

Inheritance is the climax of the trilogy. The sensual relationships intertwine as they track the poachers to the gold mines of Australia

Inheritance

Landscapes of Love

PHILIP TYLER

INHERITANCE
LANDSCAPES OF LOVE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the Park Rangers who risk their lives every day to protect the mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park and the rhinos in the National Parks of Kenya.

In the year ending March 2021 alone, twenty young Park staff in Virunga were murdered in a ‘ferociously violent and sustained attack’ by armed poachers.



Mountain gorilla and baby in Virunga

“If we do not do something to prevent it, Africa’s animals, and the places in which they live, will be lost to our world and her children forever.”

Mandela

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PROLOGUE

Chyulu Hills – Kenya – West Africa

Daniel slowly opened his eyes, after the operation to repair the muscles in his left thigh. The AK-47 bullet had torn straight through his leg but fortunately missed hitting the femur. His vision was blurred but he could see two figures, one on each side of him. He was disorientated and did not know if he was still in the forest with the dead Somali next to him, drenched in blood. Although the smell of the putrefying rhino carcass had gone, as had the buzz of the swarming flies around his legs.

“You are in Elizabeth’s hospital at Mtito Andei. You were seriously injured but you’re safe now my darling,” comforted Charlie, holding his hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I thought I was dead. I heard a second bullet,” mumbled Daniel, still not sure what had happened to him. He tried to move but the pain in his leg was intense, even though the anaesthetic had still not fully worn off.

“Don’t try and move my love. Just lie still and we will explain everything when you’re feeling better,” assured Charlie.

“Is Annie, OK? Is she alive?” Daniel started to panic. “Where is my darling Annie. Please tell me she is alive?”

Charlie looked a bit shocked and glanced across at Annie on the other side of the bed. Ann Marie looked back at Charlie and smiled reassuringly.

Ann Marie took Daniel's other hand. "I am here with Charlie. We are both here."

"I thought I was dead!" reiterated Daniel slurring his speech and losing consciousness again.

"He said that in Chocorua!" Charlie grinned at Anne Marie.

"We could send him there to convalesce and I will look after you!" offered Anne Marie with an even bigger grin on her face.

At that point, Karen, the senior doctor who ran the clinic for Daniel, came into the room to check on her patient.

"How's he getting on?" she asked Charlie.

"He's still a bit delirious and confused, but he is slowly coming round."

"He was very lucky the bullet missed the bone or he could have been in for a very long recovery," confided Karen. "But he's a tough nut and will be back on his feet in no time. Just don't let him go off on some other hare-brained adventure until the stitches are out and the wound has healed up properly."

"How long do you think he will be in for?" asked Anne Marie.

"I would like to keep him in for a week, but you know Daniel. If we get past tomorrow, I'll be surprised!"

* * *

Daniel arrived back in camp the following day.

“You are still meant to be in hospital,” admonished Charlie at his surprise arrival. She gave him a hug and kissed his cheek.

“I was bored and I needed a decent cup of tea. What’s been happening here? Have the police sorted out the dead Somalis? Is the rhino cow and calf down at the Springs, OK?”



White rhino and calf

“Yes, everything is fine,” assured Charlie. “Just sit down before you fall down and Nzinga will make you a cup of tea.”

The whole team had heard the news of Daniel’s arrival and gathered around him to celebrate his rescue from being killed.

“So how did you two know the Somalis were going to ambush me?” asked Daniel smiling at Anne Marie and Charlie who had saved his life by killing the poachers.

“You’ve got Eshe to thank for that,” said Anne Marie. “A few minutes after you left to find the rhino carcass, Eshe said that the white rhinos never go down as far as Utu. So, Charlie and I were suspicious, grabbed two AKs and jumped in the Land Rover. We only just arrived in time. He was about to shoot you again!”

“Come here Eshe and give me a big hug,” offered Daniel and Eshe obliged, happy that she had helped save the life of the man she idolised.

“Jahir and I have some news for everyone,” blurted out Eshe. “We are getting married next week!” Everyone cheered and congratulations flowed from every direction. “Will you give me away please Daniel. Please?” pleaded Eshe.

“Of course. It will give me the greatest pleasure in the world, Eshe. I wondered why you wanted to save my life!”

CHAPTER ONE

The Serengeti Ecosystem – Tanzania

Although Eshe and Jahir were both raised in the orphanage at Kilmana run by Father Peter, Eshe had worked so closely with the Maasai over the last few years that she considered them as her family. All the women folk in the local village were excited about the wedding of their adopted daughter and they were determined to organise a traditional Maasai wedding ceremony. Having both spent a lot of time away from Tsavo, in England getting their further education, Eshe and Jahir were sort of planning a more modern Christian ceremony. The women folk won!

