

The Africa Story:

One Musician's Perilous Foray
into the World's Most Dangerous Jungle
after the World's Most Precious Stones

By Mark Christian
& Troy Christian



*Troy, Tyler, and Mark Christian would like to dedicate this work to our new-found family member
Michael Whitsitt*

This isn't based on a true story -- it is a true story

Prologue

My name is Mark Edward Christian, I was born in a hospital called Bella Vista which is near a town named Mayaguez which is on the island of Puerto Rico. My mother was a local and a member of a large family that bore the surname of Hernandez, My father hailed from Rhode Island but was raised in Norwalk, Connecticut. He had joined the Marines and was stationed in Arecibo, Puerto Rico where he and my mother met.

My earliest memories are of living in Norwalk with my mother, father, and older brother Daryl. I have a younger brother as well and his name is Christopher, I am 4 years and two months older than he is, and Daryl is two years older than I. From the very beginning there was turmoil in my parents lives and their union was short lived, I remember being ferried between Norwalk and Puerto Rico as they fought a lot and my mother would return home with us in tow. Memories of my dad are few but there are a few, mostly traumatic ones, contrasted with a moment or two of kindness towards me.

My parents had divorced by the time I was six years old and we spent a couple of years with my mother's family in Puerto Rico in that town of Mayaguez.

When I was eight years old my mother, who had moved to Florida with my brother Daryl, had her family ship me to her. My mother didn't speak English all that well at the time and obtaining work without any special degrees to her name was very hard. She had been very brave to try but soon found she needed help. She had always been very religious and a devout catholic and she turned to the catholic church for help. So the summer I was to turn 9 I found myself in the office of a man named Mr. Bennett. Mr Bennett was kind I suppose, he explained to me that I was being temporarily made a ward of the state in order for the church to be able to help my mother by placing us in what they termed a home. The "home" was an orphanage located in Tampa, Florida and known as The Christ Child Center. It shared a very large property with a school named St Lawrence, the school still stands today. The home is long gone.

My brother Christopher was primarily raised by my mother's sisters and we did not spend too much time together as children.

I have always considered myself to be kind of lucky within my unlucky circumstances. My older brother and I were raised in what we termed boarding schools, and my second home actually was a boarding school by the name of Mary Help of Christians which was also located in Tampa.

I remember becoming very independent rather quickly. My very first night at the orphanage I had to find a place in the pecking order of the all boys side of the home I was placed in. The alpha male at the time was a young blond headed boy maybe 2 or 3 years older than me, his name was Perry Gagnon. So in the middle of the boys side living room and under the watchful eye of a German nun by the name of Sister Okra we had a fist fight, as soon as it became apparent to me

that the nun had no intention of interfering I discovered the great power of my temper. We were both pretty bloody, nose, lips, but I had already decided I would not yield to the older boy. I think I wore him down though, cause in order to save face Perry suggested we finish the fight in private, this is so funny now, the kids that were present about ten others, booed and jeered, but I didn't really know how much more I could take of this face punching stuff, so I accepted, once in there Perry turned out to be an okay kid, he said he had to keep his position as leader of our little pack of orphans, let him declare victory and I could be his friend. I thought I had proved my point and I agreed. Our pajamas were torn and bloody, buttons missing off the old style pajama tops. We shook hands and exited the small utility closet. I could tell by the look on Sister Okra's face that she thought she had done the right thing or maybe it was a bit of respect for me, I don't know. She never said a word about it.

Before we were sent off to the neighboring school everyday, we were each given a bag lunch and two dimes for a milk. I guess I was a big momma's boy and I worried a lot about my mother and how she might be. I had her phone number memorized and almost every night I would sneak out of the fire exit at the end of the boys side hallway, I would leave it propped open and I would walk barefoot across the school property and about a quarter mile to a gas station that was there, I would use those dimes to call my mother's number on the pay phone, If she answered I would hang up and always feeling much happier I would return to school, if I got no answer I would wait there by the payphone to try again, I'm not sure how long I would wait, but it felt long.

