He had to be emotionless.

Just then, the Chief ordered that the girls be brought closer to the boys; much closer. The boys stood there drunk with their hands tied behind their backs. One of the girls was ordered to rub herself up and down the body of the first young boy, the boy who wore the jackal hide around his head. The boy stood there appearing indifferent, his eyes focused on the horizon. But the second boy, the boy who wore the rabbit hide on his ankle, began to get aroused and beads of sweat formed on his brow. He had attained a partial erection. The Tribal Chief ordered that everything should be stopped and that the boy who wore the rabbit hide on his ankle be brought before him.

The execution of the boy was sudden and swift and merciless. The

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henchman held the young boy's head on a large, flat stone and instantly and ruthlessly cut off his head with a large panga blade. His head was given to the Tribal Chief, who seized it by the hair. He held it up high in the air.

Both the young boys and the young women watched with horror and terror as the Chief threw the young boy's head – the one who wore the rabbit hide - down the hill, down the slopes of Gumbandebvu. His decapitated body was then picked up by the henchmen and also thrown down the hill.

By sunset, after a long and gruelling day, three out of six of the boys had been decapitated in this way. Only three remained; the boy who wore an eagle feather in his hair, the boy who wore the jackal hide around his head and the boy who wore the lion claw around his neck.

The three boys had survived one of the most difficult tasks in the land. They were now Warriors, the most feared soldiers in the land. They descended the slopes of the hill in a single row, quietly, with heads hung low. The henchmen had untied their hands and released them. There was great emotion and tension in the air. Everyone slowly walked down the old and ancient pathway, worn down by countless generations, on the Eastern side of Gumbandebvu.

Had they remained upon the hill, surely they would have noticed the tiny blue beetles which had descended upon the blood-stained surface of the flat stone, the one on which the boys had been decapitated. Surely someone would have noticed the way the beetles sat there, fearlessly and boldly, drinking the dried and clotted blood.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LOVER



The old man spent a lot of his time living in the past. His memories would flood over him; memories from his childhood, memories from his middle years and memories from his recent past. He would also spend some time in his head living for the future, for he knew that he had an important task to do. He would visualize the task in his mind's eye. He would feel a shiver of terror run down his body at the thought of not completing his task.

The old man spent very little time living in the present moment, despite the fact that his Now was so very vivid and real. For how could one ignore the scorching heat of this drought?

The old man's present tense was filled with pain. His Now was filled with drought and his Now was filled with intense and savage heat. Flies buzzed and crawled upon his face. The flies were everywhere, a constant and very real irritation. They would crawl into his ears and try to get into his eyes. How could the old man walk with flies in his eyes?

He was constantly thirsty and constantly hungry. He could feel his body aching. He could feel his hunger pains. He could hear his stomach rumble. He licked his dried and cracked lips. He could feel his very real and very vivid situation, yet his suffering was small, for

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his mind and body were not traveling together. His mind was in another time and in another place and his emotions were distant and in another space.

One memory seemed to dominate his thoughts, and it was invasive and intrusive. It simply would not go away. Who knows how a memory is reactivated? And who knows how and why memories present themselves when they do?

The old man had forgotten about this memory, yet for some unknown and inexplicable reason it had suddenly presented itself to him. It was a story that had happened to him many years ago when he had been a young man. He had not remembered it for well over forty years, yet now, from out of nowhere, it had come back. It struck the old man, and he felt a very distant emotion deep within his being.

He tried to shake off the memory at first, to stop it taking over. But it had a way of creeping up on him. At first it was a simple flashback. Something he had seen in the environment must have triggered it off. It was the image of Ndila, the Chief's daughter. The only woman he had ever loved.

He remembered when he had first tried to seduce Ndila. It was extraordinary how the pain of his unrequited love for her still hung heavily upon his heart. Who knows why some things never come to pass?

He remembered as a youngster trying desperately to seduce her. He had gone to visit her almost every other day. He had taken her flowers. She was his best friend and they would sit and talk for hours. He had confessed his love for her, yet she simply was not interested in him. For some unknown reason she had selected his best friend.

It was like the weaver birds in the trees. The female bird selects the male with whom she will mate. Many males vie for female attention. Yet at the end of the day – it is she, the female, who decides. This was how the old man reasoned it.

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Embittered and angry, the old man with the lion claw around his neck took to a life of solitude and study. He put all his energy into studying the healing arts. He studied the traditional art of medicine. In honesty, he had studied it to try and heal his own heart, which would not heal. Yet all those years later, with all his knowledge and after having treated so many people from far and wide, he still could still not come to understand what it was that made his friend more attractive to Ndila than him. After all his years of studying he could not come to understand the workings of the female heart.

His friend, the one who wore an eagle feather in his hair, was not as clever as he was. His friend was not as good looking as he was. And his friend simply had not had as pure a heart. The old man simply believed that he had been the better man, yet he had not been chosen.

Despite all his quiet and reflective thinking on the matter, the old man's heart was not still and his mind was not at ease.

Because his best friend had stolen his woman, one would think that there would be an enmity between them. Yet despite that fact, he remembered how everyone thought that they were still good friends. The old man with the lion claw around his neck even treated his friend as a patient.

Then, fifteen years ago, Ndila, her husband and all three of their children had perished suddenly and unexpectedly in a fire. They had gone to sleep in their hut one night with a candle burning. During the night, the candle must have fallen over, setting the straw on fire. The old man remembered the story; he remembered being there. He remembered being one of the men who had helped remove their charred bodies from the hut.

Ndila and her husband and their three children had all died in that blaze. And that was how it had ended for them, just like that.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE LOST VILLAGE OF MATUKANE



The old man walked now with his head hanging low. He had lived a full life and a rich life. But his heart was still burdened by the troubles of his past, and he was now just an observer and a witness.

He watched things unfold. He had no position on any single topic. He had no opinion. He just stood as an innocent bystander. Watching, listening and feeling, his method was simple; he observed, he reflected and he wondered.

The journey was difficult. The drought consumed the land and there was nothing left to look at.

Every day the old man walked as far as he could. When he got tired, he rested. When he got thirsty, he drank and when he got hungry he ate. His supplies were precious and few and scarce, so he tried to conserve as much of his food and as much of his water as he could, for he knew the land would give him nothing. The land had nothing left to give – except for sand and powder and parchment-dry earth.

The sun beat down upon his frail and sinewy body. He walked long expanses of flat land, land which had once been thriving savannah. The old man walked through dry and cracked river beds. He walked up steep hills and traversed ancient jagged valleys. The trees were all dead and he walked through the forests of dried branches, tree trunks

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and twigs. At night he would sleep alongside the dead tree trunks, old and mighty trees which he had known as a child and which had now dried up and were withering away.

On the third day, he came across an old village, a place he had known well as a child. It was the nearby village of Matukane. It too was a skeleton of the proud and vibrant village it had once been. No one had survived and no one remained. All had left the village. All had experienced the drought, and all had departed. The village now lay dried up and dusty. The empty kraals remained and the old huts remained, although nothing of the village's spirit remained.

The old man decided to go and explore the village. He had accompanied his Chief to visit it and he had known the old people who had lived there. He had known the gossip of the old village and its triumphs and tribulations. Now nothing remained. Now no one remained. The old man felt a sharp stinging pain in his heart as he reflected upon his ancient memories.

He walked into one old hut, which was now disintegrating. Then he walked into the next hut and then the next hut and then the next. Nothing remained. Not even a morsel to eat or a drop to drink. Not even a tool to use. Nothing remained to remind him of the tribe which had once lived there. They had taken everything with them. Were the tribe members still alive, he wondered, or had they all perished in this savage drought?

There was a single drawing carved into the mud wall on the eastern side of one of the mud huts. It was of a little blue scarab beetle, the one which was feared and revered throughout the land.

The old man would find the same signs again over the next two days when he passed through the nearby ghost villages of Lulugame and Namakgane.

CHAPTER TWELVE

UNREQUITED LOVE



The old man held the golden amber tightly in his old and arthritic hand. Inside it, tightly compact and perfectly preserved in time, was the little blue rain beetle. He had travelled many days for this moment. And he knew exactly what he had to do.

He stood silently at the base of the old and mighty baobab tree. The tree must have been two thousand years old. This was a land of giants, and this tree was no exception. Everything grew bigger than normal in this ancient valley.

The old man's eyes were filled with much pain and much sorrow. His eyes were hidden within his wrinkled face. Sparse grey tufts of hair covered his head and beard and his body was very thin and very frail.

The old man sat down for a moment. He breathed deeply. He remembered once having seen a giant millipede walk over the buttress of one of the mighty baobab roots. Now not an insect stirred.

The sun was blazing hot and there was no sign of clouds in the sky. Way up high, in the blue, blue sky, there were specks floating on thermals – vultures.

This baobab tree stood on a hill. It was not the only hill in the region; there were many other hills nearby. But this particular hill was the only one with a baobab tree on it. Not only that, but it was the

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oldest and biggest baobab tree in the land. The name of the hill was Gumbandebvu.

The old man had travelled far for this moment. He had crossed vast, dry expanses of land. He had not slept much, he had eaten very little and he was totally alone. He was frail and weak. What he had accomplished in the past few days was unheard of for a man of that age.

The old man knew exactly what he had to do. He had to get to the top of the baobab tree and bury the golden-amber-entombed rain beetle deep within its leathery trunk. On his back he had a rucksack, fashioned from the skin of an antelope. Inside the rucksack was a calabash used to carry water, now of course long empty, and an iron chisel.

He was certain he had outlived them all. He was certain he had outlived his entire family, all five of his children and all eight of his grandchildren. He was certain he had outlived his entire village. He must be the last person alive, for no one could survive this heat.

There really was nothing left for him to live for, except this one last important task. All the old man understood was that he had to bury the entombed Beetle, in a place no one would ever find it. He reasoned that it must never be found, not even by the remotest chance. This he knew with all his heart.