“As long as I don’t have to have my hair shaved off and lamb fat smeared on my head!” declared Eshe, at least rejecting that part of the traditional festivities.

“And we don’t want any cows or goats as presents either,” laughed Jahir.

Undaunted by these restrictions the women set to work and started making the elaborate and colourful costume for Eshe to wear. Hundreds of colourful beads were threaded and a decorative wedding collar lovingly created.

Charlie and Anne Marie were in charge of the preparation of the feast, consisting of roast beef, a sort of soup that was a mixture of cow’s blood and milk, and a

honey-based creation for afters. Charlie was not sure about the blood and milk but Daniel assured her it was delicious!

* * *

The morning of the wedding arrived. The sky was cobalt blue without a cloud in sight. Kilimanjaro rippled in the heat-haze drifting up from the savannah and the white-starred robins were twittering in the black ironwood trees. Eshe had spent the night with the women folk at Kambu, one of the local villages. They had spent the previous evening explaining to her how to be a good wife to Jahir and how to give him many children. Eshe entered into the spirit of the evening and did not let on that they had been living together for some while. She did however pick up one or two things about men that she had never thought was possible!

Meanwhile Jahir had spent the night with Daniel, Bomani and Thulani and definitely needed a black coffee for breakfast. The wedding ceremony was to take place on the special rock overlooking Kilimanjaro which meant so much to everyone at the camp. Father Peter, from the orphanage, had agreed to officiate, in conjunction with the Maasai elders, who would bring a traditional element to the ceremony. Jahir had decided to wear his pilot's uniform from his days at RAF Cranwell but the elders insisted that he wore a cow skin covered in coloured beads on top. This symbolised his wealth and standing in the community, so the bride and her family would be impressed.

Charlie fussed around Jahir, making sure his tie was straight and that the cow skin didn't hide too much of his pilot's wings.

“You look very handsome, Jahir. Eshe is a very lucky young lady,” assured Charlie. Jahir smiled nervously and shuffled his feet self-consciously. Daniel appeared in his best linen suit and white shirt. No tie.

“How’s the condemned man this morning?” Daniel asked with a smile.

“Have you got the rings?” asked Jahir tentatively.

“I had them somewhere last night. I will find them eventually,” joked Daniel, pretending to search through his pockets.

“Don’t wind him up any more,” replied Charlie. “He is nervous enough as it is!”

* * *

The joy of the approaching bridal family could be heard a mile away as they ascended the red dusty track up to the camp. The intensity of the laughter and singing increased as the milling throng got slowly nearer and nearer. A thin cloud of ochre dust drifted amongst the bushes and tumbled down the hillside into the vast grasslands below. Finally, the party danced into view, with brightly coloured dresses billowing with exuberance and fun. Eshe, hidden at first by a multitude of happy smiling faces, finally appeared from the chaos in her magnificent red dress. Charlie ran over and gave her a big hug.

“You look absolutely stunning Eshe. Your dress is amazing, and all those beads. It must have taken them a year to sew all those together!”

“Are you sure I look OK?” whispered Eshe. “I couldn’t see what they were doing.”

“You look fabulous. Come and hold my hand I will take you to Daniel.”

As they walked across the camp to find Daniel, Eshe turned to Charlie and whispered again, “I just wanted to thank you Charlie for taking me on that flight in the helicopter to Kilimanjaro with Jahir. If you hadn’t done that for us, I would probably never have had the courage to kiss him.”

“You are clearly very much in love with each other and I am sure you will have a wonderful life together,” smiled Charlie as they found Daniel finishing a phone call.

“Good morning Eshe; you look different!” joked Daniel and Charlie gave him a quick dig in the ribs.

“Don’t you think she looks amazing?” suggested Charlie, scowling at Daniel.

“Jahir is a very lucky man, Eshe. You are incredibly beautiful and I wish I was twenty years younger.”

“So do I,” blushed Eshe, revealing her fantasies about Daniel but added quickly, “you have Charlie and I think you are very lucky too.”

Daniel took Eshe’s hand, gave it a soft kiss and led her out into the cheering Maasai families. The tufts of savannah grasses, tied to Eshe’s shoes to symbolise a plentiful supply of food for their cattle, flicked up little clouds of ochre dust as they walked across to the stone outcrop overlooking the plains of Africa. Jahir turned to look at Eshe, his eyes filled with joyous tears. Their eyes melted into one vision as they became man and wife under the midday sun.

* * *

“You may kiss the bride,” said Father Peter and Jahir took Eshe in his arms and gave her a long passionate kiss. The cheering echoed around the camp and the party began.