Those kids became my family for the next five years. After CCC came the Mary Help of Christians years but I was out of there by the time I was 16 and it was on, imagine a dog seeing an ocean for the first time, that's how the freedom of not being in a school felt to me. And I tried

to take full advantage of it. I thought everybody was this wild. I had to learn the hard way about alcohol and drugs and there was a dark period, but I somehow conquered that. And until the day my first known to me son was born I did what I wanted to do which was to be in a band and play music. The story you are about to read takes place a few years after becoming sober for the first time since I was 16.

Chapter 1

Two years of sobriety later, I was a different person. I had completely reforged my attitude in life and had quadrupled my abilities musically. I had found my own voice, and I was done with doing covers. I was in Miami on a day graced by a rare crispness—the sun was above me and my twenties behind me; I had just turned thirty years old. I was living in a brand new apartment in Kendall with a few sticks of furniture, stealing cable. There was a lot of burning the candle at both ends back then, and I would normally get home anywhere between midnight and 2 am and then get up at 7 to go to work. But I felt great; I was happy and very excited. Since getting sober, the possibilities were starting to seem endless. For the first time in my life, I was becoming an optimist.

So there I was, watching the news one evening, when I saw breaking news that Nelson Mandela had been released from prison. I had the TV on mute, as I strummed the guitar and wrote lyrics. My eyes kept going to the images on the screen. I noticed that in between shots of Nelson Mandela delivering a triumphant speech, there were shots of South Africa in general interspersed in the mix. There were children playing on dusty roads , but some appeared to not be wearing shoes, and they were entertaining themselves with broken junk, like discarded bicycle rims and sticks. The thought pressed at me like an irreconcilable riddle: “How could they be walking on some of the richest soil in the world but not be able to afford shoes?” I struggled to douse the

fires of cognitive dissonance that the scene had sparked in my mind, and finally, I began to ponder the possibility that vast sums and treasures were waiting for someone to unearth them and as though a perfect storm of realization had been summoned by my inner muse all at once, the flames of doubt were doused, and the beginnings of a plan began to sprout up from the ashes. In the back of my mind, reminiscent of Descartes' inspiring angel, a still small voice began to insist, "You have to go to Africa in search of gold and diamonds."

Enter Eli the drummer in my band, and one of my very close friends. The way I came to know Eli was a bit of a stroke of luck, maybe some would say fate. I was looking for a day gig. I happened to walk into a company that was located in the Eagle Bank building in South Miami; their name was Intercept America. The first hint that something was a little unusual about this place was the hiring manager. Picture someone with the long, black hair of a would-be Colombian rockstar. More than that, he was decked out in stage gear, like you had snatched a Latin David Lee Roth out of some alternate reality and slapped him behind a cubicle. Naturally, we started to get along immediately.

I soon found out that he and I had a band and one of the first things I told him was I think I'm going to be your new singer. Eli had discovered Intercept America via a newspaper ad. The company claimed that they were going to reinvent customer service by way of providing a virtual secretary that would replace human service representatives completely. The marketing pitch involved a lot of buzzwords concerning the nascent field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the dawn of the internet, and under very contrived circumstances, the product could even appear to actually work. At the end of the day, the machine they talked up so well amounted to little more than a glorified answering machine.

To cut a long story short, Intercept America was a company looking to defraud any investor they could get to ante up \$50,000 or more, which Eli had in fact convinced someone to do, earning him a job as a branch manager. It was a well-organized professionally crafted front, and from the outside, it appeared to be a well funded and even a potentially visionary corporation that had begun to gather attention from hopeful technologists.