According to his belief, to break the curse that had befallen him and his people, he had to bury the golden amber and its contents deep within the heart of the oldest baobab tree.

And so he stood, silent and alone, at the base of the old tree. The trunk was massive and grey and leathery, almost like that of a fossilized elephant skin. The tree stood tall and proud. If it could have talked it would surely have spoken of all the wonders and all the horrors it had lived through.

There were fifteen old pegs hammered deep into the bark of the

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ancient tree, creating a make shift ladder; his people had once collected honey from an old beehive at the top of the tree. But the devastating drought had caused all the honey to dry up, and all the bees were long gone.

The old man was physically and mentally exhausted. He had not eaten or drunk anything in days. His calabash was empty and he was frail and weak. Yet he knew that he had to climb the ladder to the top of the tree to complete the task that he had set out to do. He had to free the land of the curse – he had to ensure that the following generation, whoever might have survived, would be safe.

And so, slowly and wearily, he dragged and heaved himself up the old tree. Peg by gruelling peg he climbed. Up and up he went, sweat dripping off his sagging parchment-like skin, the amber tightly secured inside his animal-hide belt.

It took him a great deal of time. He had to stop many times to catch his breath. He was so very thirsty. He had last drunk a day ago. Yet he knew that at the top of the baobab tree, in the hollow depression, there was an area where pure water could usually be found. This thought gave the old man extra strength and he pulled himself higher into the tree.

But when he got to the top of the tree, there was no water in sight! The drought of the land had sucked even that source dry.

The old man's head began to spin. He would surely die. He did not have enough energy even to go down the tree, and the surrounding land was nothing but dry, powdery sand. There was simply no more water to be found.

But he had to complete what he set out to do. He had to bury the evil contents of the amber deep within the heart of the ancient tree. The rain beetles had bought this drought to the land. The rain beetles

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had not arrived. The rain beetles were responsible for the tragedy which had now befallen the land.

With luck, burying the amber-entombed rain beetle in the heart of the most ancient and mythical tree in the land would break the curse. The old man understood that if a rain beetle were entombed in golden amber then it would serve as a timeless memory and a warning for future generations. Golden amber had a magical way of preserving its contents for countless generations. And what better way to warn future tribes of the myth of the beetle than to bury it in the heart of the oldest and most mighty of baobab trees on the hill of the sacred Gumbandebvu.

And so he worked, in the fierce heat of the African sun. He chiselled away a small hole on the top of the baobab tree. Only the mournful cry of the emerald-spotted dove disturbed his rhythmic chiselling of the leathery trunk at the top of the ancient baobab tree.

He worked with great resolve. One could almost sense that he paid obeisance to some ancient determined inner discipline. Sweat poured off his face and body and there were flies buzzing around him as he worked.

For inside the golden amber was Africa's darkest secret. The old man, in his dehydrated state, peered into the amber and looked at its contents for one last time. The amber contained a single blue beetle about the size of a dung beetle, totally unremarkable except for the iridescent blue markings on its back. It was perfectly preserved in the amber. He wished he could have crushed the beetle's head between his fingers. He wished he could also crush its heart. But he knew that the beetle had to be kept perfectly preserved in the amber.

Unknown to the old man, deep within its abdomen lay a small egg sac which contained thousands of unborn beetles. The old man could never have known this fact; no one could have known it.

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He looked at the little beetle with hatred and fear and loathing. He felt like crushing it into a million little pieces, but he knew he could not do that, for according to the ancient legend and ritual the whole beetle had to be buried deep within the heart of the oldest baobab tree. This would forever remove the curse and bless the lands and its people. This would bring the rain. This was the belief, and this was what the old man had to do.

And so, deep into the night the old man scraped away at the thick and leathery bark at the top of the tree. Inch by gruelling inch he dug, until, by morning, he had dug a hole as deep as his arm. Physically and emotionally exhausted, he placed the golden amber and its contents at the bottom of the hole and closed up the hole with the bone-dry wood chips. No one would ever find it there, he thought, for the tree had a way of sealing its old wounds with its thick, grey, stone-like bark.

As the sun rose slowly above the horizon, the old man uttered an ancient prayer and tried to spit on top of the hole. But his mouth was dry. He was suffering severe water loss and dehydration.

He had completed what he had come to do. He had completed the ritual. He was sure that the world was now safe. He was sure that the drought would end. He was sure that the rains would come. He was tired and exhausted and his head was light and spinning and he had no strength. He thought he would just rest a while to gather himself.

In those final moments he remembered his sin: He was the one who had murdered Ndila and her husband and all three of their children fifteen years ago. Yes, they had perished in a fire. Yes, they had gone to sleep in their hut one night with a candle burning. But the candle did not fall over, and it was not the candle which had set fire to the hut. The old man remembered the story; he remembered being one of the men who had helped remove the charred bodies from

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the hut. Ndila and her husband and their three children had died in that blaze. But it was he, the old man who wore a lion claw around his neck, who had set fire to their hut.

The sun continued to rise slowly and steadily into the sky and the temperature began to rise. The drought continued relentlessly. And the old man with the lion claw around his neck finally slumbered silently away in the fork of the oldest baobab tree, dehydrating and desiccating, sinking, slowly, swiftly and silently, until death finally came upon him under that African sky.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFRICA'S DARKEST SECRET



The flies were the first to find the body of the old man. They headed straight for the moist areas, such as the nostrils and the eyes and the ears. And after a while the eyes, nostrils and ears were filled with yellow white flies' eggs.

After a time his body became limp and sagged over the mighty thick branches of the old baobab tree. The dry winds continued to blow and the sun continued to beat down.

And then vultures discovered the body. At first there were but one or two vultures, but later many of the birds, of different species, descended upon the corpse of the old man.

Feeding began slowly, gingerly, pecking away at his dried, semi-mummified skin. Later, as the competition increased, the feeding became more frenzied, with birds fighting and bumping one another for scraps of food.

In the commotion of the activity, the frail carcass of the old man fell from the old tree, dropping quickly and silently to the ground. The vultures descended again upon the fallen carcass and continued with their frenzied scavenging. And the scavenging continued well into the night.

Even the night was hot. There was no reprieve from the suffocating heat and dryness. The stars were three dimensional in the dark black

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sky and there was no sound of thunder to be heard, even in the great distances of the horizon.

And at night the hyaenas came, many of them, as if from nowhere, manifesting like ghosts from the blackness. They cried and screeched and wailed and whistled, and their eerie cries echoed and reverberated deep into the heart of the night.

They too were taking strain in the heat. All their water sources had dried up and the hyaenas were but skin and bone. Competition was exceptionally fierce and their behaviour was becoming unpredictable and desperate.

By morning, what remained of the bones of the old man was scattered all over the sandy African veld. Many of the large bones had been crushed and shattered by the jaws of the hyaenas. So intense was their hunger and their thirst that they had managed to crack and crush the head of the old man, until eventually not even his skull remained.

Now the lion claw around his neck, a mandible bone and a couple of teeth were all that remained. The hyaenas had crunched and eaten all the old man's bones.

And the drought continued. Ruthlessly and relentlessly it continued. There was not a drop of water anywhere. Trees withered. Grasses dried up. Sand filled up the cracks and crevices all around. The hot wind blew and everywhere, animals died. All around there were signs of death; bones, bleached by the sun, littered the African veld.

Now even the scavengers began to die. The hyaenas and the vultures and the jackals – species which usually thrive in times of drought – began to die. Their carcasses too lay strewn in the veld.

There were no signs of cloud on the horizon. Not even the smallest puff of white. Only the fiercest blue sky, with its fierce white sun.

Even the old and mighty baobab tree – on the top of the hill of

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Gumbandevu began to feel the strain. Its bark was now dry and brittle and its roots had begun to die. Then one fateful day, a month or two later, the baobab silently and mightily fell to the ground. There was a loud and deafening crackle and rumble, which surely must have echoed for miles and miles. Yet there was not a living creature who could have heard it fall. For all around the tree, surrounding the hill and in the surrounding valleys, there was death.

There the tree would lie, alongside its mighty dry hole, with roots exposed. The hole was lined with heavy boulders which had been pushed aside by the gigantic tree over the centuries. And the heat continued to beat down and the sun continued to scorch the earth.

Now the tree began to dry out and wither, slowly and surely, in its very own arid landscape on top of the hill called *Gumbandevu*. The tree which had lived for over two thousand years, which had seen countless births and deaths, which had seen countless living things come and go, and which had seen all types of weather, had now reached its end.

Within a decade it would totally dematerialize and disintegrate under the African sun. By the end of that single decade of drought, nothing would remain except for the large hole in the earth lined by rocks and stones and the large dent in the ground where the tree had fallen, on the very top of that very ancient hill.

Only its sacred package, the little blue beetle entombed in golden amber, the one that was buried deep within its heart, the one that contained Africa's darkest secret, remained.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RAIN



Nature does not endure abrupt change without great violence.

The drought would continue for half a century. It was ugly, vicious and prolonged. And, as is typical of succulents, the old baobab tree had withered away and dematerialized into nothingness.

A simple hole in the ground remained, lined by boulders with fifteen rusted old iron pegs which were scattered nearby. And in the centre of the boulder-lined crater, the golden amber.

Then one day, half a century later, after a hot morning, white clouds began to form on the horizon. The cicadas would have screeched particularly loudly on that day, almost as if they had known what was coming. But there were no cicadas. There was almost no insect activity at all, any more.

The white clouds gathered, merged and swirled on the horizon, at first white, then grey, then dark as coal. And in the distance, deep guttural thunder echoed and rolled and reverberated. A warm wind blew across the land. A solitary blade of grass quivered restlessly as the mass of darkness loomed closer and closer to the hill.

When the storm finally arrived, it broke with unimaginable violence. For a drought of such severity could only be quenched by a thunderstorm of equal severity.

