

HAZEL CRANE

QUEEN OF DIAMONDS

TESTIMONY FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

BY DAVID KRAY

THIS IS A TRUE STORY. LITTLE HAS BEEN DRAMATISED. SOME NAMES AND DATES HOWEVER HAVE BEEN
ALTERED TO PREVENT FURTHER REPRISALS.

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HAZEL CRANE MADE UNTOLD MILLIONS BY DARING TO CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM.

SHE CLAWED HER WAY UP FROM THE GRIM STREETS OF BELFAST TO A GLITTERING MANSION IN DESIGNER JOHANNESBURG.

SHE BROUGHT THE CHAUVINIST BARONS OF BUSINESS AND ORGANISED CRIME TO THEIR KNEES.

SHE BROKE THE LAW, SINGLE-HANDEDLY OUTWITTING AND HUMILIATING WHOLE TEAMS OF TOP COPS.

SHE MANIPULATED THE COURTSHIP OF POWERFUL MEN, PROFITING FROM THEIR GREED AND LEAVING THEM BROKEN AND CONFUSED IN HER WAKE.

BUT SHE MADE BITTER ENEMIES OF DANGEROUS MEN. THEY BEGAN BY MURDERING PEOPLE CLOSE TO HER. THEN, ON THE MORNING OF MONDAY NOVEMBER 10, 2003, THEY GUNNED DOWN HAZEL IN COLD BLOOD.

BUT EVEN IN DEATH, SHE WAS NEVER GOING TO BE SILENCED.

THIS BOOK IS HER LEGACY. HER INDOMITABLE SPIRIT LIVES ON IN ITS PAGES.

HAZEL CRANE WAS AN ENIGMA.

SHE WAS A RUTHLESS DEALER, A DOTING MOTHER, A SHREWD OPERATOR, GENEROUS TO A FAULT.

HER FIRST HUSBAND DIED IN COMBAT AGAINST AFRICAN NATIONALISTS. HER BEST FRIEND WAS LEGENDARY SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONALIST WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA.

SHE HAD BEEN MARRIED TO A CHRISTIAN, A JEW AND AN ARAB.

SHE HAD LONG-STANDING CONNECTIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL CRIMINALS. BUT SHE AIDED INTERPOL, SOUTH AFRICAN AND ISRAELI DETECTIVES IN A GLOBAL HUNT FOR NOTORIOUS KILLERS.

HAZEL CRANE'S LIFE STORY READS LIKE A RACY PAPERBACK. BUT IT IS TRUE. AND HERE FOR THE FIRST TIME, FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE, IT IS REVEALED IN THE EXPLOSIVE, TELL ALL BIOGRAPHY OF A RARE GEM WHO CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE QUEEN OF DIAMONDS.

PROLOGUE

To live on in the hearts of those you leave behind is not to die

QUEEN OF DIAMONDS TELLS THE STORY OF HOW A RAGGED CHILD FROM BELFAST city grew to become as much a friend of princes and presidents as of conmen and killers.

It is the tale of a woman, a widow, a mother, who crossed the line from a simple suburban existence to enter a twilight universe of smuggling, double-dealing and death.

It is the account of a successful businesswoman, a glittering socialite, who strode boldly into the firing line to become a key player in one of the most high profile organised crime cases in South African legal history.

Hazel Crane's life was saturated in intrigue. Her death leaves us with more questions than answers.

For the first time, her astonishing tale is told in uncompromising detail. Facts never before made public are revealed without fear or favour.

Hazel Crane's life story was remarkable even before her bloody end made headlines. So much so that she had asked me to write it back in early 2000, nearly four years before she was gunned down in a mafia hit.

She wanted to put her life in context, to prove that she was not the one-dimensional character portrayed in the national media.

But more than that, she wanted to use it as a vehicle for her vengeance against the organisation that she believed had killed the man she loved.

When Shai Avissar sauntered into Hazel's life, he was a penniless immigrant from Israel who had come to South Africa in the hopes of finding his fortune. Hazel met him through mutual friends. It was love at first sight. She told me that when he turned and looked at her for the first time, she literally went weak at the knees – an intensity of emotion this hardened businesswoman and convicted illegal diamond buyer had not experienced in years.

It was in the piercing blue of his eyes, and the confident curl of his mouth, she said.

"I was powerless. Though my friends and family – and even some of his friends - warned me off, I could do nothing but yield to his attentions."

And so Shai Avissar came to live with Hazel Crane. He arrived at her plush mansion in Abbotsford, Johannesburg, with all his worldly possessions in a pillow-case.

Hazel set about trying to give her 'bit of rough' a good polishing. She lavished him with fast cars, designer clothes, expensive jewellery and the jet-set lifestyle to go with it all.

As Avissar's confidence grew, so did his underworld business contacts. He quickly earned a reputation as a ruthless player. He rose to become a prominent representative of the Israeli mob, the notorious Ramat Amidar crime syndicate, operating not only in South Africa and indeed throughout Africa, but worldwide – from the USA and Europe to Australia and the Middle East.