A good amount of investors were drawn in before the wheels started coming off of the whole thing. One day after hundreds of complaints to the Better Business Bureau, the FBI showed up, and only then did it become clear that it had been a scam as company leadership tried to take the money and run as it were.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Eli was able to pitch the concept so well was that he had bought into it himself. It turns out he had mortgaged his home and had invested \$50,000 of his own money with Intercept America. Our rehearsal studio had been built in the backyard of that same home specifically for our band FarrCry. He was counting on that investment to help defend his father who was under investigation for piloting cocaine from Colombia. Of course, as a result of the FBI raiding Intercept America, Eli and I both were now unemployed.

As you might well imagine, I had no way to repay the \$50,000 loan. Our only move was to stall the foreclosure procedures that would begin inevitably for as long as possible. The entire management staff of Intercept America had simply vacated upon the FBI's arrival. Everything was up for grabs, and Eli tried to get back as much of his \$50,000 as he could by taking office furniture as well as computers. That's when I had the idea of sneaking into the server room and printing out their entire client list. While the machine had not worked, it had identified thousands of people in Miami with a need for that type of service, and I didn't know it at the time but this would turn out to be a very good idea and a very valuable list.

As far as I was concerned, we had a very good thing going on with the band—it's a type of chemistry that's very hard to find. We were becoming more and more focused on what we wanted to do. With the exception of my resolved issue with drinking and cocaine in the past there was never another substance abuse issue within the band. We had a very good work ethic. We rehearsed a lot, we were at the studio 6 days a week, and we wrote constantly. Everyone was allowed to write their own parts, and we had all agreed to split the writing. That seemed to shock a lot of people, but our philosophy was simple. If everyone were allowed to contribute evenly and only produce songs as a band then everyone would work for the best outcome each and every time. Also we wouldn't have problems with individuals insisting we did "their" song, even if it wasn't necessarily that good.

At any rate, the band comprised Eli, our drummer (whom you've already met), and then there was Craig, our guitar player, Ira, our keyboard player, and Randy. Randy was the last to join—he was the quintessential bass player. He was delivering pizzas for a living but he owned a small condo in Ft. Lauderdale, and was a hard worker and a very seasoned bass player on the cover circuit, but this was to be his first time performing original compositions.

I myself had come from a well known cover band, and it was going to be my first time writing and performing original material as well. Ira was a music major at the University of Miami, and he drove a Porsche, and that seemed to have been enough for Craig, who was the one who brought Ira into the band. Craig and Eli had already been practicing together for a couple of years when I came along.

The studio had been our haven. It represented an accomplishment for any band to have their own studio. After having started out in warehouses that were designed for storage and facing the array of problems that came along with those types of places, we were really happy when Eli had told

us that he would be building it. It was just a 40' X 20' rectangle with a single door, and no windows. But it was solid concrete block construction with a hurricane-rated roof, and it was soundproofed. We could play as loud and as late as we wanted to and we did, and for the first few years, it was our home away from home.

Eli had taken a number of computers out of the Intercept America office space as well as some furniture. Their worth didn't come close to the 50K he had invested but I had a plan brewing in my head.

I had made a couple of trips to the library and was spending my Sundays reading everything I could find regarding mining for gold and diamonds in South Africa. Most of the material I was able to find at the time was pretty dated although it began to give me a back story on mining in South Africa, and it began to create a picture for me. The more I learned, the more fascinated I became.

One of the things I learned was that there were two types of mining. There is mining the ore—the kimberlite, as it's known, is the substrate in which diamonds are formed. The kimberlite pipes that contain the diamonds were pushed up during volcanic eruptions that occur beginning at great depth and pressure. Some of the pipes are large enough to drive a vehicle through.

Kimberlite pipes are most readily identifiable by their green or yellow color. Indeed the earliest miners of Kimberlite pipes in Kimberly, South Africa, simply referred to them as “blue ground” and “yellow ground,” which were known to contain diamonds and other semi-precious stones. If a particular pipe yields a diamond or even samples well geologically for the potential to contain them, it is not uncommon for industrious miners to erect compounds demarcated by tall fences and guarded entry ways. Once vehicles enter, they are typically not allowed to leave without being searched. In some instances, the workers employed by the mine will be led to believe that

they are being X-Rayed as they leave to discourage them from absconding with any stones they may have found.