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The thunderstorm unleashed itself with such great beauty, such great power, such great poetry and terror. Sheets of rain fell from the sky. Then, after a while, it stopped, and an unearthly silence filled the air.

The crater in which the baobab had lived had filled with rainwater, forming a little pool on the top of that sacred hill. The bone-dry hole was now filled with the coolest and purest of rainwater. And the water in the pool seemed to steam, ripple and shimmer.

Something intangible seemed to fill the air. A fragrant hint of something rare, exotic and exciting. A pleasant, light, earthy, woody and wet aroma, hinting at something inviting and pleasurable..

And as the subtle, sweet aroma of new life lifted upwards and hung in the air, the golden amber stone, with its dark contents, became exposed in the mud.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INTRODUCING PROFESSOR HUGH RUTHERFORD JAMESON



Hugh Rutherford Jameson seemed to be at the pinnacle of his career. He lived and worked from his private game lodge, set in the magnificent mountainous region between Malelane and Nelspruit, south of the famous Kruger National Park. He lived entirely alone in his six-storey thatched house. He had a maid servant called Euphemia and a butler called David, both of whom were of the Shangaan tribe. They were both completely trustworthy, for Jameson had known them since they had been small. He had been the medical doctor at Maphuta Malatji Hospital and he remembered having treated them both as children. Their mother was a nurse at the hospital, and Jameson had never forgotten them.

Often Jameson would sit on his wooden deck, watching the mighty Crocodile River lazily weaving its way through the thick green reed banks. He would watch the crocodiles and hippos from the deck with a drink in his hands. These days he would only drink Blue Label scotch whisky. He could afford to drink it, therefore he drank it.

The long African days he would spend slogging at his computer, or on the phone, or researching some strange and rare object. He had a sniper-like personality, in that if something got into his 'bull's eye'

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focus of vision, no matter what that something was, he would relentlessly and ruthlessly track it down and procure it. He had used this quality to track down rare stamps, rare books, scarce paintings, inordinately expensive bottles of wine, impossibly rare bottles of whisky and, yes, even some of his women – those whom he would describe as *crème de la crème*.

Jameson's IQ was hovering around the 185 mark and he had a high social and emotional IQ, which was, and still remains, almost unheard of in the highest ranks of genius. He had eight degrees in various divergent fields and seven of the eight he had obtained *magna cum laude*. Only one of his degrees, in medicine, had he not passed *magna cum laude*, probably because his right hand had been injured by a leopard the weekend before he had written his final exams and he couldn't write quickly enough.

The hobbies he practised were as wide and varied as could be imagined.

Now, at the age of 64, he was a mystery encapsulated in a paradox within a riddle. His knowledge and experience in all fields were vast and encyclopaedic. He had no insight into his own psychology, however, and nor did any psychologist. He was an evolutionary freak, a one-off phenomenon. Perhaps Mother Nature had a sense of humour after all.

Besides, at the age of 64 he didn't give a damn about his psychology.

In his younger days he had been able to meet, date and seduce any woman he desired. He always knew what to say and what to do. He could melt any woman's resistance away. He radiated a confidence and a self-control and power that women found irresistibly attractive.

He had a way of sizing up a woman's potential; he could eliminate

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those who were wasting his time. He aroused women in his presence. He moved with power, aggression and grace. It was almost impossible for woman to manipulate and control him. He was attuned to a woman's changing moods and emotions. Precisely how many women Jameson had seduced and conquered in his lifetime remains a matter for speculation, for he never spoke of his conquests to anyone.

Unfortunately, when it came to matters of the heart, Jameson was nothing less than a detestable, miserable and affected man. Arrogant and unspeakably sceptical, Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson simply did not believe in love. He believed in lust, he believed in infatuation, he believed in ardour, he believed in obsession, he believed in Aphrodite herself – but he did not believe in love.

There had once been a girl once who had managed to crack his suit of armour – or should I say suit of Armani, for that was all he would wear when he went out in the evenings. Her name was Inga. She was the closest he had ever come to the emotion called love. Unfortunately, she had ended up emigrating and marrying another man. Jameson had made peace with this fact and he put up a big 'No Entry' sign in his mind regarding her and that entire chapter of his life. He simply never ever thought of her again.

He had practised numerous careers in his life. He had been in the military, he had been a medical doctor, a botanist, an entomologist, a psychiatrist, a zoologist and a chef.

Now, at the age of 64, he was considered one of the foremost collectors of rare objects in the world. People would contact him from all corners of the world requesting his services. He was the man to go to when no one else could help. He simply called himself the 'collector', for his job description was unique and there was no formal name for the work which he performed.

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He had happened into this 'job' many years ago, and like all things in life it had been completely by accident. He had been studying sleight of hand magic as a hobby at the time and was asked by a fellow magician to try track down a rare book, thought to have been out of print for a century. Jameson's obsessive compulsive personality trait 'kicked in' and his quest felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He remembered having spent three or so weeks trudging through many manuscripts. He remembered having phoned several people. He remembered purchasing a ticket to Vienna and meeting an old Viennese man by the name of Christiansen at the Landtmann cafe.

He remembered meeting with Christiansen at the famous Viennese coffee shop. He remembered their conversation and the smell of the coffee and the taste of the apple strudel cake. Most of all he remembered the thrill when he finally tracked down the manuscript.

He had held the dusty old brown leather book, with its stained brown pages, in his hands. He remembered the smell as he paged through it. He could sense the wonderment in what he had done. He had paid a minimal amount of money for the book, considering the effort which had gone into tracking it down. It was the adrenaline, the testosterone, the excitement and the electrical sense of accomplishment which turned Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson into one of the foremost professional collectors on the planet.

It would work as follows. Suppose you wanted to track something down, say a rare stamp, a rare butterfly or a rare bottle of whisky. You would contact Professor Jameson through his website. Jameson would then review your request and an amount of money would be negotiated. All payments were to be made up front. Jameson offered a 100% guarantee on all his cases. If the client didn't get what he or she wanted within the allocated three month period – well then, he would give them their money back.

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The testimonial section on his website read like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. The people who had used his services had weirdly eccentric names. There was a Clyde von Bonacorde from Prussia, there was a Madam Amorose de la Bucchaveldt from Hungary, there was a Pompadore van der Cruse from New England and there was a Lord Rothschild from the United Kingdom.

The testimonials gave nothing short of the highest acclaim: words such as ‘the finest’, ‘the best’, ‘God bless him’, and ‘impossibly brilliant man’ seemed to jump out of the screen when you read them.

Perhaps of all the powerful traits that made up the fabric of the man was Jameson’s knowledge of human behaviour. He was a consummate observer of people and could sum them up in a matter of minutes. He had a way of speed-reading people that FBI agents would envy. He could even predict certain behaviour from certain people.

He could influence and understand all types of people. He intimately understood the human condition, with all its predictable crises. He knew that very few people in this world were happy. Few, he realized, were satisfied in this life. If someone did not possess something, he or she would naturally seek it out. If that person had attained something that he or she had pursued, he or she would seek out that which would allow them to maintain or improve it. He understood that people pursued this general policy with all four major categories in their lives: love, money, family and health. Only the most thoroughly grounded and secure among us were satisfied with their lot in life – although he realized that they too had breakdowns from time to time.

Jameson realized that the happy times in people’s lives were not measured in years but in minutes. People spent a lot of their lives pursuing fleet-footed and short-lived experiences of pleasure and happiness.

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Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson realized that even though we all live in the same world, we also live in different worlds. He realized that despite the gross unfairness that is life, we are all ultimately *cosmically* equal. Some people are born to wealth and others to poverty. Jameson realized that the rich are not necessarily happy and the poor are not necessarily unhappy.

He realized that those who had some skill, experience, advantage, gift or quality in one area would simultaneously have a detriment, handicap, disadvantage, weakness or shortcoming in another. He understood that people were often blind to their advantages and envious of qualities belonging to others. Those gifted with good looks, a loving family, influential friends, a quality education, wisdom, longevity, health or good fortune most probably lacked all the others in the same list. Those gifted with intelligence weren't always gifted with good looks, wisdom or true friendship.

Critical to the practice of his job as a collector, he realized one thing: Anything that people fundamentally lacked or wanted would cause frustration. These frustrations typically escalated into anger, fear, greed, suspicion, worry, anxiety and guilt, and led to unethical and immoral decisions and their consequences. Clients would often approach him in an emotionally restless state, dissatisfied with their lives in general, deluded in the belief that the rare object they desired would suddenly and magically make everything better.

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ON THE EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF HIS CLIENTS



And so Professor Jameson had devoted his life to others. He knew that this life was not about him, for he had a gift and a talent. And he used these for the purposes of making other people happy and fulfilling their dreams.

Of course, he had his faults. He was not perfect. The womanizing, for instance, had taken its toll on the poor man. He realized that women – even the dumbest of women – were far cleverer than the brightest of men. He realized that the human species was most definitely in the hands of the fairer sex. It was the female who decided with whom to mate. It was the women who decided whose genes would be passed on to the next generation. Jameson had come to realize that it was the women, in fact, who were the custodians of the human race.

It takes an inordinately strong man to say no to a voluptuous woman who places herself ‘on a platter’, so to speak, before him. Jameson often had difficulty saying no to these women, so he often found himself in precarious situations. This had taken its toll on him. His hair was grey and turning white. He had wrinkles on his face and scars over his body. Each one told a story, proving that he had survived to tell the tale.

Women would be immediately drawn into his aura, to be

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hypnotized and mesmerized by the man. They would watch him as one would watch an accident taking place in slow motion, with a voyeuristic curiosity. Once in his presence and under his spell, no woman would be able to resist his charms.

This was all the more difficult when one of his clients, who happened to be an extremely sensual and provocative woman by the name of Lida de la Rey, approached him to track down a rare object. Lida wore a tight, black, sexy dress and she had a faint trace of perfume about her. The perfume was spicy, subtle and intoxicating. She had applied it to herself in an extremely skilled manner; he would have to lean closer to her to appreciate the full aroma of it. Once she had walked into his room he knew that this was an extremely dangerous woman.