When Hazel married Avissar – prophetically, on September 11, 1997 – she could not have conceived of the gutter depths to which he would drag her.

She could not have imagined how he would place her, and her family and friends, in such mortal danger.

Until one day in October 1999, when Avissar went to lunch and was never seen alive again.

Hazel claimed she was later to learn that on the day Avissar disappeared, he was picked up and taken to the home of Lior Saadt, one of his business partners and closest friends. There, according to the State case against him, Lior Saadt and/or another 'partner and friend', Amir Mulner (aka David Milner), allegedly beat Avissar to death with a baseball bat.

Shai Avissar's violent end was unsurprising. He lived a dangerous life. Hazel's comparatively modest criminal activities – illicit diamond and emerald dealing – did not come close to the rank schemes and scams of Shai Avissar and his motley outfit.

At the time of Shai's death, he and Crane were no longer man and wife. They had divorced secretly months earlier.

But Hazel Crane was nothing if not loyal to the bitter end. And single minded. She had a reputation for always having the last word. She wasn't about to admit defeat now. She threw everything she had behind the hunt for Avissar's suspected killers.

Even after Lior Saadt had allegedly smashed his way into her home brandishing a pistol and loosed off a round just inches from her face, she persisted with her quest.

Even after he allegedly told her that he would rape and murder her and her children.

Even after she narrowly escaped death when gunmen opened fire on her in a drive-by shooting outside her home.

She offered to finance the police polygraph testing of Saadt, and put up the substantial cash reward which brought informers close to Saadt out from under their rocks.

One in particular, the late Carlos Binne, proved invaluable. His betrayal led investigators to the spot where he and his accomplice, the late Julio Bascelli, had buried the remains of their former boss, Avissar.

Binne and Bascelli, both State witnesses against Lior Saadt, were gunned down in separate hits.

Far from intimidating Hazel into retreat, the grisly discovery of Shai Avissar's mutilated, decomposing corpse in February 2000 compelled her to redouble her efforts.

She hired private investigators. And – only after Saadt's alleged threats against her children – Hazel even hired a professional 'mercenary' from Northern Ireland. She paid an advance fee of R100,000, and told him to 'pick up' Lior Saadt. This she admitted openly to me in a taped interview.

But by now, Lior Saadt and Amir 'David' Mulner, were safely out of the country.

Rumour had it that they had fled to Panama, Central America.

Still, Hazel's dogged persistence did not waver. She made contact with a list of friends and 'business acquaintances' around the world. She spent hours and whole days on the telephone, demanding, pleading, threatening, insisting that they in turn use their contacts to help track down Saadt and Mulner, both of whom by now she believed beyond a shadow of a doubt were directly linked to Avissar's execution.

She badgered the South African and Israeli police, and Interpol.

Finally, Hazel's efforts paid rich dividends.

In April 2001, word reached her that Saadt was in Mozambique. He had entered the country illegally on a flight from Portugal, using a false passport bearing the name Yusuf Eden. Hazel said she used her influence to ensure that he was located there and 'delivered' in a special border operation to police in South Africa.

Saadt cried foul. He insisted that he had been unlawfully abducted and that the South African judicial system had no jurisdiction to try him. The technicality was that no

extradition order had been requested or processed by the South African or Mozambican authorities.

Then, in July, after weeks of tedious hearings and postponements, media interest in the case was re-ignited: Saadt became the target of a bold assassination attempt when a prison van ferrying him and other defendants to court came under fire from gunmen on a motorcycle. While Saadt suffered only flesh wounds, a teenage prisoner beside him died in the hail of bullets. While unfounded rumours circulated that Hazel's own powerful associates were behind the attempted hit, she was always adamant that it was nothing to do with her.

The trial within a trial dragged on for more than two-and-a-half years. Hazel, often accompanied by her most prominent and faithful friend, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, never missed a hearing. She sat in a front row seat in the gallery, never once taking her eyes off her husband's alleged killer.

In May 2003, Hazel was herself targeted in a drive-by shooting. Ironically, she had been standing on the street outside her home with security consultants when a back-seat passenger in a passing white Audi opened fire. Hazel dived for cover. One of the men with Hazel was critically injured in the incident.

Finally, the jurisdiction application was squashed. On December 3, 2003, the Johannesburg High Court ruled that Lior Saadt was to stand trial for murder.

But Hazel was not there to celebrate her final triumph. On Tuesday, November 18, she was cremated to the celestial orchestra of a malevolent African thunderstorm.

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HAZEL CRANE, NEE MAGEE, WAS SHOT IN THE FACE, CHEST, ARM AND LEG ON A CRISP Johannesburg morning on November 10, 2003.

Her killer walked calmly out onto the street of a leafy, upmarket neighbourhood, raised his weapon and fired six times point blank through the front passenger window of Hazel's luxury sedan.