The second type of mining is called alluvial mining and the easiest way to explain this type of mining is to say these are the diamonds that are spread in volcanic eruptions. Magmic flows coupled with other seismic disturbances brought on by the erupting volcano move these diamonds out of the kimberlite pipes and spread them into more accessible sediment layers. They can be found near riverbeds, and sometimes, even at surface level. Sieves and pans suffice to unearth the precious stones that have been thrust into alluvial soil, and lighter machinery can be employed to clear the land and move the earth. If you see people searching for diamonds with handheld tools, you can be sure they are alluvial miners.

Alluvial mining seemed like the way to go for me. I was very excited to learn this interesting fact. It seemed to me that in a real life situation, the alluvial mines and miners would be easier to approach.

During that time, I was doing my research on one of those computers that Eli had taken from Intercept America. Eli had, in fact, gifted it to me as he was becoming aware of my idea to try to find gold and diamonds somewhere in Africa.

This was the very beginning of the internet, and more technical knowledge of the POP3 and SMTP protocols was required to send and receive an email at that time than most students learn in Network Engineering 101 these days. Learning how to use it made me feel like I was thinking faster than the competition, whoever they might be. At that time, the entire bibliography of the public library system was indexed in a virtual dewey decimal system. You couldn't yet read books online but you could search for titles and know exactly what shelf they were sitting on in the library that housed them.

The most important and life-changing book I found this way was *The Diamond People* by Murray Shumach, and although it's really a murder story, I found invaluable snippets of information. With these little snippets, I began to paint a mental image of how the diamond industry operates. I learned that 90% of the world's quality gemstone is mined from a little African country called Sierra Leone, and those diamonds were recovered exclusively by alluvial mining. The concentration of precious stones and metals is so dense in that country that it's sometimes called The Athens of Africa.

Also, the internet afforded me the ability to receive real time state advisories from the government websites. From those advisories, I learned that Sierra Leone had 17 years of political stability.

I also learned that the French as well as the Russians had taken turns mining in Sierra Leone. All of the nice roads around Sierra Leone were said to have been built by the Russians, who had tried mining there. It was reported that after the Russians built out some infrastructure, the French began to take holidays in Freetown, and would buy matchboxes of diamonds in town. They would mostly receive industrial quality stones but on occasion, there was a true gem. This kept the tourists coming back for a long time.

Another interesting fact I discovered reading the book was that New York and Miami were large diamond districts. Miami had a new Metro rail system that ran from Kendall all the way to downtown Miami. The Seybold building specifically was known to be a large diamond district. So now I had my starting point. I would drive the green Volkswagen with no reverse to the station in Kendall and take the train all the way to downtown Miami. From there I would walk the few blocks to the Seybold building. I did not ever expect to be able to see a rough diamond but I did expect to be able to see all manner of cut and polished diamonds. Eli had procured a

green American Express card with the FarrCry company name on it and had given me a duplicate card.

I knew absolutely nothing about diamonds but I began to pose as a buyer. In order to make the shopkeepers comfortable, I would flash the American Express card and let them know that that's how I would be paying. That turned out to be a bit of an embarrassment as any real diamond trader would know that it's a cash business and absolutely no one would use a credit card as I was about to learn. That *faux pas* turned out to be important in a way that I could never have predicted because that's how I got the attention of a diamond cutter known as Ygal Mannelis. On one of these occasions, Ygal, a middle-aged Israeli man with copper-colored skin and a neatly trimmed beard pulled me to the side, and asked, "What are you really doing here? Anyone who's here to buy diamonds knows a credit card is no way to pay for them."