Jameson had strict protocols regarding his clients. He would take referrals only through his website. He would thoroughly research the request before answering the email. This was to ensure that time-wasters and the psychologically unsound would be eliminated. He had devised a thorough 25-page questionnaire regarding all the details he needed to track down the rare object. It requested many personal details about the client and a full history of the object to be tracked down.

Jameson did not take unsolicited referrals. He had screened Lida's email request and spoken with her over the phone. He had ascertained that the case was a relatively straightforward affair, and she had paid for his services up front. Now here she was, at his lodge, and Jameson could smell trouble. She had lured him into her trap and now the playing field was different.

This he sensed from her body language. At she entered the main reception hall of his lodge, he noted her eyes; they were like those of a leopardess watching her prey. She had an unusual amount of confidence and self-belief for a woman of her age and her perfume was

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exotic – not to be found in the normal commercial stores. Jameson deduced that the fragrance must have originated in the Spice Islands. He had smelled a similar scent in a small store in Stonetown on the island of Zanzibar.

Jameson was caught off guard, and he hated surprises. On her original email Lida had stated that she wanted to track down a rare painting by the artist Volschenck, a task Jameson could have easily completed within three to four days. She had arrived at Jameson's farm as per scheduled appointment, but from her body language, tone of voice, cadence of speech and the micro-expressions upon her face, he sensed that she was actually here with another, underlying request. He sensed that this would be infinitely more impossible than her stated mission.

'Hi, you must be Professor Jameson?'

She spoke as she walked up the wooden pathway. Her accent was strangely British for such a South African surname. The floors were of the old polished wooden variety. Outside, the weather was swelteringly hot. Cicadas buzzed restlessly in the trees, making a deafening noise.

Jameson had opened his huge sleeper-wood double entrance doors and was walking down the moss-grown wooden pathway towards her. He walked with a limp in his right leg and he always carried a stick made from finely-polished yellow wood. The stick had been given to him as a gift from one of his clients.

'Welcome to Leopard Lodge, Mrs de la Rey. I hope the drive didn't prove too tiring for you?.'

'It's Miss de la Rey. My husband died five years ago. You may call me Lida'.

Jameson could not believe how effortlessly this woman carried herself in the oppressing heat. She seemed completely unaffected by it.

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'The drive was perfect. This is such a beautiful part of the world you live in.' She was sincere and smiling and she had a happy open face and a ladylike manner about her. On her questionnaire she had written 'archaeologist' under job description, but she didn't look at all like an archaeologist. Jameson was immediately taken by this woman. She appeared to be in her early forties, though Jameson guessed that she was more likely in her fifties.

'Come take a seat in my lounge' began Jameson. 'David can carry your bag for you. The day is extremely hot and I am sure you would like to relax with a good cup of something cool. Or perhaps you would like some tea? I find that hot tea actually works wonders in extreme temperatures such as this.'

Jameson led her to his lounge. Leopard Lodge had been built by one of the world's premier bush architects. It was wood and thatch and polished stone and had been designed in an artistic and magical way. The house consisted of six storeys and the stairs weaved their way between them. Wooden bridges, high ceilings, koi fish ponds and a forested and moss-laden garden made Jameson's home one of the most exclusive and exotic secret hideaways in the world.

They walked over the hanging, wooded bridge and Jameson showed her into the lounge. Here there were plush carpets, a fireplace and the most magnificently comfortable brown leather couches. She made herself at home, sitting down and placing her handbag on the floor next to her.

Euphemia brought in a tray of tea, scones, jam, butter and whipped cream and placed them on the hand-carved mahogany table in front of them. In the distance a rainbird gave its mournful call. Jameson watched Lida through the corner of his eye while Euphemia poured the tea for them. Jameson only drank Lady Grey tea, with its sweet amber and aromatic hue.

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When Euphemia had finished pouring the tea, Lida buttered a scone, placed a dollop of jam on top and then, in a seductive flourish, topped it off with an unctuous splattering of whipped cream. It was subtle and masterful at the same time. Jameson was impressed.

Once they had finished tea, Lida de la Rey pulled a golden resin-like stone from her handbag. She handed it to Jameson and he examined it. It was a piece of amber in which was embedded a well-preserved beetle.

‘My father gave me this stone on his death bed’ she said.

‘What does this have to do with me, I wonder?’ said Jameson. ‘I collect rare objects for people. You seem to have your object in your possession already.’ Jameson smiled at his own observation.

‘Precisely’ began Lida, ‘This is why I am here.’ She leaned forward. ‘Are you not at all curious as to the significance of this beetle?’

Jameson watched her. She was very sensual. She had the most beautiful straight black hair he had ever seen and the tone of her skin was impossibly soft and feminine. She had the nicest of smiles, although it seemed that she did not smile very often.

Jameson looked at the amber again. ‘Now what is all this about?’

He was quite riled by the dramatic way in which she was presenting the object to him. ‘On your original email you stated that you wanted to track down a rare painting by the artist Volschenck.’

‘I lied’ she said, looking him straight in the eyes.

Jameson was caught off guard by her statement.

Lida then pulled an old leather-bound book out of her handbag. It was a book on lost African tribes, by Sir Richard Shelby and Sir David Handgrove. One of the pages – page 861 to be exact - was marked. She turned to it. The heading was ‘The Lost Tribal Village of Matukane’

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‘Archaeological exploration of the tribal villages of Matukane, Lulugame and Namakgane revealed similar etchings and drawings, typically carved into the mud walls, on the north eastern side of the mud huts, of a little scarab beetle.

According to legend, these very special blue scarab rain beetles were to be found nowhere else in the land. Turquoise and shining blue, they would emerge every springtime and herald the coming of the rains. The tribe believed that the failure of these beetles to appear would indicate that the rains would not come. That is why the tribe treated these little beetles with absolute and total respect. They would ensure at all costs that the beetles were respected and treated well. The tribe believed that if the beetles were treated well they would return, bringing with them the rains.

Tribal law was very strict and very clear regarding this rule: Anyone who dared to kill a rain beetle would themselves be killed. This little blue scarab beetle was therefore immortalized and worshipped and carved into the very fabric of the tribal society. Pictures of the beetles were carved into their earthenware and stones and huts, and paintings of it decorated their clay pots.’

Lida de la Rey had now secured the full and undivided attention of Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson. Jameson was busy doing mental gymnastics. ‘What on earth is this woman doing here and what on earth does she want?’ he wondered. His background in the military, medicine, botany, entomology, psychiatry, zoology and gastronomy could not assist him in understanding this puzzle. This beautiful young woman sat before him with her amber-entombed beetle, thus defeating his purpose as a collector, because the rare object had already been collected.

‘Please spell out, in simple language, what you want from me. I’m afraid I do not understand why you are here’ said Jameson.

Lida adjusted her skirt. She put the book down on the mahogany

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table, took another sip of her Lady Grey tea, cleared her throat and looked Professor Jameson in the eye. Her eyes were unimaginably blue on that African summer afternoon.

Just then, as if from nowhere, there came a bright flash of light outside. The flash was a brilliant, electric explosion, like the crack of a whip. Then a loud, thunderous roar rolled and reverberated and shook through the household.

An electric summer thunderstorm had suddenly and unexpectedly decided to unleash itself. The timing was surreal. And when the rain began to fall it was so deafening that the two could hardly hear each other speak.

They sat there, the two of them, uncomfortably drinking their tea.

'Looks like this rain has really set in' said Jameson. 'You might as well make yourself comfortable. You are not going anywhere in this kind of weather. The roads in and out of the lodge will be under water. There is no way you will be able to make it back to Nelspruit before dark. You must be my guest at Leopard Lodge for the evening. Euphemia will make up a room for you. You can leave tomorrow morning.'

Lida de la Rey was caught off balance by this sudden twist of events. She had thought she would quickly have the business meeting and then leave. Now she was trapped at this magnificent lodge with a man she did not know, and without her clothes and her personal effects. She looked at the rain streaming down the windows. Her host was right; she really had no other options.

'Thank you Professor Jameson, I will accept your kind offer' she said, looking slightly flustered.

'Dinner is at six thirty. See you then' said Jameson, with a twinkle in his eye.

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A GOOD AND SUSTAINED CONVERSATION PRESENTS ITSELF



Dinner was prepared by Jameson himself; he had, of course, been a chef among his many careers. Having studied at the Culinary Institute of America, he was quite expert in the kitchen. He never used his cooking skills for commercial gain and he never owned a restaurant. He had decided to become a chef so that he could cook for his guests and for himself.

Tonight, simplicity was on the menu. The dinner began with springbok carpaccio made with balsamic vinegar. A simple dish, yet Jameson's knife skills took this dish to another level. He had purchased a razor blade cooking knife in Japan, on which were engraved his initials. He carved the most ethereally wafer-thin shavings of springbok, which literally melted in your mouth when you tasted them.

Jameson had an underground walk-in wine and whisky cellar. From more than 2000 bottles of rare and exclusive wines, he had chosen a subtle red with delicate overtures for the main course. The wine hailed from the South of France, from a little known district. It was a shy wine, demure and gracious on first taste, naughty and teasing in second taste, and it would ultimately envelope the taster in an almost feminine manner on after taste. This was what Jameson referred to as a 'thoroughly seductive wine'.

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For the main course, Jameson decided to roast some guinea fowls in his secret marinade. Jameson had travelled the world and eaten at some of the finest restaurants. He also had eaten street food in Mexico and throughout the East. On the way back from Vietnam he had conceived his famous scallion and ginger marinade recipe. When he had first made the recipe for himself and tasted it, he knew that this was the kind of marinade that could make the taster black out from sheer pleasure. The marinade alone had elevated his grilled guinea fowl dish to the ranks of the sublime!