The unnamed female 'friend' accompanying Hazel to court that morning screamed and raised her hand.

As Hazel's foot went to the pedal, the trigger twitched. High velocity snub-nosed rounds smashed through glass and flesh.

The Mercedes lurched across two lanes and slammed into the pavement.

The woman in the passenger seat curled up like a foetus and held her shattered hand close to her body. Beside her, Hazel Elizabeth Crane, Queen of Diamonds, lay sprawled and bleeding across the steering wheel, mortally wounded.

Her executioner climbed casually into a waiting car that pulled neatly away, turned the corner and was gone.

Across town, State Accused Lior Saadt was being led into court to face 13 serious counts ranging from murder, attempted murder and kidnapping to illegal possession of teargas, a weapon and ammunition.

The gallery was hushed as the news was delivered in open court. Principal witness Hazel Crane had been gunned down. The prosecution slumped. Lior Saadt sat stony faced in the dock.

The Israeli's inscrutable countenance may have masked a multitude of emotions, relief being paramount.

He was only too keenly aware that it was Hazel Crane's persistence that had brought him to the dock in the first place, and her testimony that was crucial to his prosecution. Less than four months later, on Monday, March 3, 2004 Lior Saadt walked out of court a free man.

The State had withdrawn all the charges against him, citing the slayings of three key witnesses – Hazel Crane, Carlos Binne and Julio Bascelli - and the 'sudden, untimely' death of Inspector Wayne Kukard, the police officer leading the investigation.

Saadt was hurried from the courthouse, into a private security van and – under heavy police escort – raced to the Israeli High Commission in Pretoria. There his travel documents were rubber-stamped and at 9.20pm that night he was on El Al flight number LY512 to Tel Aviv.

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SINCE TAKING OVER THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE MURDER OF SHAI AVISSAR, INSPECTOR Wayne Kukard had become much more than just a representative of law enforcement to Hazel Crane. He became one of her most trusted and loyal friends.

He took a close personal interest in the case, and in Hazel's own security. At one point in their relationship, when Hazel told him she planned to travel to Ghana after what turned out to be a bogus tip-off, the Brixton Murder and Robbery Squad detective told her: "If you try to get on that plane, I'll break both your legs myself."

He explained that he had reason to believe the trip was a set up – and that Avissar's killers had 'an unmarked grave' waiting for Hazel. She trusted the lawman's instincts and heeded his warnings. His advice may well have saved her life.

But Kukard could only temporarily prevent what for a long time had seemed to observers to be inevitable. He was devastated when the end came for Hazel. He was one of the first on the scene of the shooting. At her funeral, Kukard described her as 'a remarkable, courageous woman and a dear friend'. He told friends he felt sick with grief and guilt because he had not been able to protect her, citing Hazel's refusal to accept a police escort.

On January 6, 2004, Inspector Wayne Kukard suffered 'a massive heart attack' and died. He was 36 years old.

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IT WAS A BIZARRE COUPLING. WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA, FORMER WIFE OF ONE of modern history's most pre-eminent statesmen, and the embodiment of fierce African Nationalist sisterhood.

Hazel Crane, whose first husband died in combat against black freedom fighters in the Rhodesian conflict.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, a legendary if controversial political figure, a symbol of The Struggle for three brutal and dangerous decades.

Hazel Crane, a convicted illegal diamond buyer, a social butterfly, dubious darling of the South African media.

Hazel gave me her explanation for the book. I saw it with my own eyes when I spent two weeks as a guest at her home in Abbotsford in May 2000, just weeks after her former husband's body was found.

We sat on cane furniture in Hazel's bar. Winnie held Hazel's hand and wept while Hazel recounted Avissar's disappearance and the subsequent discovery of his broken body. Hazel spoke quickly and matter-of-factly. I thought at the time that her delivery was strange and emotionless. But Winnie knew better. Winnie was mourning her friend's silent pain. Hazel's strength finally gave out, and she and Winnie embraced, holding tightly onto each other for a long while, oblivious to my presence.

"She was my sister," Winnie told me in March 2004.

I had called her to discuss the book. She talked to me for twenty minutes, enough time to register her shock and disgust at the fact that murder accused Lior Saadt had been set free, to tell me of her suspicions that Captain Wayne Kukard's sudden death was 'not natural', to express her belief that there had been a conspiracy to cover up the facts. There was something familiar about her hollow, impassive tone. Winnie was desperately trying to rein in her emotions, willing herself to be strong. She managed bravely until the end of the conversation.

"She was my sister."

And then she broke down.

Winnie's pain at the loss of a friend with whom, over more than a decade, she had shared moments of joy and tragedy, eclipsed any concern for her own personal safety. It was clear that Winnie wanted to talk more about Hazel, who she 'missed every moment of every day', than about any threat to her own personal safety.

And Winnie would have good reason to fear for her life. The monsters who planned and executed Hazel's killing have a bloody track record and a penchant for spectacular mayhem. Anyone close to Hazel, anyone privy to the sordid secrets of the underworld she inhabited, runs the gauntlet of an appointment with the assassin's bullet.