I'm sure I turned red but I decided at that moment that I had nothing to lose by telling someone with experience my idea. As Ygal considered what I was revealing about my plans, he nodded slowly, and when I was done speaking, he verified that he knew people whose business it was to smuggle diamonds out of Africa. He made a point of stressing that the journey would be full of difficulty and risk but that successful smugglers were by no means unheard of. What really excited me was that he proceeded to offer to teach me all I could absorb about rough stones, on the condition that should I ever make it to Sierra Leone, he would have the first pick of anything I returned with. He invited me to return to his office on Monday at ten. It was a very happy Metro Rail ride home.

Ygal had verified my idea, and even more than that seemed willing to invest time and effort into making sure I would be prepared with the knowledge I needed for a successful trip.

The Seybold building is the second largest hub for trading diamonds in the United States and the impressive ten story building hosts both artisans and vendors in the diamond and jewelry enterprises. Ygal had given me his business card, which had his office phone number and hours neatly printed under a banner in a custom font that read 'YNG Diamonds'. I noticed that his office was on the tenth floor. One had to pass through security in order to ride the elevator that went to the tenth floor.

That Monday, in Ygal's office was the first time I ever saw a rough diamond. They were of course amazing, and he was showing me some very big stones; eight-sided stones, these were considered to be completely finished forming—not every diamond is. They come in several forms. Ygal elucidated the differences between the types of rough stones and the various shapes that they could be cut into, showing me examples of each if they were handy. He went on to teach me the color scale that diamonds are graded by, the topology of finished stones and anything else he thought I might need for a gemology crash course that would soon be put to test in the wild.

I spent the next ten months going to see Ygal at least once a week, sometimes a couple of times. Each time I learned something new. You maybe wouldn't think it, but there is a lot to learn. There remained one rather large problem. Where would I get the funds to finance not only the trip but the discretionary funds with which to purchase rough once I made it to Africa?

Almost a year had passed since the debacle that was Intercept America. The whole thing seemed to fade away the same way it had arrived. Eli heard nothing more from the investigators who had been asking him questions on the day of the raid. In fact he hadn't heard anything at all. And that was good in one way. I had been worried a bit that there would be a record of me having printed

the client list that Intercept America had collected pitching their product to anyone that might want it.

I was also worried that the security cameras had seen me, and I knew the FBI was looking at everything. In the end, I wasn't ever even interviewed. There were dozens and dozens of people who had been there longer than me. I guess they figured they had heard the same story about how folks had come to find this job enough times.

I had kept that client list, and now I was thinking it was time to find out what it might be worth. I went to see the owner of a pretty well known answering service that I will not name in order to avoid any legal trouble for myself going forward or any embarrassment for the company that purchased the list, but I will say that I am glad to see that they rapidly grew even bigger and are still in business today.

The sale of the list was relatively easy, I was given an office for a couple of days, and I asked them to provide me random samples of the names on the client list. I then set to prove the value of the list by calling the names given to me, and employing a pitch similar to the one taught to me by Intercept America, seizing on the knowledge that I was somehow aware that they had had a bad experience with their last company but that this company was the real deal. And that's all it took. I sold a dozen clients a day in no time.

I'll never really know how much the list was worth to them. But they paid me 14K dollars for it. Beggars can't be choosers, and I was pretty happy to have turned it at all.

That still wasn't enough money to fund the buying but it covered the price of the trip and still left about 9k in the roll.

I was thinking that I needed a cover story for traveling to Sierra Leone. Also I was worried about personal safety, and I couldn't take a chance on carrying a concealed weapon, especially not in a

country like Sierra Leone. Even though I hadn't yet been there, I'd always been aware of the dangers that might exist in third world country jails and hospitals.

It didn't appear that anyone was too willing to go into the jungles of Sierra Leone with me. In fact one of the things I heard the most as I was planning my excursion was that if it were that easy, everyone would be doing it. And people said that with such conviction, it's a wonder I didn't begin to question myself or believe them.