“So, who was on the phone?” Charlie asked Daniel, as they collected their first glass of Dom Perignon Champagne from Bomani’s rustic bar.

“What phone? I thought it was a lovely service,” replied Daniel trying to avoid the question unsuccessfully.

“I knew you were up to something! So come on, what’s going on?”

“Just doing a favour for a friend.”

“Which friend?”

“You’ll see in a minute. That’s his helicopter,” smiled Daniel pointing to a tiny speck in the sky, swooping down the front of Kilimanjaro and across the plain towards them. As the drone from the blue and white Super Puma grew in intensity, the eyes of the party lifted to the skies. It circled the camp and hovered above the small landing pad next to Jahir’s helicopter, throwing up a curtain of dust hiding its occupants. As the dust started to clear, a tall figure dressed in a pure white flowing thawb with a red and white checked keffiyeh walked towards the mesmerised gathering. In his right hand he held a small gift wrapped in gold foil.

Nzinga, who was standing next to Anne Marie, grabbed her arm when she recognised Prince Fahd.

“I can’t believe it’s him. Am I dreaming? Why is he here in Chyulu?” Nzinga was confused and elated at the arrival of her special friend from Saudi Arabia.

“I was only talking to him last night and he said nothing about this!” exclaimed Nzinga.

“I think you might have Daniel to thank for this but let’s see how things pan out. Play it cool my dear. Don’t blow it,” advised Anne Marie.

Daniel walked across to the prince and they embraced as old friends. Fahd's eyes flashed around the gathering looking for Nzinga. Their eyes met and they smiled at each other with no hint of their real feelings.

"Did you have a good trip my friend?" asked Daniel.

"Thank you for inviting me, Daniel. I cannot wait to see how your rhino project is going. But why are you limping so badly?"

"Long story, but the girls killed the other guy!" laughed Daniel. They walked across to Eshe and Jahir, and Fahd presented them with his wedding gift. It would buy a lot of goats!

* * *

The champagne was starting to work its magic. The music got louder, the dancing more colourful and the white-starred robins were long gone. Charlie had a long conversation with Fahd about Rashieka and her continued recovery from her kidnap. She and Prince Khalid were back running their busy lives: he running endless meetings about oil production and Rashieka enjoying her daily shopping expeditions. Still no sign of any children though.

"Where are you staying?" asked Charlie.

"I have hired the Safari Lodges in the Serengeti and I was hoping you would all come and stay as my guests whilst I am here?"

"That would be wonderful. I assume Daniel knows about this already?"

"Of course: he organised it all for me!" laughed Fahd. "I thought Jahir and Eshe could have a quiet lodge on their own and enjoy their honeymoon whilst we all go on safari!"

“I am sure they will enjoy the peace and quiet after all this excitement; it’s very kind of you Fahd and it will be great fun to spend a few days in your company. Now I am sure you will want to see Nzinga on your own whilst everyone else is preoccupied with the festivities?”

“Do you think she will forgive my surprise arrival?”

“I am sure she will mellow with a kiss!”

“But...”

“You’re a long way from Saudi here Fahd and amongst friends. Daniel would not have invited you if he thought there was a problem. Just enjoy your time with Nzinga; she talks about you all the time. Tomorrow is another day. If you walk across to the outcrop where the wedding ceremony was, on your own; I will bring her across to you in a few minutes,” smiled Charlie.

* * *

Charlie found Nzinga talking to Anne Marie, took her hand and asked her to come for a walk.

“Has he gone?” asked Nzinga with a worried expression on her face.

“No, he is waiting for you over at the rock. You only have a few days together so make the most of it,” advised Charlie.

“But Annie said to play it cool?”

“A prince from the Saudi royal family has flown two thousand miles to be with you Nzinga, now is not the time to be cool!”

Nzinga walked slowly through the confusion of colour and music and out to the rock. Fahd was looking out across the savanna and turned to face Nzinga when he heard her footsteps.

He smiled and held out his hand. “This is going to be incredibly complicated.”

“I don’t care,” said Nzinga returning the smile, “I have never felt like this with anybody before and I am so pleased that you could come.”

Fahd took her into his arms and kissed her softly on the lips. Their lips parted and they looked deeply into each other’s eyes. Fahd lifted her off the ground in his arms and kissed her again, passionately.

A tear of joy trickled down Nzinga’s cheek, “I don’t care how complicated it gets. I only want to be with you.”

* * *

The following morning, they climbed aboard the two helicopters and headed for the Safari Lodges in the Serengeti. Bomani and Thulani had agreed to stay behind and watch over the rhinos and Max had headed back to the airport to keep a birthday party appointment with his two goddaughters in Los Angeles.