Perhaps even more dangerous than the triggermen are the faceless crime barons who bankroll them. Wealthy beyond measure, powerful, connected and ruthless to a fault, they have the resources and the moral bankruptcy requisite to remote murder – death from a distance.

Their bloodthirsty minions are hand-picked from the festering sub-culture of international death dealers. They have all the necessary characteristics – greed, savagery, cunning – to make them ideal bottom-feeders in the mafia hierarchy.

And in the time-honoured tradition of that shadowy organisation, their loyalty and silence – the code of Omerta – was never in question.

As for the identity of the chosen harbinger of death, all the evidence points to the international fugitive Amir Mulner, aka David Milner.

Baby-faced Mulner was wanted by Israeli police in connection with several mob-related murders and car bombings in Jerusalem. The former Israeli Special Services commando had also been a close associate of Shai Avissar. And, according to the late Carlos Binne, he had been present at Avissar's execution.

He had, Hazel suspected, been an enthusiastic participant. She claimed to have been told that he had helped break several bones in Avissar's body, before helping to wrap the bloody corpse, still warm, in a blanket, carry it out to Saadt's car-port, lock up and drive to his favourite café for an espresso and biscotti.

Mulner, named by police as a prime suspect in Hazel's killing, would have been a natural choice for the final job. He was, allegedly, a professional killer. And he had an axe to grind with Hazel Crane. She had been a thorn in his side for long enough. No doubt Mulner had maintained some form of contact with his former associates since fleeing the

country three years earlier. It would have been a simple matter for an interested party to get one final, deadly message to an old partner in crime.

It is, however, only fair to comment that the above is just the most obvious scenario. In the abstract world of organised crime the firm links and tenuous strands connecting players overlap and intertwine and merge and fade to such an extent that it is impossible to assert any one theory with conviction – and in the absence of living witnesses.

In her time, Hazel was involved in many deals. Shai Avissar was up to his neck in scams. According to Hazel, he had blundered through countless ‘transactions’ where powerful people had been hurt – both financially and physically. Could Hazel’s killing have been the result of some other deal unrelated to the case against Lior Saadt? Anything is possible. She may well have been targeted by someone who mistakenly associated her with a dirty deal committed by Avissar months or even years before. He was, after all, considered by many to be the ‘other half’ of Hazel’s business empire. He frequently conned people into believing that her house was his, her car was his. On more than one occasion Hazel was compelled to set the record straight in order to protect herself and her family from reprisals after Avissar enraged potentially deadly enemies.

Perhaps Lior Saadt had nothing to do with Shai Avissar’s murder – at least, the final, physical end of it. Perhaps he genuinely has no idea who killed Hazel. We may never know for sure, because the system designed to probe those and other unanswered questions, namely, the South African judicial process, was scuppered by a spate of bloodshed that will more than likely continue long after you have read the last lines of this book.

What we do know, though, is that Hazel was a remarkable woman who did not deserve to die the way that she did. The story that I have told here, using hours of recorded interviews with Hazel, members of Hazel’s family and close friends, as well as reams of personal and public documents and countless Press cuttings, attempts to bring her unique character to life in these pages. An impossible dream for, like a diamond, there is no substitute for the real thing.

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THE FOLLOWING IS (RELEVANT SECTIONS OF) THE VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT FROM MY recorded telephone conversation with Winnie Madikizela-Mandela at 12:30pm GMT on Monday, March 22, 2004:

DK: You were so close to Hazel. She spoke of you all the time.

WMM: She was like a sister to me. There isn’t a single day that passes by without me thinking of her, you know? It’s so difficult. I miss her every moment of every day.

DK: I know. I don’t think the full reality has even dawned yet. Especially with Lior Saadt being allowed to go free.

WMM: Can you believe that? Even though we achieved having him thrown out of the country, that hasn’t lessened the pain.

DK: There wasn’t any justice done.

WMM: No, not at all.

DK: When I met you I was in South Africa working on the book about Hazel.

WMM: Yes, that’s right.

DK: There are still questions that need to be answered. I feel the book could be a good way of bringing people forward. Maybe more evidence will come to light.

WMM: You know how the justice system in our country has failed thousands and thousands, who are living. Do you think they are going to bother doing anything for someone who is no longer alive? And yet if they had investigated that case properly, Hazel would still be alive, if they had only taken sufficient precautions.

I hear the nonsense that she had rejected police protection, the witness protection service. But do you listen to someone in cases like that when you know you are dealing with murderers? They ought to have enforced that. 'You are our number one witness'; that's what they should have done.

DK: What did you think of Wayne Kukard's death?

WMM: I don't believe that it was a natural death. It's too suspicious.

DK: You'd met Wayne quite a number of times?

WMM: Oh heavens, I knew him so well. I was attending Hazel's case and I knew him very well. Even when Hazel went to brief the police after the death of Shai, I was with her. We went to the police station together.