Ira Salzman was our keyboard player, and was the last member to come into the band. I never attempted to delve into his private life, I knew that Ira had lost both of his parents by the time he came to us. He was answering an ad that Craig had placed in *Rag* magazine, looking for a keyboard player. Craig had liked him and wanted the rest of us to meet him so he invited him to our rehearsal studio and the rest was history, we all took to each other and the chemistry was good.

Ira had once told me that his mom had passed due to skin cancer. He had said that it wasn't long at all between diagnosis and her death. The cancer had metastasized to her lymph nodes.

I believe his dad had a heart attack sometime after his mom's passing. He was not an only child; he had a brother and a sister, both older.

I knew he had received a large inheritance of some sort but only because of the obvious signs like going through cars like they were free—one week he was driving a Porsche, the next a Lotus, the next a Corvette, then a Nissan Z, then a Lexus. The list goes on and on, and of course, he always lived in very nice places. So at this particular point in time, he was living in a penthouse apartment in Aventura Florida at a very posh place called The Waterway.

I figured that Ira had as much love for the band as I did, and that it was as important to him as it was to me. I had not told Eli of my idea to ask Ira for a loan so we could get our studio out of the

path of the proverbial boulder-sized eight ball. So it came as quite the shock that morning in his penthouse kitchen with the dazzling view of the city of Aventura as well as the Atlantic ocean, when he suggested we should fire Eli and replace him rather than risk going off to Africa to smuggle diamonds. Because “If it were that easy, everyone would be doing it”

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That morning was a bit of a wake-up call for me. I really believed in “one for all and all for one” to the point that risking life, freedom, or limb seemed like an easy choice. I know I had been very careful to never ask or rely on Ira for money because I didn’t ever want him to think that he was only in the band because he appeared to have money. I mean we had one guy who delivered pizzas for a living and another who was a trust fund baby, and the rest of us somewhere in between. But I always wanted things to be even within the band as much as possible. That’s why I made sure all royalties related to writing and publishing were shared evenly in fifths.

It was also very important to me to not ever ask Ira for any sum of money though it was obvious he had it. However, on this occasion, when one of our best friends was in jeopardy *and* our rehearsal location and essentially business headquarters was at risk as well; I was not expecting at all the callous suggestion to simply fire Eli and let him worry about his own problems. I didn’t even end up asking him for the help I wanted; I just expressed my unwavering intent to get diamonds out of the jungle, out of which would come a year’s worth of money for me to invest into turning myself into America's favorite son, and the proceeds to rescue our studio that happened to be in arrears.

Not long after that one night after practice, the band decided to take a walk along South Beach. We just needed a break, and it was something we were known to do every once in a while. If things at the studio were not clicking, we would decide to go to the movies together or take a walk, and oftentimes, it helped to get us out of a rut, past one thing or another. But on this night I met a girl. It seemed to me like from a distance we had both simultaneously noticed each other and I was drawn to go talk to her. Her name was Shirley. And as it turned out, she was a singer working nights in the Grove. She was also a bartender on South Beach, trying to make ends meet. At any rate, Shirley and I started talking, and we began to see each other more regularly. She would sometimes meet me at my apartment after rehearsal and she would spend the night. It wasn't long before I revealed to her what I had been planning. I knew she had to be in good shape for obvious reasons but also we would go on 2 and 3 mile runs, and she could always keep up. I had fortunately been a long-time runner, and had done breathing exercises for years in an attempt to improve my singing voice. One night, after a pretty grueling 3 mile run, which we finished in just under a half-hour, Shirley began to express an interest in going to Africa with me. She told me how she used to work on an ocean-going catamaran that groups would rent for fishing and sailing trips. She said that as part of the liveaboard crew, she had had her experiences in dealing with drunk guys out at sea, and how she had always managed to diffuse or derail tense and possibly dangerous situations. I had no reason to doubt her stories or her convictions about her own self-assuredness and level-headedness. She even gave me a great idea regarding a safe but effective weapon we could carry without fear of breaking the law. A stun gun. They were a relatively new thing for average citizens, and maybe people wouldn't be too aware of what they were and if they were discovered, we could claim they were just strobe lights for photography, and that we in fact were just wildlife

photographers. And just like that, the cover story took shape. Shirley was in—she would be my accomplice.