Out of the corner of his eye Jameson could see Lida trying to retain her composure. She was clearly trying to suppress the pleasure she was experiencing. Jameson was impressed – she had managed to hold her composure extremely well. Not many women were this strong.

The rain was still pouring down outside and the pitter-patter of the drops could be heard on the thatch. But by the time dessert was served, Jameson could see that his guest was slowly beginning to unwind and enjoy herself. For dessert Jameson had some seasonal local fruits with fresh yoghurt, upon which were scattered chocolate shavings and African honey. The rain continued to pour.

After dinner, Jameson went into his study, a glass of rare whisky in hand, and returned with a book; an old book with a leather jacket. The book was all about ancient Egyptian mythology.

Jameson sat on his plush leather couch while next to him, on another leather couch, partly covered with a blanket, sat Lida. They were sitting by a large window which overlooked the African bushveld. The rain was still lashing the window and in the distance could be seen only miles and miles of darkness, all the way to the Kruger National Park and Mozambique.

The Leopard Lodge private reserve bordered ‘Big Five’ country

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where one could find Africa's leading game animals, the lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo and elephant. No one would want to be out in that bush at night, in the rain and darkness with all those dangerous animals. The safety, security and warmth of Leopard Lodge was most comforting.

The mood was such that the possibility of a good and sustained conversation presented itself. Jameson opened the Egypt book.

'It seems to me that the beetle is a scarab beetle of sorts' he said. He read aloud from the book:

Scarabaeus sacer, the dung beetle, was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians as an embodiment of their god Khepri. The scarab was well known for rolling its dung into spherical balls. It was sacred to the ancient Egyptians because the beetles seemed to emerge from nowhere. The apparent 'self creation' of the scarab beetle resembled that of the Egyptian god Khepri/Khepera/Khephri, an alternative name for their sun god Ra, or Atum, who had created himself out of nothing. The scarab is therefore a symbol of regeneration and creation, conveying the idea of transformation, renewal and resurrection.

The funeral rites of the Ancient Egyptians were extremely important and use of the scarab was of prime significance.

A large (3-10 cm) 'heart scarab' was usually suspended from the mummy's neck with a gold wire or chain, not only as a token of resurrection, but as an advocate to help the deceased to present his defence before the tribunal. These scarabs were often made of green stone (basalt, schist, jade, etc), for green was an auspicious color. On their flat base is inscribed in hieroglyphs a particular chapter from the Book of the Dead which invokes the 'heart of one's mother', and this expression probably designates the heart scarab.

Pictures of the beetles were carved into Egyptian earthenware and stones

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and within their pyramids, and paintings of the little scarab beetle decorated their clay pots. The scarab was one of the most powerful symbols of the victory of life over death. It was even painted on the walls of Tutankhamun's tomb, behind the pharaoh's head.'

Jameson held the golden Amber stone to the light. It shimmered as he carefully studied the beetle trapped inside. He took a magnifying glass and tried to look more closely at the little creature. It certainly was a strange beetle. It wasn't *Scarabaeus sacer*, that was for certain. In fact it wasn't any of the species he had seen before. To Jameson, it appeared a new and different type of beetle – perhaps one that was extinct.

'So how did you come upon this beetle?' Jameson enquired.

'It was given to me by my father on his deathbed' she began.

'My father was Dr Arthur de la Rey. He received it from an old Jewish man called Shimowitz who said he had carried it with him through the entire holocaust of World War Two. Apparently he was a concentration camp survivor. Somehow he managed to keep this piece of amber secretly from the Nazis the whole time. According to my father, Mr Shimowitz had been given it as an amulet by his father and his father had been given it by his father's father, and so on from time immemorial.

'My father was Mr Shimowitz' personal house doctor and on his death bed Mr Shimowitz gave my father the stone, saying that he had no more living relatives and that he was the last in a line. The Shimowitz line ended with him. As a gesture of kindness and gratitude Mr Shimowitz gave the amber to my father, who was a great friend and confidant through life. When my father died he bequeathed it to me.'

Lida had become quite emotional as she told her story. Jameson was intrigued. He wondered what the significance of this stone was now, if any.

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‘My father mentioned to me one other thing regarding this stone’ Lida continued in a conspiratorial tone. ‘Apparently, when Mr Shimowitz gave the stone to my father, he squeezed it tightly in his hand, saying that he should guard it with his life and that failure to do so would surely mean that all mankind would perish.’

‘This is the reason I am here, I need to know exactly what I am dealing with here. Is this a rare beetle? And what is the significance of this beetle?’

Lightning struck and thunder rolled in the distant night. It was all so very dramatic. Jameson could not help but take a final deep gulp of his whisky.

‘It has been an exceptionally long day, Miss de la Rey’ he said. ‘I think we should call it a night. I am tired. Perhaps we should resume this conversation in the morning. I wish you good night.’

With that Jameson rose, shook Lida’s hand and wished her a pleasant sleep. Then he departed for his room.

Lida was left on the leather couch, alone, staring into the pitch-black darkness of the African bushveld. The rain beat against the window. The lighting in the room was dim and the smell of wet thatch hung in the air.

She had never felt so alone in all her life. ‘There is a loneliness in this world’ she mused. ‘You can see it in the slow movement of the hands of the clock’.

She grasped the amulet tightly in her hands, and tears welled up in her eyes. She slowly got to her feet and headed for her room.

That night she would sleep the deepest sleep on the softest of white linen sheets.

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ON THE GENETIC SEQUENCING OF THE BEETLE



The rain continued to pour. Relentlessly it fell, as if from a vast bucket in the sky. There was no travelling in this weather, for the rivers would surely be swollen and the roads would be submerged in water.

Lida woke up refreshed, although she was a little concerned as to her predicament. It was clear that she was now a sort of prisoner in a place that was not her own. She had had the clearest of intentions of showing Jameson the amber, acquiring his opinion and then bolting. She had had absolutely no intention of staying overnight. But the way the weather looked from her window, it seemed that she would be there for an indefinite amount of time, which stressed her because she had other things to do. This was completely unplanned, and Lida was the type of woman who planned everything to the finest of details.

What was more, the cellphone network was down because of the storm, so she could not phone her people to tell them when she would be coming home. Not that she had many people to tell. Her mother lived in Nelspruit, but apart from her she lived a lonely and reclusive life. Very much like that of Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson, different as they were.

Lida took a shower and went into the main atrium of the lodge. It

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was seven o'clock and on the table before her was a perfect breakfast of the continental variety; fresh scones, toast, a variety of jams, cheeses and a freshly-brewed pot of tea. David and Euphemia smiled silently and obediently as she entered the room: 'Morning Madam' they said in unison.

'Good morning David, good morning Euphemia' she responded. Taken aback by this undeserved hospitality, Lida flushed a little.

Just then Jameson entered the room. He had been up since early dawn and already looked well set into his day. In his hand was a mug of steaming hot coffee. He appeared to have a lot of energy about him for that time of day. Jameson did not suffer loneliness much. He reckoned that being alone added a certain beauty to life. It put a special glow on sunsets and made the morning air smell better.

'Good morning Miss de la Rey. I trust you slept well?'

'Please call me Lida. And yes thank you, I slept wonderfully. That was one of the softest beds I have ever slept upon. Those sheets were amazing.'

'I managed to get them from Switzerland. The bed comes from Austria' Jameson replied.

'Looks like it is still raining and the cellphones aren't working.'

'Yes, that is one of the problems of living up here. It is sublime, tranquil and magnificent, yet at a cost. When things go wrong, one has to become somewhat self sufficient. But I am sure the rain will stop shortly. In the meantime, why don't you make yourself at home? Leopard Lodge is well equipped with facilities. There is an indoor pool, a games room and a home theatre system. Euphemia has completed a massage course and she can treat you in the spa if you wish. The pantry is fully stocked, so David will start preparing for lunch. In the meantime, let us discuss your amulet a little further, shall we?'

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After breakfast the two repaired to the lounge. It was still raining outside. They sat down, each on a separate couch facing each other. In Lida's hand was a cup of Earl Grey tea, while Jameson was on his third cup of coffee.

'May I suggest a way forward in this matter, Lida?' Jameson began.

'By all means' she said politely.

'If you really are serious about getting to the bottom of this beetle story, then DNA extraction seems to be the only way forward. They will have to drill a small hole into the amulet and extract some of the beetle's tissues. Then they will be able to answer your questions, namely what sort of beetle it is, where it comes from and so on.'

'Do you know anyone who can perform such a procedure?'

'Well, I can't do the sequencing – for that I would have to go into town, to the DNA laboratory. However I do have a small drill set here in my office and I am quite sure that I can drill out a small core of the amulet.'

'It is such a beautiful thing – are you sure your drill won't crack or damage it?' Lida asked with some concern in her voice.

'Not to worry, I have used the drill countless times before to polish rare gemstones and make fine jewellery, etc. All I will do is make a very small drill insertion into this side of the amulet and then, with an ultra-fine needle, I will extract a small sample. I will then place the tissue in a special preservative fluid. As soon as the rain stops and the road becomes passable, I will take it to the lab.'

Lida thought about this carefully for a moment. Then she said, 'OK -let's do it.'

She had made a decision that would affect mankind in ways she could never possibly have imagined.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ON THE DRILLING OF AN AMULET



Lida watched Jameson as he performed the drilling. He was deeply entranced with the task at hand, totally enraptured in the moment. This would serve as Lida's best memory of the man.

The drill sounded very much like a dentist's drill. Jameson wore special magnifying glasses and worked at his desk under good lighting. He inserted the superfine drill bit point into the apex of the amber, close to the beetle's abdomen. The drill slowly penetrated the amulet and small flecks of drill dust wafted into the air. Lida could smell the dust.

Outside, sheets of rain were still descending from the heavens. It was only about ten o'clock, but the day felt older because of the heavy clouds and dark curtains of rain.