From day one – she was not there the day Shai was killed – I was, and she phoned me from Zimbabwe, she was travelling, asking can I go and check for her and see what happened. I was the first person who saw Shai's car, how it was parked in front of that restaurant. It was quite clear this was someone who was coming back, who didn't expect to die. It was left so carelessly in front of the restaurant, he went across to wherever he went to, and he expected to come back quickly.

Shai walks out of the restaurant and someone who knows him beckons him to come over to the car, the car which this other person was in. The car was driving down the road, meanwhile his own car is in front of the restaurant. So he jumps into the car of this friend. I would imagine he must have said, 'Let's just go around the corner, I need to talk to you', or something like that, because it was clear he got into the car on his own. It must have been someone he knew and trusted.

He was not kidnapped. This is broad daylight, half past one, something to two in the afternoon, he's just had lunch, he walks out of the restaurant, not realising that this was the last time he was ever going to see the sun.

This car drives down, obviously it must have been timing them, it must have been parked somewhere in such a way that they could see him coming out of the restaurant, and would then drive down as if it was just coincidental, and he gets into the car.

In fact, when I questioned the people around there before Hazel joined me, I spoke to a man in the restaurant right at the corner, another restaurant opposite the one where Shai was eating. I asked him if he knew Shai, and he said ja, well, of course he knew him very well, and I asked him what were his habits. Where do you think he went to from that restaurant? And this man said around the corner they sell The Jerusalem News, so Shai normally went to get this paper almost every time it was available, and he would normally go around the corner. People thought the car had gone around the corner. So it was probable that he jumped into the car and his 'friend' said, ag, man, can you come with me, or he himself said I just want to go and buy the paper around the corner, and then his 'friend' must have found a way of enticing him to go with him, leaving his car where it was.

These were friends. And Lior was his bodyguard.

DK: Do you think even after someone eliminated Hazel, and even after Wayne Kukard died, is it right that they should have released this man and let him leave the country?

WMM: No!

DK: Surely they had enough forensic evidence and written statements from witnesses?

WMM: What needs to be asked is, what about the other murders? The man was facing other murder allegations and these were of Israeli nationality. What about those?

DK: The police had gathered forensic evidence at Lior's home, and also found weapons.

WMM: I know. We went to the police station and Wayne Kukard showed us the bat used to kill Shai, and some blood stains. So I couldn't understand what nonsense it was that they were looking for (other DNA evidence). Wayne had all that evidence. That was why he had to go.

DK: Hazel was concerned that evidence was missing. She believed someone was involved in covering up this crime.

WMM: That's true.

DK: I'm hoping that this book might bring people forward. I want Hazel to have the last word. This book is Hazel's voice, it's her way of making a lot of people uncomfortable. She names a lot of people, she details a lot of activities.

WMM: That needs to be done. So Hazel can rest in peace. I miss her so much. Hazel was like my sister. She was my sister.

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HAZEL CALLED ME ONE LAST TIME TEN DAYS BEFORE SHE WAS KILLED. SHE WANTED me to get a story into a newspaper for which I once freelanced, under a pseudonym.

"I've got a good story for you," she told me.

"I'm declaring war on the Israeli mafia. I've been doing a lot of investigating and I'm close to nailing the lot of them.

"These gangsters will all pay for what they did to Shai.

"One way or another, I'll see each and every one of them brought to justice.

"I have even travelled to Israel to investigate Lior Saadt's links there."

The newspaper, which cannot be named as this could compromise my cover, carried the story that weekend. It was the last exclusive interview Hazel ever gave.

Eight days later, Hazel woke from a fitful sleep. She telephoned her sister Karen who was in Durban at the time and told her about the disturbing dream she had had.

"A man walked up to me in the street. He didn't have a face, but I knew that I knew him. I started to say something to him, then I noticed he had something in his hand. It was a gun. His hand came up. That's all I can remember."

Hazel had an early breakfast in bed, then bathed and got ready to drive to court with her 'friend'. They had a quick cup of coffee and left shortly before 09.20. Less than a minute later, the man from the nightmare came calling.

But if he hoped to remain faceless, to slip away into the shadows, he can think again.

Hazel Crane always did have the last word, after all.

David Kray*

June, 2004

** Author's real name withheld to prevent reprisals*

PERTH, AUSTRALIA, 03:10AM, FEBRUARY 2000

THE PHONE JANGLED ON THE BEDSIDE TABLE. BEFORE ITS FIRST shrill cry had died on the air the receiver was in my hand. I pulled myself up in the bed, sat back and took a deep breath. I spoke softly in the darkness.

"Hello, this is Hazel Crane."

I knew before a word was uttered on the other end of the line who it was and why he was calling.

"Hazel."

"Hi Wayne. You've found him."

"Yes. I'm very sorry Hazel."

"Have there been any arrests?"

"Not yet. I still have forensics at the scene."

"I'll be on the first flight home in the morning."