It was early May and the long rains were coming to an end but the humidity was still intense and the daytime temperatures were over thirty degrees. The prince had reserved the whole site so they could relax in privacy and not be worried about the scourge of social media intrusions. Charlie and Daniel had their own lodge near the natural pool and Jahir and Eshe had theirs, a discreet distance at the far end of the group. Anne Marie had the lodge next to Charlie’s and Fahd had booked a separate lodge for Nzinga, next to his, as he did not want to make any assumptions about their relationship.

After the frenetic activity of the previous day’s wedding, they all decided to have a relaxing evening by the pool,

overlooking the vast lands of the Serengeti. As the crimson sun drifted down to the distant horizon, the evening air cooled and a distant lion roared in preparation for his evening's sortie. The attentive staff at the lodge lit a fire to prepare an alfresco meal and filled the crystal flutes with Krug Clos d'Ambonnay to complement the smoky flavours of the chargrilled vegetables.

Daniel and Fahd were stood next to the firepit when Charlie appeared wearing her favourite long floaty dress made of fine Egyptian cotton. She had put her hair up and was wearing the long gold earrings her grandfather had left her. She looked incredibly sexy as the flames from the fire reflected through the fine material. Fahd kissed her on her cheek and Daniel just smiled in anticipation.

Charlie glanced at the flute in Fahd's hand but looked away quickly.

"It's only fizzy grape water!" he suggested without much conviction and they all laughed.

Jahir and Eshe wandered slowly along the path, hand in hand, towards the gathering, smiling and chatting to themselves, clearly happy to finally be together without creeping about in the dark.

"Now then you two, how was the first day of married life?" asked Daniel.

"This is just such a romantic place to spend our first few days together," replied Eshe. "We will always be indebted to you Prince Fahd and thank you for such a beautiful present."

"You make a wonderful couple and I am sure you will be very happy together. And please drop the prince bit. Just call me Fahd."

“Have you been to Africa before?” asked Jahir.

“Only once, to an oil conference in Nigeria, but it has always been one of my ambitions to come to this part of Africa and see all the wildlife that you are all doing such a fantastic job of protecting. We have similar conservation problems in Saudi and I am looking forward to comparing notes with you Eshe so we can learn from each other.”

“Where are Annie and Nzinga?” enquired Daniel, looking at Charlie.

“I think Annie is doing Nzinga’s hair? She wanted it to look special for you tonight Fahd. She is so pleased you have come all this way to see her.”

“I came to see the lions,” joked Fahd, unconvincingly. At that moment Annie and Nzinga appeared from Annie’s lodge. Nzinga looked stunning in her long bright blue silk dress and her hair looked beautiful, tumbling around her shoulders in waves. Fahd took her hand and kissed it softly again. Nzinga could not believe this was happening to her.

“Daniel. How do you manage to surround yourself with such beautiful intelligent ladies in the middle of nowhere!”

“Everything is beautiful in Africa!” smiled Daniel. “Now let’s get something to eat before the sun sets.”

* * *

The following morning everyone was up early, at five o’clock, for a hot-air balloon ride in the clear blue skies above the Serengeti. The team from Arusha were already unpacking the green and gold balloon and inflating the Nomex envelope with the gas burners generating the hot air. The balloon slowly took shape as the hot air filled the inside of the envelope and lifted it vertically above the

traditional wicker basket. The tension in the ropes holding the basket to the ground grew taut as the balloon strived for its freedom from the dusty African soil. The senior pilot was called Oscar and he had been flying hot-air balloons all over the world for over twenty years, including winning his category at the Championships in Rio Claro in Brazil 2014. Whilst he was completing his pre-flight checks, he got into a deep conversation with Jahir about air currents and the safety features of the balloon compared to Jahir's helicopter.

"Come on you two – enough of the techy stuff; these ladies want to see some wildlife before all the lions go for a midday siesta," admonished Daniel.

They all climbed into the creaking basket, Charlie with her Canon camera fitted with a long zoom lens, Anne Marie with a picnic hamper and Fahd with the obligatory bottle of champagne to toast the safe landing – hopefully. Oscar gave the envelope on the balloon one final burst of hot air whilst Daniel released the straining ropes allowing the party to accelerate into the cool morning skies above the Serengeti.

"Wow, it climbs really quickly," exclaimed Anne Marie.

"That's why we like an early start," advised Oscar. "The difference in temperature between the ambient air and the hot air in the balloon gives you a big advantage in the length of flight you can achieve with the gas we have on board."

"Where are we heading?" asked Fahd, getting enthusiastic about his first flight in a balloon.

"We are in the hands of the Gods," smiled Oscar, "but the air current should take us north-west along the Grumeti River basin towards Lake Victoria. The large herds of

wildebeest and zebra will be chasing the grasslands on their annual migration up to the Masai Mara and we should get to see some of the early herds crossing the river which is pretty spectacular.”