That was when it happened.

A bolt of lightning struck the house with a dreadful crash. All the lights went out, and the drill abruptly stopped working. Jameson was startled in his drilling and the drill slipped in his hands...

The amulet cracked.

The beetle suffered a glancing injury. And in the half darkness of the day, nobody noticed the tiny egg sac as it fell from the amber and landed on the floor.

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When the lights came on there was a silence deep as death. Lida and Jameson both held their breath, Lida with her hand in front of her mouth.

Jameson was deeply disgusted with himself. He had accidentally cracked the beautiful amber amulet with his drill.

Lida said nothing. Swiftly and silently, she left the room.

Jameson sat back in his chair, gave a deep sigh and sat there. He remained sitting there for what seemed like hours.

CHAPTER TWENTY

RECONCILIATION SOUP



Jameson tried his best to glue the amulet back together with what little special epoxy resin he had left, but the damage had been done and the precious amulet was ruined. He realized that he had made a monumental error by attempting to drill into it. And now, what had been done could not be undone.

The rain still poured outside.

The amber was priceless, and he knew that he could never compensate Lida for what he had done to it. She had trusted him with the amulet and he had betrayed her trust, albeit unintentionally and accidentally. Jameson had never before let a client down. This was a first for the man. He felt as shattered, cracked and destroyed as the amber amulet itself.

Lida would not speak to Jameson and the atmosphere was very strained. Even David and Euphemia could feel the tension. No one spoke, and still the rain pelted down on the thatch roof. The roads were still impassable. There was nowhere to run.

Jameson felt his mood slipping into a deep and dark place. He felt the black dog of depression gnawing and nipping at his feet. For years he had battled with his bipolar disorder; it had cost him many a dear friend. And now he felt it descend upon him like a heavy, wet, black blanket. He felt his breathing slow down.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Jameson descended into depression, there was nothing for anyone to do except weather the storm, which sometimes lasted weeks; it had once lasted two years. He refused to take pills for his condition, for he understood it intimately. In his low days he would be graceful to all around him. He would force himself to eat and to keep to his routine. He knew exactly how paralyzing his depression could be if it was allowed to control him.

In the depths of his darkness he knew that he had created a huge and possibly irreconcilable problem with Lida. He had no way of making it right. He could offer her money, but the gem was priceless. He could ask for forgiveness, yet he had let himself down. And he was such a stubborn old fool that he would never, ever, forgive himself.

The clock ticked loudly on the wall and Lida, who had been hidden in her room for the past couple of hours, finally and reluctantly emerged. She looked very fragile. She was not the same woman as the one who had boldly entered his lodge the day before.

Jameson headed for the kitchen and started chopping onions with a sharp knife on his wooden chopping board. He had a plan. For this weather, for this mood and for this woman there was only one solution: his secret reconciliation onion soup.

He started working on his magic potion. And within half an hour of shuffling the frying pan over the stove, there, quietly and silently watching him by the doorway, was Lida, enticed into kitchen by the aroma.

‘Things may be a little bit more endurable with this in your stomach’ he said.

Lida said nothing. She just stared at him; that leopard/prey look again.

Half an hour later the onion soup was ready. It steamed and filled the room with its warm and comforting aroma. Jameson pulled a loaf of warm bread from the oven. He tore into its crusty exterior with his

CHAPTER TWENTY

rugged hands and dropped a knob of butter into the centre. The bread steamed as he put it down in front of her.

Her black hair was straight and silky and heavy as it hung over her shoulder. Her eyes made no attempt at contact.

‘I am truly sorry’ Jameson said, ‘I seriously messed up. What can I do to make things right?’

Lida looked directly into his dark deep and sad eyes and simply said ‘Shit happens. Things fall apart.’

The two of them sat quietly and solemnly sipping their soup and eating their bread.

‘What happened to your leg?’ she asked politely, to make small talk.

Jameson was suddenly reminded of something from his past. It was something so painful that he had never spoken of it to anybody, ever before. It had happened 40 years ago, when he had been a very much younger man.

She had been 18 years old and he had been about 22. They had crossed a field. He remembered that he had had a secret crush on her. Her name was Susanna. But the field had belonged to a mating pair of ostriches.

They never saw the male ostrich coming. The male ostrich was swift and silent and had kicked Susanna from behind, killing her immediately. She was still a virgin at the time of her death.

For 40 years Jameson had never forgotten this incident. Nor had he forgotten his Susanna. She had been so beautiful and pure and fair. What a waste!

The male ostrich had then kicked Jameson, breaking his right femur in two. He couldn’t move because of his injuries, and still the ostrich stomped around him. He remembered how he had screamed and thrown stones at the bird. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Five hours later, his father was the one who found them. The aftermath was too traumatic to recall. The scars could still be felt; they were still painful, even all these years later. That incident was the reason for his limp.

A month after the attack he had tried to see Susanna's family, but they had gone. Her parents and her younger sister vanished. They had left town. There was no forwarding address and no one knew what had happened to them. They had just disappeared.

Susanna was buried on the farm next to his parents' place, and he visited her grave regularly.

It was now well past lunchtime and the meal had settled. They sat there as the rain continued to pour from the heavens. The mood was sombre indeed. Even though it was midday it was semi-dark outside and the lights of Leopard Lodge did little to enliven the atmosphere.

'I reckon we should have some coffee and then decide how we're going to get you back to town' said Jameson, gesturing to David and Euphemia to clear the table.

Lida was still unhappy, though her mood was softening. The 'reconciliation soup' was working a little of its magic and she was beginning to make peace with the situation.

They retired to the lounge and sat on one of the big plush leather couches. David and Euphemia went to the kitchen to clean up, leaving the two of them alone.

'Listen Lida, is there some way I can reimburse you for the damage I have caused? I really feel quite bad for what I have done.'

'You were not entirely to blame. If it hadn't been for the lightning I'm sure the amulet would still be unscathed.'

'Why don't we take it into town and let the folks at the DNA laboratory do their thing? That way the entire exercise will not be an entire loss.' Jameson said.

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'I think that's a good idea' said Lida.

There was silence. Jameson was busy pouring the coffee when he noticed Lida looking at him. Her thick, dark black hair obscured one eye and Jameson felt himself suddenly moved. She looked like a leopardess...

It happened so suddenly and so swiftly. Suddenly his big strong hand was holding her neck and he was kissing her. And she kissed him back.

The kissing became more intense. And then Jameson suddenly stopped.

'That was good soup' he said.

'Good soup indeed!' she replied, with a twinkle in her eye.

The two of them smiled and held each other tightly on the couch. And as the rain continued to pour and the aroma of warm roasted coffee filled the air, the two of them felt a deep and emotional comfort which neither of them had experienced in many years.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

ON THE EGG SAC OF THE BEETLE



In the later afternoon the rain finally subsided, and Jameson decided to drive Lida personally back to Nelspruit. The plan was to leave her Mercedes at Leopard Lodge. She could return for it at the weekend, when the roads would be friendlier towards two-wheel-drive vehicles. Jameson had a Toyota Fortuner 4x4, which he loved more dearly than most of his other possessions.

The plan was to take Lida to her house in Nelspruit and drop the remnants of the beetle at the DNA laboratory. The sky was still cloudy, but the rains had thankfully stopped.

The two of them wished David and Euphemia farewell and headed off down the sandy roads towards Nelspruit. On the road they saw many game animals such as impala and warthogs. A rainbird flew across the road and the smell of the potato bush filled the air with its classic after-rain smell, almost liked baked potatoes.

They drove slowly along the sand road, avoiding deep puddles of rainwater. They were now comfortable in one another's silence and there was a deep and binding bond between them. Neither of them

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had experienced such a deep connection at any time in their respective lives.

Meanwhile back at the Lodge, David was busy sweeping the study. He swept the floor and dusted the desk. He did not realize that he had inadvertently swept up the beetle's tiny, ancient egg sac.

David emptied the contents of the dustbin into the outside compost heap. Jameson believed in recycling, and all vegetable matter and discretionary garbage was added to a recycling compost heap. Within the heap were many earthworms, which helped to convert the decaying organic matter into fertilizer. Jameson used this on his extensive gardens.

When the egg sac, which was the size of a pinhead, landed on the compost heap, it immediately started to absorb moisture and swell. After being entombed for centuries, the beetle eggs were now being exposed at last to water and to life.

Very few organisms have the capacity to remain in an inanimate state, with the exception of some plant spores which can remain in the outer atmosphere and come to life with the addition of water. But this particular beetle species was a very special one. It had the ability to survive almost indefinitely in the egg stage.

The little beetle grubs now began to grow within their individual egg sacs. Beetle eggs are usually laid according to the material the larva needs to feed upon on hatching, but these were unusual. The eggs had been retained within the mother beetle's abdomen, allowing the grubs to feed off her preserved body after death.

The beetle larvae emerged from the eggs with darkened heads, chewing mouthparts and spiracles along the sides of their bodies. Like all such grubs they passed through several instars, the larval developmental stages. Being parasitic, during the later stages dramatic

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

changes occurred. The little grubs were getting more and more restless, seeking out food...

Within three months of the breaking of the amber amulet, hundreds of fully-formed, sexually mature, turquoise blue adult rain beetles had begun to emerge from the garden of Leopard Lodge, Mpumalanga, South Africa.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

NEVER KILL A RAIN BEETLE



It was 6 am and the sun was busy shooting through the darkness. Jameson was sitting comfortably in his favourite chair, overlooking the mighty Crocodile River. He always awoke at 4 am sharp and made himself a hearty fire to celebrate the breaking of the dawn. He would always take his trusty old kettle (which he had acquired during his military days), place it on the fire and make himself some old-fashioned farmer's coffee. Jameson had always begun his day with this traditional ritual.