"I don't think that's a good idea. These men are still on the loose. Your life could be in danger. I think it's best if you stay out of South Africa for a little while longer."

"I'm coming home in the morning."

"All right Hazel. I'll have some of my men at the airport to meet you."

"That's not necessary."

"But Haze-"

"I said it's okay Wayne. I'll give Winnie a call."

"Okay. I'll speak to you when you arrive."

"Fine. Oh, and Wayne..."

"Ja?"

“What was he like?”

“Get some sleep Hazel.”

“I want to know.”

“He was... he was bad.”

I replaced the receiver. Hayley lay sleeping beside me. I ran my fingers through her hair, careful not to wake her.

I got up, slipped into my gown and quietly left the room. I walked through the living room and opened the French windows, stepping out onto the little balcony. A cool night breeze tugged at my gown, and then I felt his hands on me, caressing me, and his warm breath at the back of my neck. Just for an instant, and then he was gone. And in that moment I knew that it had all been worth it, the death threats, the exile, the heartache. I could finally lay my soul mate to rest.

As I stood and looked down on the sleeping city, I felt nothing but emptiness. Then, as so many times before, that familiar aching hollow was numbed and replaced by a cold fury. I realised I had been stooping, as though in defeat. I consciously straightened my spine. And, as I turned to go back indoors, despair gave way to vengeance.

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HAYLEY DROVE ME TO THE AIRPORT. SHE HAD WEPT WHEN I TOLD her. I knew she was weeping for me more than for Shai. My daughter had been very fond of the man in my life, as had my son, but she had never been entirely convinced that he was good for me.

Still, she looked into my soul as I told her, dry-eyed, that his mutilated body had been discovered in a shallow grave. And she detected the emotional wall I had already thrown up. And so she wept for me.

It was raining when we came off the motorway onto the airport turn-off. I closed my eyes and allowed myself the brief indulgence of recalling Shai's face. He was beautiful. He had movie-star eyes, ice blue, and kissing lips that went from wicked grin to sullen pout and back again in a heartbeat.

I recalled our final parting. He had held me in his arms in the departures lounge, and I breathed in his warm scent, surrendering to his embrace. He crushed me to him as though he would never let me go.

“You will always be my wife, Hazel,” he whispered.

“Shai,” I said softly, “that part of our life is over. There's no going back.”

“You're wrong. You can never belong to somebody else,” his rich Israeli accent grew thick with emotion.

“I'm sorry, Shai. Goodbye.”

He kissed me on the lips, a lingering intimacy that neither of us wanted to end. The final call for my flight came over the Tannoy and I pulled away, held him at arms' length, my hand on his heart. We looked one last time into each other's eyes and then I turned and walked through the gates. When I looked back, it was no longer Shai who stood and waved.

It was his killer.

The monster smiled thinly at me, then put one finger to the side of his shaven, tattooed head and jerked it back in the action of a pistol recoil.

I gasped and opened my eyes. Hayley put her hand on mine.

“Mum... are you okay?”

I nodded. But my hands were trembling. Hayley pretended not to notice. I inwardly cursed my weakness. I was never economical with fury and ecstasy. They were my allies. But grief and fear were my time honoured enemies. And now, of all times, I could not afford to give them purchase.

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I HUGGED AND KISSED HAYLEY GOODBYE. SHE SQUEEZED MY hand in silent support and I brushed an errant wisp of hair from her face. I paused for a moment to admire my daughter's breathtakingly beautiful features. At 27, Hayley still had the waif-like figure and face of a teenager. Her long dark hair and flashing green eyes stopped men dead in their tracks. If she had not chosen - with my firm encouragement - to take a degree in journalism, a glittering career as a glamour model would no doubt have awaited her. But, even with advances in cosmetic surgery, intellect outlives looks. And I wanted Hayley to excel in a legitimate career. Neither my daughter nor my equally talented and good-looking son Anthony, who is a qualified barrister, will have to do the things that I have done.

They will not have criminal records. They will not, God forbid, have to bury two slain spouses. They will not have to claw their way out of the gutter. They will not feel the cold steel of an assassin's weapon between their eyes. And they will never have to travel the road of vengeance on which I now embarked, and which I have vowed to continue until proper retribution has been visited upon the monsters who robbed me of the man I loved. Some, already, have paid for their part. They have died by the sword. Others still at large are now experiencing that hunted feeling, the sensation I had to endure for so long. But the worm has turned. I have become the predator and they the prey.

"Mum, you're hurting me!"

I shook my head to clear it and realised I had been clenching Hayley's hands in mine.

"I'm sorry my baby," I cried, kissing her fingers.

"It's okay. Mum, are you going to be alright?"

"Of course I am. You know me."

"I know. But just-"

"Just what?"

"Don't do anything silly."

"I'm not going to do anything silly."

"I mean - dangerous. Mum, these men are bad. I don't want-"

"They won't hurt me, lovie."

"I don't like the way you said that."