“Do you find the balloon frightens the animals?” asked Anne Marie.

“Only if you fly really low over them,” replied Oscar. “The short burns on the gas sometimes startles the gazelles but the larger animals seem pretty immune to it.”

Daniel was leaning on the edge of the basket with Charlie resting her head on his shoulder. He smiled at her and gave her a quick kiss whilst the others were preoccupied with the vivid reds and scarlets of the sun rising above the distant horizon, lighting up the magnificent scenery as far as the eye could see.

“You’d better get the camera fired up if you don’t want to miss the sunrise,” suggested Daniel, “and try not to fall out of the basket!” he laughed referring to Charlie’s fall off Mount Chyulu in New England. Charlie grinned and dug him in the ribs. “I’ll make you pay for that later.”

“Quick Charlie,” gesticulated Anne Marie. “There is a group of zebras over here with two babies.”

By the time Charlie had got her camera set up, they had drifted past the group and the moment had gone.

“Can we go back?” joked Anne Marie to Oscar.

“Err no! We don’t have steering I’m afraid,” he smiled. “There will be plenty more.”

The warmth of the early morning sun was welcome after the cool start, and as it heated the vegetation below, the pleasant aroma of the acacias drifted up to them in the basket. The smell of the distant herds hung in the passing

air and the acrid scent of lion clung to the nostrils. This was Africa at its magical best. The huge scale of the landscape. The kaleidoscope of colours. The birth place of mankind. The endless peace. A place to love and be loved.

Charlie noticed that Fahd was holding Nzinga's hand and she smiled approvingly at Daniel. He nodded towards Jahir and Eshe who were similarly attached. Anne Marie was leaning over the edge of the basket on her own scanning the verdant grasslands for more zebras. Charlie crossed the basket and put her arm around her waist.

"Have you seen anything yet?" asked Charlie, in excuse for her friendly squeeze. Anne Marie turned and smiled.

"I have often dreamed of what it would feel like to float along above the trees and savannah of Africa. I have watched it so many times in films but the reality is a million times better. It's just wonderful Charlie. I can't thank you enough for inviting me."

"I think it was your idea to come to Africa and help Daniel to find the poachers – and we ended up saving his life! It should be me thanking you," smiled Charlie giving Anne Marie another affectionate hug.

Oscar gave the burner another short burst and the flames flickered into the balloon as it gained altitude to cross a hillside covered in trees. As they breached the summit, Anne Marie pointed frantically at a small expanse of water below, surrounded by eleven elephants and three calves. Two teenagers were rolling in the muddy waters covering their rough skin with the brown mud. One of the mother elephants was pawing at the water's edge trying to encourage her calf to make the treacherous descent of the bank into the water. The calf kept moving its front feet

over the edge of the bank but then retreating in fear. The three-foot drop must have looked frightening to such a small calf for the first time. But slowly, with its mother's encouragement, it reached further and further down the slope until its back feet lost hold and it slid down the muddy slope into the water with a small splash. Charlie was ready this time and her camera whirred away as it took multi-shots of the infant's adventures.

"Did you catch that, Charlie?" asked Fahd. "I must have a picture of that on my office wall!"

"Of course; I will send you all a WeTransfer file when I get back so you can look through all the photographs I have taken of the safari. They will all be over five meg so it's the easiest way to send lots of photographs."

"You will have to come back to Riyadh and take some photographs of our Vision 2030 research programme for the Arabian leopards in the AlUla mountains for me," requested Fahd.

"We would love that, wouldn't we Daniel? It will be really exciting to see the new facilities you have built."

"It might make ours look a bit Heath Robinson!" joked Daniel.

"I think we might be able to work together on that one. Of course, it will mean I will have to come to Chyulu a lot," smiled Fahd, looking towards Nzinga whose heart leapt at the idea.

The elephant family continued with their muddy bath, and as the balloon drifted westwards, another small group of elephants were wending their way through the trees in curling, trunk-to-tail lines. The mothers were flapping their enormous ears and making squeaking noises to encourage their calves to keep up.

As the balloon moved out onto the dry savannah grasslands, punctuated only by the occasional flat-topped vachellia tree, a vast herd of wildebeest came into view. The swarming lines of animals looked like soldier ants from above as they moved relentlessly towards the Grumeti River; another hurdle in their relentless search for fresh grazing. Nzinga spotted a late calf being born but it stood no chance in the open plains against the voracious hyenas.