Phones with cameras had not yet been invented but I found a couple of 35mm cameras in a pawn shop. They had telescoping lenses, and I thought they looked the part. The stun guns I was able to acquire at a place that had just opened in Fort Lauderdale called the ‘Spy Shop’. They had quite the amazing display of tasers and stun guns. We bought two of the most powerful ones they had. This weapon was pretty serious. It looked like it could double as a clip for an assault rifle, and it curved slightly like the blade of a scimitar. At the press of a button, lightning danced between the twin two-inch steel poles protruding from the top, like a barely contained force of nature.

I had the opportunity to see this little spectacle in action once, which I’ll tell you about later. It was a time of great excitement for me as we gathered the things that we thought we would need as well as procured passports, travel medicine, shots, airline and hotel reservations. With the computer, we would log in late at night on my Netscape account, which billed my credit card \$17.50 an hour for the privilege of getting state travel advisories.

We were also able to locate maps and books through the computer, and then pick them up or scan them at the library, but it seemed a big help to be able to search the library from home essentially, and to know what you were picking up and where in the library it was located once you got there.

We now knew we were headed to the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown. So named because during the Revolutionary War, this was the reentry point for many slaves that had allied with the British returning home from America by way of Nova Scotia, as well as those slaves that were liberated by the British from America during the conflict. Thanks to the books and the maps, we

could see that we would be arriving at an island just off the coast of Freetown, called Lungi.

From Lungi, we knew we would have to board a ferry to cross the bay to Freetown, where we could catch a cab to the hotel, which was known locally as the Mammy Yoko Hotel named after a female leader of the Mende tribe renowned for her skill with bladed weapons and shrewd tactics in battle and negotiations alike.

So having acquired all the necessary travel documents and the inoculations that were mandatory before traveling to certain regions of the world, Shirley and I were ready to go. We chose to travel from Atlanta to Holland on KLM Airlines. We had decided to fly business class, and I'm glad we did. The entire trip would encompass about 30 hours of travel, and the amenities offered in business class would be the last bits of comfort for a couple of weeks anyway. From Holland, we would continue on KLM airlines direct to Sierra Leone.

Chapter 2

We arrived on a Thursday night, and I remember this because there was only one KLM flight a week, and it came on Thursdays—so minimum stay would always be at least one week.

Arriving in Sierra Leone is an experience I'll never forget—it's the closest I've ever felt to stepping out of a time machine. As we descended metal stairs down towards the tarmac, two things struck me simultaneously. One was a chorus of jungle sounds, and the other was this odd smell—a mixture of ocean and papaya and also body odor. These folks were apparently not big on deodorants. If you ever go there yourself, you will remember having read this paragraph. At any rate, it's something that you get used to rather quickly as there is a lot of commotion when this flight arrives. It's like a weekly happening that brings opportunity to the locals. The airport was on an island after all, and the ferry that transported new arrivals to the main land of the country was too far from the airport to walk, so everyone would need a cab. There were bags to

carry, and plenty of foreigners tipping in their own currencies. Guides presented themselves almost immediately, and even the customs agents were tipped well. It was all part of an underlying diamond culture that everyone tried to get a little piece of. Something I would come to understand better and better over time.