Today, he noticed something different: There was a strange sound in the air – one that he had never heard before. Jameson knew almost every insect and bird in the region, yet this morning there sounded a shrill, shrieking, cicada-like, high-pitched insect call which he did not recognise. The noise was quite irritating. He could not help but investigate its origin.

Jameson strode on to his lawn and peered into one of the giant fever trees surrounding his garden. To his surprise, in the early morning light, Jameson was shocked to find dozens of tiny blue beetles crawling

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

in his tree. He ran inside and grabbed a clear jam jar with a screw-on lid and went to capture some of these strange blue beetles.

At first he was fascinated by the little blue beetles themselves, but while he was collecting his specimens he noticed several other things. The beetle was not quite like any of the other beetles in the region. For one thing it had the most unbelievable blue shine – like the finest turquoise blue stone from the clearest of freshwater streams. And then there was its *fearlessness*. The little beetle was totally unafraid of Jameson. It would just sit there and allow itself be handled by him. It had a way of simply sitting and observing – almost as if it knew something secret or sacred that no one else knew.

Then Jameson noticed that none of the birds seemed to be interested in eating the beetles. There was a big bird party in a tree on the other side of his garden and many of the local birds were present, yet none of them took any notice of the little beetles.

Jameson went indoors and took out his stereomicroscope. It had been three months – three wonderful, romantic months! - since Lida had first visited him and here, in this clear jam jar, was an exact replica of the beetle he had examined in her amber amulet!

Jameson sat back for a second as he tried to digest this new information. It didn't take him long to do the mental gymnastics.

'Obviously its egg sac must have fallen out when the amulet broke' he muttered to himself. But he still couldn't work out whether it was a local species or an exotic one, or whether it was good or evil. Most importantly, he had no idea what the effects of the beetle would be on his garden and the Mpumalanga ecosystem. The DNA results had come back from the laboratory as 'inconclusive'.

He had to report this to the local representative of environmental affairs. They would surely need to know about the strange new beetle.

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As he pondered, one of the beetles landed on his shirt and began to walk its way up towards his neckline. He felt it touch his skin and he quickly slapped it away, as one normally does in such a situation.

Then he looked at the palm of his right hand. It was covered in chemical-smelling turquoise-coloured blood.

Jameson had killed a rain beetle.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

NOT ENTIRELY UNLIKE IRUKANDJI SYNDROME



Minutes later, Jameson's palm began to itch. It was an itch unlike any he had felt before. The itch became a sting, then a burn. Jameson quickly rushed to his kitchen and ran some ice-cold water on to his hand.

But the hand continued to burn, until a blister developed on his palm. Could the little blue beetle be one of the blister beetle family, he wondered?

The lesion on his hand refused to get better, so he dug some ice out of the freezer. The time was now seven o'clock and the sun was already well above the horizon. It looked as if it was going to be another sweltering day in the veld.

Jameson decided to phone Lida, who was in Nelspruit with her mother for the weekend, and tell her what had happened. He dialled her mobile phone, yet it just rang and rang. She was probably still sleeping at her mother's place, he thought.

The message cue clicked in and Jameson spoke. 'Morning sleepyhead, hope you slept well. Please give me a call when you get this.'

Jameson put the phone down and looked at the palm of his hand.

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The wound seemed to be getting redder; it looked like a hot-water scald injury. He had never seen or read about anything like this before.

Jameson walked up the stairs to get his medical first aid kit. He was going to try putting some antiseptic ointment on the wound. But halfway up the stairs he noticed that he was feeling somewhat short of breath. He held himself against the highly polished wooden railing for a moment.

What the hell! he mused, as his heart rate started racing faster and faster. Then he noticed beads of sweat forming on his forehead and felt himself becoming pale. *Shit. I'm going into anaphylactic shock!*

There was adrenaline in the first-aid kit. He had to reach it. He had to inject himself as soon as possible.

'David! Help me!' he cried. But his servant was outside sweeping. He did not hear the agonized call.

Jameson tried to drag himself up the stairs. He felt very faint and was breathing faster and faster. The wound on his hand was now bright red and the pain was intense.

Jameson had studied the most dangerous poisonous bites and stings on earth, yet nowhere in his studies did he remember anything remotely as painful and as venomous as this. He remembered reading about the Irukandji jellyfish and the box jellyfish from Australia. The Irukandji jellyfish is a tiny and extremely venomous jellyfish which inhabits the marine waters of Australia and fires stingers into its victims, causing symptoms collectively known as Irukandji syndrome. He was displaying similar signs and symptoms, although here he was dealing with a beetle. Just a beetle, and not a jellyfish.

Then Jameson remembered something from one of his entomology textbooks. It came back to him from the furthest recess of his mind: *The rain beetle: never kill them and never crush them and never get their*

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

blue blood on your skin. The blood contains a toxin not entirely unlike Irukanji toxin...

Hence the dictum in the opening chapter of the entomology textbook: *'Never kill a rain beetle'*.

Jameson's final moments on his stairs were spent alone and in agony. The pain increased viciously and exponentially and it wasn't long before he blacked out.

He knew he was going to die. And he had a brief flashback of his life. It wasn't pleasant and dreamy and drawn out and nostalgic as far as flashbacks go; the pain was far too intense for that. He remembered his family, his friends, his old lovers and especially Lida...

And then, just as swiftly, he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

ONLY BLUE LABEL



The sudden and unexpected death of Professor Hugh Rutherford Jameson shocked the entire Nelspruit community. They had lost one of their finest sons. Shock and denial seemed to hang in the air.

Lida seemed inconsolable, and David and Euphemia mourned Jameson's death in their own quiet way. Tributes poured in from all over the world.

There was a message from Clyde von Bonacorde from Prussia and a telegram from Madam Amorose de la Bucchaveldt from Hungary. There was a bunch of flowers from Pompadore van der Cruse from New England and there was a formal letter expressing the sympathies of Lord Rothschild in the United Kingdom.

Jameson's affairs were neatly and quietly tied up. Being a meticulous man, he had already constructed a will. His lawyers quickly and effortlessly dissolved his estate. He had no known living relatives, so most of his possessions were donated to charity.

Leopard Lodge was bequeathed to Lida. Her sudden ownership of such a magnificent property (valued at over 300 million Rand) made

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the insurance company and the lawyers in charge of Jameson's Estate somewhat suspicious. In particular, his oldest and dearest friend (and lawyer) Klag De Waal started asking some very pertinent questions. The first one was: *Who exactly is Lida de la Rey?*

Klag de Waal had gone to school with Jameson and gone on to study law afterwards. He had built up a very well known law firm in Pretoria and was one of the senior partners. Klag would visit Jameson's farm perhaps once a year, and the two of them would play chess, drink fine whisky and catch up.

When Klag heard about the untimely death of his friend and the sudden transfer of his entire property to a woman he had known for less than six months, his suspicions prickled. Sure, Jameson had no heirs. But the sudden transfer of his property to this woman simply did not sit well with Klag.

He decided to travel up to Leopard Lodge to pay his respects to David, Euphemia and Lida and conclude the legal particulars of the matter. So a week after the untimely death of his friend, he got into his BMW 4x4 and traveled up to Nelspruit. He always listened to classical music in his car, particularly Bach, and smoked a pipe; a nasty habit, but one which was so entrenched in his being that it was impossible to imagine him without his ubiquitous pipe.

When Klag arrived at five in the evening, it was David who opened the massive gates leading up to the property. David looked sad and gaunt and Klag realized that the death of his boss must have had a deep effect on the man. He could see the dull eyes, the sunken facial muscles and the greying of the scalp hair, together with his slight stoop. He knew that he was dealing with a very good man but a very sad one.

Klag immediately got out the car to greet David, as was the custom in these parts. The two respectfully greeted each other with a prolonged handshake.

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'I see you David!' said Klag in Shangaan.

'I see you Nkosi' responded David in the same tongue.

The two men said nothing more, yet a great deal passed between them. They stood silently for several minutes before Klag got back in his car and headed up to the Lodge.

At the front door waiting for him was Lida de la Rey. She was wearing a black dress and sunglasses. He could see her from a distance; she was indeed a breathtakingly beautiful woman. Jameson had spoken of her on the phone and mentioned her once or twice on emails.

How strange this was, to be greeted by a strange woman at his lifelong friend's place with that friend now dead. The whole event was surreal and sad and it left an unpleasant taste in Klag's mouth. In fact he felt decidedly uncomfortable about this whole situation.

When Klag stepped out of his car Euphemia was the first to greet him. She had emerged from nowhere in particular. She shot him an odd look, although it was so quick and so brief and mysterious that Klag couldn't quite make it out.

'Euphemia, take Mr De Waal's bags to his room' came the order from Lida, even before she greeted him.

Euphemia grabbed the bags and disappeared into the lodge.

Lida de la Rey slowly stepped down the stairs, between the Koi ponds. She walked stealthy, like a leopardess, eyes fixed on Klag, silent and intense. Klag tried to diffuse the tension of the situation by greeting her in a loud and jocular voice.

'You must be Lida. Hugh told me a lot about you' he began.

Lida extended her hand. Lithe and sleek, it grabbed Klag's hand as a snake would grab its prey. She gave him a smile.

'Come inside' she said.

Klag was visibly thrown by this introduction. She was unlike any

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

woman he had ever met before. She was extremely beautiful. She had inner and outer beauty. Her hair, her face, her skin, everything about her was magnificent. She was pure *woman* in the subtlest and most overt sense of the term.

Her smell was spicy and inviting and she exuded a sensuality and an eroticism the likes of which Klag had only read about in the classic texts. This was the real thing. Jameson had found himself something truly worthy here.

Klag was quite speechless in her presence. All he could think of to say was: 'I need a drink.'

'What would you like? Hugh mentioned you liked whisky.'

'Do you have some?'

'Only Blue Label.'

'OK, that will do.'

And so the two of them entered the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

THE AMBER STONE REAPPEARS



The conversation began very slowly and uncomfortably. Lida suspected that she knew why Klag was there, and Klag could not make his suspicions less obvious.