“Most of the calves are born in February on the plains south-east of Seronera which are rich in grasses after the short rains in November and December,” explained Oscar. “After the end of the long rains, around the end of April, they start to move on their annual 800-kilometre migration with their calves. Many calves are killed by the predators along the way including the lions, leopards and of course the scavenging hyenas which none of us really like much!”

“Does the annual migration happen at exactly the same time every year?” asked Fahd.

“It depends on the grazing available in each area of the cycle,” Oscar replied. “So, it is quite difficult to predict when the trek will start and how quickly it will progress but it always takes the same route, passed down from one generation to the next.”

“I have decided I hate hyenas!” grumbled Anne Marie as the last of the calf disappeared down the throats of the hyena pack.

“I think they come into the same category as poachers but when did you last see a big game hunter, like Ernest Hemingway, sat on a dead hyena!” observed Daniel cynically.

The burning sun was now well above the distant horizon and the curved horns of the wildebeest were

reflected on the ground beneath their ever-moving hooves. The enormous herds of zebra were interspersed with the wildebeest like black and white minstrels, braying donkey-like to their own youngsters to keep them in the safety of the herd. Those trailing behind were soon hunted down by the efficient techniques of lionesses.



Pair of Zebra

Nzinga spotted a female leopard resting in a wild date palm tree with her two cubs wrestling on the ground beneath. They rolled, fought and chased each other around the tree until an ominously large wildebeest approached. The leopard quickly jumped to the ground and rounded-up the wayward youngsters, carrying each in turn softly in her mouth, to the safety of the higher branches.

Each waterhole was surrounded by thirsty mouths and impatient crowds awaiting their turn. Giraffes with their golden mosaic skins, stooped to get fresh water; their front legs flexed apart so their long necks could reach. Thompson's gazelles, eland and waterbuck nervously

sipped at the water's edge, constantly on lookout for the next predator to ruin their day.

Oscar pointed out the winding green belt of vegetation lining the Grumeti River ahead of the balloon, as the call of the baboons echoed from the dense treetops. The herds of wildebeest were growing denser as they backed-up from the dangerous river crossings filled with hungry crocodiles, looking for an easy lunch. As the balloon crossed over the river, they could see the huge hippos floating in the green tainted water, immune to the crocodiles. The impulse of the wildebeest to find new grazing overwhelmed their fear of the crocodiles and en masse they leapt into the turbid, boiling waters, thrashing their legs in frantic panic to reach safety on the far bank before the grip of the enormous carnivorous teeth sank into their limbs and dragged them to their final demise.

"I have read about these crossings many times but to see the reality of this primeval drive to get food is mesmerising and hypnotic," observed Fahd. "It's nature at its most cruel, horrific and saddest."

"But everyone who comes on safari wants to see the spectacle," said Daniel. "It's real, it's nature at its most primitive level and it could be mankind fighting for the last remnants of food on the planet if we don't look after the place."

"Before philosophy totally ruins the day, I think it's time for lunch," laughed Oscar. "I am planning to land in that clearing on the far side of the river so hold on tight when we hit the ground."

With great expertise, Oscar slowly released the hot air from the envelope and the basket touched the ground as

softly as a butterfly on the buddleia in an English garden. The balloon gently deflated and fell to the ground in a long straight line away from the basket, for which he got a respectful round of applause from his passengers.

At that moment two Mitsubishi pickups appeared from a track through the trees with the recovery crew on board.

“How did they know where we would land?” asked Anne Marie, her head still full of hungry crocodiles.

“GPS!” laughed Oscar.

“You wouldn’t think she can fly jets!” smiled Daniel patronisingly.

With the baboons burbling in the background and the odd vervet monkey screaming at a rival, they settled down to Anne Marie’s picnic basket and Fahd’s champagne, which was rather warm – but a nice thought anyway.

* * *

The long drive back to the lodges was hot and dusty. The tracks were rough and the back seats of the pickups cramped and uncomfortable. From the freedom of the skies to terrestrial transport was a sharp contrast and they were all pleased when the camp came into view.

“It was an early start, so I suggest we all have a rest for a while. I will arrange a meal by the pool later on and we can all have a relaxing evening enjoying the sunset,” suggested Daniel. No one disagreed!

* * *

Charlie and Daniel walked down the path to the natural pool at about four-thirty and Anne Marie was already swimming up and down the pool vigorously, the silver

water droplets skimming down the black skin on her back. She didn't notice them arrive and continued her exercise whilst they relaxed on one of the rattan sofas covered in voluminous white linen cushions. An attentive member of staff magically appeared with a silver tray of gin and tonics. Charlie was wearing Daniel's favourite white silk and gold chain bikini hidden under a long white chiffon kimono for modesty.

"When did you two sneak up on me?" smiled Anne Marie, finally noticing their arrival and resting her chin on her arms at the water's edge.