Shirley had secured me a second loan, and in the end, Ira had a change of heart as he lent Eli another \$5K, which he had promptly given to me. I now had a total of \$25k, most of which was in a money belt that was strapped around my waist. I had not anticipated needing as much cash just to get through the airport as it took. As we approached customs, each with our duffle bags, we came to a wooden table with a customs officer standing behind it. We each put our bags on the table expecting to be searched and to explain all the “photo gear” but instead, he just said “That’s eighty dollars.” Not having had this type of experience in the past, I exclaimed perhaps a little loudly “For what?” He just looked at me, and in a heavy accent, he said, “This is your first trip to Sierra Leone.” And the look he was giving said everything else I needed to know, so I paid him \$40 per bag, and he marked each of them with a blue piece of chalk.

I only had another twenty left in free floating cash, so I needed to find a restroom where I could open the money belt. Unfortunately all traffic moves in one direction, and there were no facilities at the Arrival Wing. I was forced to untuck the belt and slide the pocket that held the money from my back to my front at waist level so I could unzip it and retrieve a couple of bills. Having done this as quickly and discreetly as possible, I quickly noticed that I had been seen by at least a couple of people, one who asked me right away if I needed a cab. Things were moving a little too quickly.

I was aware that Shirley was nearby, and I said yes to the cab offer, at which point the man began to wave his hand over my head as if to indicate to someone to come get us, and sure enough, up

pulled a car, which bore no resemblance to a cab other than it was a car. The guy who had summoned the car was quickly placing our duffle bags in the trunk. Shirley and I got in the back seat after I had tipped him. The driver then had a quick conversation with the man in a dialect that I couldn't understand.

As we pulled away from the airport area in the back of this impromptu cab, I hate to admit it but the cliché, 'I don't think we're in Kansas anymore', sprung to mind. The roads out of Lungi airport are red clay to this day. They are narrow and surrounded by deep palm jungles. We had arrived late in the afternoon, and the sun was retreating behind the horizon as we meandered down foreign paths piloted by someone we didn't know into the dimly receding twilight.

There were no street lights and no lights to be seen either in front of us or behind us. Then I began to notice that there was no traffic behind us and none ahead either. Some dwellings could be seen sporadically along the path and they resembled shanties more than proper dwellings. We passed a large 55 gallon drum, which contained a fire, and there were a few women standing around it, all of them topless. Some turned to gaze at us as we passed, others seemed to ignore us completely.

At about that moment, it began to occur to me that I had no idea where we were, and that for all I knew, we were being driven to some secluded spot, where our heads would be summarily hacked off with a machete and the 25 grand I had naively revealed would be their prize.

We had been in the country less than an hour, and already I had somehow screwed it up by revealing the money and hopping into a stranger's vehicle without question in the heat of the moment. A deep sense of impending danger motivated me to action.

I moved forward in my seat directly behind the driver, and slipped my arm over the headrest and under his throat putting him into a tight chokehold, his head immobile, and his arms ill-placed to strike back at me.

“Stop the car, or I’ll strangle you in your seat.” He stopped the car and I demanded of him as bravely as possible for someone who was more than half sure he was about to be robbed in the jungle, “Where are we going? Why are there no other people behind or ahead of us? Wouldn’t we all be going towards the same ferry?”

Shirley was turning white, and her eyes were the size of dinner plates. The driver began to explain that perhaps we had been the last to leave, and that when the ferry arrived, they would start the generator, which powered the lights. He went on to say that they don’t keep it running because of the cost of the fuel. “I promise you, sir, they will come on!”

I responded that we would just sit there then and wait to see if he was telling the truth. It was a very tense couple of minutes that passed in complete silence. But sure enough, eventually, lights could be seen emerging further up the dark road, and as vehicles got off the ferry, they began heading in the direction from which we had just come.

I apologized to the driver profusely. He seemed no worse for the wear, and I tipped him generously, whipping fifties off the top of the money roll as I apologized bashfully. I did have to suffer the embarrassment of hearing him tell the story to a fellow cabbie on the ferry, and they both seemed to get a good laugh out of it.

END OF PREVIEW