"Stop worrying. I'll be careful."

"Hmm," she murmured cynically.

I kissed her on the mouth before she could say anything more, and strode purposefully through the boarding gate. Hayley called after me.

"I love you mum!"

I spun around, blew a kiss and winked reassuringly at her. Then I turned on my heel and walked on, praying that I would live to see her again.

I did not notice the man who was studying me so intently, and who walked in my shadow down the covered ramp and onto the plane.

*

I WAS USHERED TO MY SEAT IN FIRST CLASS. I STRAPPED MYSELF in and was gratified to note that the seat beside me had not been taken. I fastened my seat belt, lowered the chair back and closed my weary eyes.

I drifted. The darkness became a starlit night in the African bush. I had a vision of five soldiers walking slowly forward side by side, their rifles slung over their shoulders. They were looking for something. Suddenly one of them cried out.

“Don’t move! We’re on the line.”

But it was too late. The air caught fire and one man was silhouetted against the white light. There was no sound of an explosion. Only a knowing silence. And the darkness that descended was blacker than before.

“Mrs Crane?”

I opened my eyes to the unsmiling, unshaven countenance of a stranger. My body stiffened. He leaned in closer and narrowed his eyes.

“It is Hazel Crane, isn’t it?”

“Who are you?” I snapped, sitting up and forcing him to pull his head back.

“Hello,” he smiled thinly. “My name is David.”

“What do you want?” My heart was pounding now. David. A distinctly Israeli name. Had they sent someone to execute me as they had executed Shai? Was he going to tell me they had abducted my children and that something dreadful would happen if I didn’t go quietly? My mind kicked into action, trying to work out the best possible reaction to turn the situation to my advantage before the threat was even uttered.

But the threat never came.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Crane. I’m a freelance journalist based in London. I’ve just finished reading an article about you.”

He brandished a magazine. On the cover was a photo of Madonna looking surprisingly demure. And in a window at the foot of the page was a picture of me with Winnie. Beside it in bold was the legend: ‘Unlikely Alliance: Mrs Mandela and the Queen of Diamonds’.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t,” I recovered quickly. “Were you following me?”

“Well... only from the departures lounge. I wasn’t sure it was you. I’d never heard of you before seeing this piece on you. Quite a story.”

“Quite.”

“Do you believe in fate, Mrs Crane?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because... your whole life seems to be one big destiny game. And look at me. I’m from England. I pick up a magazine at an airport in Australia to read while I wait for a plane. I get caught up in reading a story about a remarkable woman from South Africa... and then I look up and there she is. Fate.”

“What is it exactly that you want, Mister..?”

“Kray.”

“David Kray. Any relation to the Kray twins?”

“I hope not.”

“I know the family.”

“Do you?” His eyes widened.

“Well?”

"Oh. What do I want? An interview."

"I'm afraid not, Mr Kray."

"No? Why not?"

"I intend to get some sleep on this flight. I got very little last night."

"Really. Why's that?"

"I won't be drawn in, Mr Kray."

"Was that your daughter with you at the airport?"

"My sister, actually."

"Ah." He looked confused for a second but quickly recovered. It took a supreme effort not to burst out laughing. I was surprised at the feeling. I hadn't wanted to laugh spontaneously for so very long.

"At least tell me your story off the record then. I won't even write about it, how's that?"

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"Yes. You're supposed to believe that and then tell me your whole story and then at some point I'll convince you to let me write a few lines and the next thing you know it'll be a whole series of features and then I'll be writing a book and they'll be making a movie, and-

Now I did laugh out loud.

"You are full of shit, Mr Kray!"

His blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "I'll take that as a compliment. Well?"

"Okay. We can talk. But if there's going to be a book, trust me - I'll be the one writing it."

The plane taxied onto the runway, paused for a moment and then launched itself through the rain. We were still climbing when I retrieved the portable blood pressure device from my handbag. I strapped it to my wrist and took the reading, then broke a tablet out of its blister pack. The hostesses were already out of their seats and I summoned one of them and asked for a glass of water. The journalist had been watching me intently.

"You have high blood pressure?"

"For my sins."

"I'm not surprised."

"Because I'm such a sinner?"

"That's not what I meant. I mean, you've had some hairy moments."

"Hairy?"

"Scary."

"Have I?"

"According to this, you have." He waved the magazine.

"What does it say?"

"Well... You're being hunted by a pair of wanted killers."

"I'm being hunted, am I?"

"Aren't you? And this bit about you being South Africa's most notorious diamond smuggler, that's true?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any on you now?"

"Only the ones I'm wearing."

"Are those real?" He touched the largest stone on my finger in awe.

"Of course they're real. That one is twenty-four carats."

"It must be worth a small fortune."

"I could buy a few frocks if I sold it."