"Oh, ages ago," lied Daniel. "Are you practising for the Olympics!"

"I just felt like some exercise. It gives me a buzz to push myself to the limit sometimes," replied Anne Marie lifting herself out of the water. Daniel's eyes glanced up and down her beautiful slim body for a fleeting moment. Charlie noticed with a tinge of jealousy. She let the kimono slip off her thigh as a distraction for Daniel.

"I love your kimono, Charlie; where did you buy it?" asked Anne Marie, her eyes beating Daniel's to the exposure.

"Riyadh actually. Princess Rashieka bought it for me as a present on one of our many shopping trips. This is the first opportunity I have had to wear it."

Anne Marie collapsed onto the sofa next to Charlie, curled one leg under herself and grabbed a G&T from the table next to her. "Cheers! That balloon flight was the most wonderful journey I have ever experienced. I just loved the baby elephants in the mud pond. I hope you've got lots of pictures for our book."

“I thought you had forgotten about that project?” said Daniel ruefully.

“I never forget an opportunity to work with Charlie,” grinned Anne Marie.

Before that potentially complicated conversation developed, Jahir and Eshe wandered across from their lodge at the far end of the complex. Jahir had his arm around Eshe’s waist and she briefly looked up at him, smiled and they kissed.

“Hi you two. How is the honeymoon going?” asked Anne Marie in a blunt but amicable American way. Eshe blushed and Jahir smiled!

“We are having a lovely time together,” replied Eshe, regathering her composure. “Isn’t this such a wonderful and peaceful place? We are so lucky Fahd invited us.”

“Pull up another sofa and help yourselves to a drink,” suggested Daniel, just as Fahd arrived wearing his bright red swimming trunks. Charlie had never seen him undressed before and was struggling to take her eyes off his extremely attractive physique. His naturally brown skin flattered in the evening sunlight.

Daniel stood up to welcome him but fell back onto the sofa as his injured leg gave way.

“Too much gin already?” laughed Fahd.

“He should be taking more rest after being shot but you know what he’s like!” reprimanded Charlie.

“I’ll give him a massage later. That’ll fix it,” said Anne Marie with a sly grin.

“Whose coming for a race up and down the pond then?” suggested Fahd. The words were hardly out of his mouth when Anne Marie leaped up and dived elegantly into the cool water.

“I’ll take that as a challenge then!” said Fahd and followed her with a determined dive of twice the length. Charlie followed his lithe torso through the air and followed his body as it slid into the water without a ripple. He caught Anne Marie up before the first length.

“How many lengths then?” challenged Fahd.

“As many as you like!” replied Anne Marie.

“One hundred. One, two, go!”

“What happened to three?” shouted a surprised Anne Marie but Fahd was nearly one length ahead and pretended not to hear. Anne Marie set off in hot pursuit as Nzinga appeared from her hut adjacent to Fahd’s.

“What are they up to – is it some sort of competition?” queried Nzinga.

“I think they are as competitive as each other but I doubt he has raced a woman before!” said Daniel.

As the two swimmers raced up and down the pool, Eshe got up from the sofa and walked across to Nzinga to talk to her dearest friend quietly on their own.

“So how is Jahir in bed now you are married?” asked Nzinga, coming straight to the point.

“Well, you know we have been together for a while,” whispered Eshe, “but he has become incredibly romantic and wants me all the time. He makes me feel so special and is very considerate but we made love four times last night!”

“The women in the village did warn me about African men’s libido but I did not expect quite so much enthusiasm,” smiled Eshe. “Anyway, have you and Fahd done it yet?”

“Not yet. He is being very polite and kisses me so sensitively. He makes my tummy turn over.”

“So are you going to let him?”

“I don’t know what to do. I really want him. My body aches for him when he touches me but Anne Marie warned me not to be too keen because of the situation, with me not being from Arab royal blood.”

“It’s an amazing feeling when they are in you. I know we have never talked about it in detail but I am married now and feel I should help you. You are my best friend in the whole world!” smiled Eshe, hugging Nzinga.

“The truth is I am still a virgin,” confided Nzinga, “and until I met Fahd, I never really thought about sex much; but now my whole body is on fire for him and I want him to want me.”

“Look there is no rush. Apart from who he is, he also seems to be a gentle honest person to me. If you get close to him wanting you, explain that you have never been with a man before and that it is something very special for you. You will be able to tell from his reaction if he has sincere long-term feeling for you,” advised Eshe thoughtfully.

“Thank you Eshe. I love you like a sister. Let’s see what happens in the next few days.”