‘The autopsy report said that Jameson died from anaphylaxis’ began Klag.

‘Yes, it’s hard to believe. Hugh never mentioned to me that he was allergic to anything.’

‘According to the report of the forensic pathologist it appeared as if something had stung him’ continued Klag. ‘There was apparently an unusual wound on the palm of his right hand.’

‘I never knew Hugh to be allergic to bees’ said Lida.

‘According to the forensic pathologist, this was not caused by a bee. It was apparently caused by another type of insect. Would you have any idea what type of insects frequent this part of the world?’

Lida looked baffled. ‘I have no idea whatsoever’.

‘I’ve only been living here for about five months. I know that we get some snakes and spiders in this part of the world, but nothing else springs to mind.’

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Klag took a long, slow sip of his Blue Label whisky. He knew how to interrogate a witness. After all, this was his chosen field of expertise.

‘Tell me Lida’ he paused, ‘how are you doing after Hugh’s death?’

Lida broke down. Her tough composure shattered, suddenly and unexpectedly. Perhaps it was the tender way Klag had posed the question or perhaps it was the way he looked at her, but she was visibly and suddenly shattered in his presence. She began weeping, sobbing and shaking quite uncontrollably.

Klag got up and offered her a handkerchief, trying to comfort her in his own reserved way. He even sat next to her and tried to pat her back. He was not a very emotional man.

‘Now now now!’ he said, in a deep, low and reassuring voice. ‘Take a deep breath and tell me everything.’

Lida began to talk, slowly at first but with increasing rhythm and cadence. She told Klag how tough it had been on her. She told him how lonely it had been. She told him of the difficulties and hardships of the past couple of months. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she began to reminisce about her time with Hugh Rutherford Jameson. She really did seem to miss and love the man.

Klag was soon reassured that a freak accident had happened to his friend and that his suspicions were unfounded. He finished his Blue Label and was beginning to get ready to leave when he noticed that Lida was busy twirling something between her hands. It was some strange object with which she nervously fiddled.

It was at that moment that Lida de la Rey displayed the piece of golden amber resin. Inside it was the well-preserved shape of a small beetle.

‘My father gave me this stone on his death bed’ she said.

‘Why are you telling me about this?’ said Klag.

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‘Are you not at all curious as to the significance of this?’

Klag watched her. She was very sensual. She had the most beautiful straight black scalp hair he had ever seen and the tone of her skin was impossibly soft and feminine. She had the nicest of smiles, although it seemed that she did not smile very often.

Klag looked at the amber stone once again.

‘Now what is all this about?’ he was clearly quite riled by the dramatic way in which she had presented this to him.

‘It was given to me by my father on his death bed’ she began. ‘My father, Dr Arthur de la Rey, received it from an old Jewish man who had carried it with him through the Holocaust. Apparently he was a concentration camp survivor and he reported having kept this amber stone secretly from the Nazis during his entire incarceration. According to what my father said, Mr Shimowitz was given the amulet by his father and before that by his father’s father from time immemorial. My father was Mr Shimowitz’ personal house doctor and on his death bed Mr Shimowitz gave him the stone, saying that he had no more living relatives and he was the last in a line. When my father died, he left it to me.’

Klag was intrigued.

‘My father mentioned to me one thing and one thing only regarding this stone’ said Lida, her voice becoming more conspiratorial. ‘Apparently upon Mr Shimowitz said he should guard it with his life and that failure to do so would mean that all mankind would perish. This was the reason I came up here to meet up with Hugh. He was the leading authority on beetles and rare insects.’

By now the Blue Label whisky had begun to get to Klag’s head.

‘I somehow believe that this beetle had to do with Hugh’s death’ said Lida. ‘It is just that I can’t prove it.’

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Klag felt light-headed and rather uncomfortable. He was not a very superstitious man, and this whole story somehow sounded a little far fetched. Klag was a sceptic by nature. He always took a cautious approach to claims. He applied reason to everything. There were no sacred cows in Klag's world. He always needed evidence, proof. His favourite words were 'show me'.

'That's a nice little story, Miss de la Rey. Can you prove it?'

'Unfortunately I cannot.'

'Well then, it looks like the matter is closed. I am going to see myself out now, because it's a long drive back to Nelspruit and it's already late afternoon.'

Lida got up and shook Klag's hand. Klag thanked David and Euphemia and then headed down the path to his 4X4 BMW. He closed the door and put on his seatbelt. He put his favorite CD in and waited for the music to start. He waved goodbye to Lida, David and Euphemia and started heading down the gravel road towards Nelspruit.

It was a perfect low veld late afternoon. The music was soothing and hypnotic; it was the *Out of Africa* soundtrack by John Barry, quite fitting and appropriate for the scene in which he was traveling. On the right he could see some impala with oxpeckers on their backs.

A few kilometers down the road, Klag stopped his car and opened the window to watch some weaver birds up in the trees. He was an avid birdwatcher and he had his binoculars with him in the car. He reflected that is the female weaver bird who selects with whom she shall mate. Many males vie for the female's attention, but at the end of the day it is she, the female, who decides.

He watched a particularly fussy female weaver eyeing the nest of an ardent male. She hopped around the branches and inspected her suitor's thatch masterpiece. She gave one last critical look, and then

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with a snap or two of her beak she suddenly dislodged his nest from the branch.

Klag watched the male bird. What amazed him was that the bird didn't look at all upset. He carried on singing and went off to start building a new nest. Just like that. There was no feeling sorry for himself; he just carried on building and creating as he was wired to do. This fascinated the Klag.

Just then, silently and swiftly, something flew into his car through the open window; a little blue beetle. With the music playing in the background and his focus on the weavers, he heard and noticed nothing.

Ten kilometers later, Klag De Waal exited the farm and the electronic gate to Leopard Lodge automatically closed behind him. He hit the main tarmac to Nelspruit feeling quite satisfied and content with his meeting with Lida.

As the music reached crescendo, the little blue beetle fearlessly, slowly and softly crawled up and over Klag's back towards his neckline.

The rescuers found his wrecked BMW at the bottom of the mighty Crocodile River ravine three days later. His body was so mangled, putrefied and swollen that even the best forensic pathologist, in the best first world set up, would have surely, under similar circumstances, missed the sick and weeping mark which had been inflicted by the crushed little blue rain beetle on the back of his neck.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

REVENGE



Three weeks later David, loyal David who had worked on Jameson's estate for his entire life, died suddenly and unexpectedly. His community suspected a heart attack. The funeral was well attended by the Malelane community.

And three months after that, Euphemia died too, from a flu-like illness. Euphemia, who was so adept at cleaning, making her delicious scones and quietly going about her business, suddenly and unexpectedly got sick and died. Her funeral too was well attended by the Malelane community.

Euphemia and David were both Shangaan; Jameson had known them since they were kids. So brother and sister, both of whom had worked for Jameson for all those years, both died within a matter of months of Jameson's death.

No one asked any questions and no one thought any more about it. Coincidence, some would say. Freak accidents, others would say.

Only if you were to zoom in and watch Miss Lida de la Rey, sitting quietly and alone on the wooden deck of her new property set in the

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magnificent mountainous region between Malelane and Nelspruit, silently sipping her excellent champagne, smile upon her lips and golden amber beetle dangling around her neck, would you perhaps come to understand...

For 40 years she had never forgotten what had happened to her sister Susanna. She had been so beautiful and pure and fair. Susanna had been kicked by an ostrich and had died. Hugh Rutherford Jameson had been kicked too, but he had lived.

Embittered and angry, Lida de la Rey took to a life of solitude and study. She put all her energy into studying. She studied hard. Yet all those years later, with all her knowledge and after having travelled far and wide, she still could not come to forgive Jameson for her sister's death. After all this time and after all her years of studying she could not come to peace with the loss of Susanna.

She studied entomology. She specialized in poisonous beetles, obtaining her degree *cum laude*. She lost weight and dyed her hair. All the time she planned and schemed, devising a meticulous revenge. She decked her plan with every bright little feather that would burn in her ghostly heart, all the while smiling knowingly to herself.

The story of her father and Mr Shimowitz was a manufactured lie. She had come across the rain beetles in a rare textbook. She knew of the dangers of them. All she had to do was hatch them out, wait and let them wreak their havoc. Her life was also at risk, but she knew better. So long as she didn't kill one and crush it and get the blue blood on her skin she would be fine. Apparently the blood contained a toxin, not entirely unlike Irukanji toxin...

Hence the dictum in the opening chapter of the entomology textbook: '*Never kill a rain beetle*'.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

THE BEETLE



The rain beetles, of which there were now many, started to buzz and get restless in the trees behind the late Hugh Rutherford Jameson's estate. They started to buzz like cicadas on a hot African summer's day.

Suddenly and unexpectedly they started to move and crawl and buzz and fly. And then, as if they were one creature, they slowly headed north-east over the Kruger National Park towards the old tribal villages of Matukane, Lulugame and Namakgane.

Where the beetles were going no one could tell, for there were sharp granite mountain ranges, deep slow-flowing rivers, wide green valleys and impossibly endless blue skies ahead. This treacherous landscape extended for miles, all the way up to the north eastern corners of the land.

It was the boy with the thin ribs who noticed the first little blue beetle of the season. The boy was playing near the river when he noticed a strange blue beetle sitting on one of the black river stones. This little beetle was fascinating, because it seemed so

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

totally unafraid of him. It moved very little. It almost seemed dead. It just sat there on the river stone, no one could miss it. The beetle just sat there, silently watching the boy. The beetle had an unusual way of observing the boy.

It was a very quiet, very strange and very surreal moment when the boy noticed that he was being watched by the little blue beetle, yet he made nothing of it. He quickly trapped the beetle within his cupped hands and placed it in his pouch.

He would show it to the tribal elders.

The end