The two of them re-joined the group who were now on their feet, noisily cheering on Fahd and Anne Marie who were on lap eighty-five. Anne Marie was catching Fahd and was now only a few strokes behind. Fahd was clearly getting tired but so was Anne Marie, who had already done a few hundred meters before the challenge commenced.

“Come on Fahd,” shouted Daniel. “Don’t let the men down!”

“Annie is going to win. She is catching him! Come on Annie!” called Charlie.

Jahir put his arm around Eshe’s shoulders and gave her a passionate kiss, whilst the rest were willing on their

chosen competitor. "What have you two been whispering about?" he asked.

"Just girl's stuff," smiled Eshe.

"Have they done it yet?" he breathed into her ear.

"How did you know what we were talking about?" said a surprised Eshe.

"Did I get a good rating?" enquired Jahir smiling.

"More practise needed," laughed Eshe. Jahir looked into her sparkling eyes, took her hand, and they ran back to their lodge, giggling.

"Ninety- nine," shouted Daniel, as Anne Marie and Fahd struggled up the last length, both completely exhausted.

"Come on Fahd!" screamed Nzinga, distracting him and Anne Marie just managed to touch first. Charlie grabbed a towel and helped Anne Marie out of the pool. She had never seen her so tired and completely burned out. Fahd jumped up on the side and helped Charlie lay Anne Marie on the sofa and got her a drink of water.

"Did I win?" asked Anne Marie, slightly disorientated.

"Yes Annie, you won," confirmed Charlie, "but you nearly killed yourself."

"You are an amazing lady, Annie. May I call you Annie?" asked Fahd, very concerned about her exertions.

"Of course, Fahd. It has been an honour to do battle with you," smiled Anne Marie, weakly.

Nzinga took Fahd to one side. "Are you OK? I was worried you were getting too tired," said Nzinga.

"I am fine. Don't ever tell the others but I thought she deserved to win. She is extremely competitive and fights like a man to get whatever she wants."

"So, you let her win?"

“Let’s have drink before I die of thirst,” he said, avoiding the question.

Daniel put a drink in Fahd’s hand and toasted his swim. “Cheers. That was fun. Now let’s have something to eat before it gets incinerated.”

They all sat round the crackling fire as the glowing sparks floated into the sultry evening air and the blood-red sun made its way lazily to the distant horizon. The antelope meat was delicious from the firepit and the Leleshwa wine from the Rift surprisingly refreshing after a long hot day. Anne Marie found her strength again after the meal and laughed and joked with Fahd about women’s role in modern Saudi, which he took in good spirit. He was more interested in when they could see the mountain gorillas. Charlie chatted to Nzinga about the latest camera technology and artificial intelligence. Fahd joined in the conversation, being really interested in the recent developments.

They had got so deeply into the benefits of quantum computing in high resolution photography that Charlie hadn’t noticed that Anne Marie had started to give Daniel’s leg the promised massage to ease the pain. Daniel was lying on his back on the sofa next door, and Anne Marie was stroking some sort of oil along his thigh around the gunshot wound. Daniel’s shirt was undone and Charlie was smiling to herself about his strong masculine chest and how it was more attractive than Fahd’s. Charlie then realised that Anne Marie’s fingers were sliding higher and slowly firmer, towards the frayed edges of Daniel’s shorts. He had his eyes shut and was clearly enjoying the feeling. Charlie tried to ignore what was going on but then caught Anne Marie’s glance and she was smiling at Charlie, whilst her

fingers sought further pleasure for Daniel. Anne Marie was playing games with Charlie and Charlie knew it, so she tried to ignore her and returned to the computing discussions with Fahd and Nzinga. Anne Marie was frustrated at the lack of response from Charlie and started to rub the oil into Daniel's chest, casually catching his nipples with her long fingernails. His body was responding when Charlie glanced back. She still refused to give in to the temptation.

The next time Charlie glanced over Fahd's shoulder, Anne Marie had undone the top four buttons on her white safari shirt which left nothing to the imagination. Charlie was left with no option. She stood up, cast aside her beautiful kimono to reveal her sensual body clad only in the miniscule silk and gold bikini that Anne Marie had given her in Chocorua. Charlie knew that would distract her, because Anne Marie loved to see Charlie wearing it. Charlie dived into the pond and Anne Marie immediately jumped up and dived in after her. They swam around each other, laughing and splashing each other until they came together. Anne Marie threw her arms around Charlie's neck and kissed her romantically on the lips. Charlie's body responded like never before, even though she knew others were watching.

Nzinga looked at Fahd and whispered, "Did you see that?"

"Oh, Annie and Daniel go back a long way. The three of them seem to make it work." Dismissing the query as a matter of fact.

"Would you like to come back to my lodge for a lemonade or something," Fahd smiled at Nzinga.

"The something sounds wonderful."