"I'll bet. Are you very wealthy then, Mrs Crane?"
 "Compared to whom?"
 "I don't know. Michael Jackson."
 "I've had more plastic surgery than he has."
 "Really?"
 "Yes. And I have more pairs of shoes than Imelda Marcos."
 "Is that a fact," He was grinning. He evidently thought I was joking.
 "Actually, it is a fact. She showed me her collection, and I can honestly say that I've not only got more than her, but that mine are nicer than hers."
 "Okay. So you're a friend of Imelda Marcos."
 "You sound sceptical. I'm also a very good friend of Benazir Bhutto."
 "The Pakistani prime minister?"
 "Is there more than one Benazir Bhutto?"
 "It's probably quite a common name in Pakistan."
 "Like Kray in London."
 "Please, call me David."
 "Hazel," I reciprocated, extending my hand. He shook it awkwardly.
 "That's quite a chunk of gold," he said, indicating the bracelet on my wrist. It was made from heavy links of 18 carat gold, with a large 'H' forming the centrepiece.
 "Yes," I said simply.
 "Was it a gift?"
 "Yes."
 "This is like getting blood out of a stone, Hazel," he chided me.
 "Yes, it was a gift... from my husband."
 "The one who's missing."
 "Yes. Missing."
 "What's his name..." he found the page in the magazine. There was an inset photo of Shai with his arm around me. He smiled up at me from the glossy page.
 "Shai Avissar," read David. "Missing since November. Police believe the Israeli confidence trickster may have been abducted and executed by gangland rivals-"
 "That's enough!" I snapped, snatching the magazine from him.
 "I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me," he said, genuinely contrite.
 I brought my temper under control. I was surprised at myself. Normally, I was capable of murderous rages that lasted hours and sometimes days. I had been known to point and fire loaded weapons at unfaithful lovers. I had punched great oafs of men, quite literally twice my size. I had even pulled a South African police officer - not renowned for their high tolerance threshold - across his desk by his tie.
 Perhaps I was over tired. Or maybe I needed someone to talk to. And this tabloid hack was all I had right now.
 "He's been found," I said, looking at the photo of Shai.
 "Your husband?"
 "That's right."
 "And is he-"
 "He was murdered."
 "Good grief. When-"
 "He was found last night. That's why I'm flying back to Johannesburg."
 "What will you do when you get there?"

I looked through him. The faces of my husband's 'associates' filled my vision. Snake-eyed Lior Saadt, baby-faced Amir Mulner, snarling Carlos, skittish Julio... They lay at my feet begging for mercy. I levelled the 12-gauge sawn-off shotgun and squeezed the twin triggers...

"Hazel..?"

I refocused my eyes and smiled at the journalist.

"I'm going to arrange a reunion."

"A family reunion?"

"A get-together."

"I see."

Clearly he did not, but I was not going to elaborate. At least, that's what I thought.

"Look, Hazel, can we start at the beginning..?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me your story. Your whole story, I mean."

"From birth?"

"Exactly."

"What for?"

"I want a sneak preview of the book. Okay?"

I studied his face for a moment. He had rugged good looks, dark blond hair, blue eyes, the rough-hewn bone structure of a real man, not the fine pencil-lines of a pretty boy. They were the kind of masculine good looks that had always appealed to me.

But there was more than that. It was his slightly crooked smile and the mischievous glint in his eyes that decided me. Unlike so many other men I had encountered during my man-filled life, this was no fool. He would appreciate my story.

And suddenly I had a powerful yearning to tell it. As if yielding up the secrets of my past might somehow heal the awful ache inside.

"You'd better make yourself comfortable, David," I said quietly. "And fasten your seat belt."

*

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND, 6.05PM, APRIL 24, 1951

THEY DRAGGED ME INTO THIS WORLD WITH A PAIR OF FORCEPS, and I don't know if I liked what I saw on entry. I do know, however, that my dad didn't much like what he saw.

"That's the ugliest wee'un I've ever seen!" he gagged. My little head was elongated and bruised and I imagine I must have had the disapproving glare under which people still wither today.

Daddy, for his spontaneous remark, was rewarded with a wallop over the head, courtesy of his mother-in-law's umbrella.

I may have given a hideous first impression, but I did go on to redeem myself by winning the Butlins Baby of the Year competition, aged one. I looked like such a precious angel. Little did they know...

My earliest memory was as a three year old. I was walking down the Hollywood Road in East Belfast, holding my grandfather's hand. He led me into The Boulevard, a little

corner shop near our house, and took a little wind up dog off the shelf. He placed it on the floor at my feet and it wagged its tail and barked a funny, tinny sort of bark.

"This," said granda', "is for you."

"Why?" I asked breathlessly.

"Because you have a new wee sister."

I didn't argue the point. We walked slowly home, me winding my little dog. Granda' opened the door at 122 Hollywood Road, a modest two-up, two down mid-terrace. My Nan was sitting on the brown leather couch in the living room, a little bundle in the crook of her arm. Karen Roseanna, my big sister who would have been five at the time, was kneeling on the arm of the chair, gazing lovingly at the mewling object.

"Come see our new wee sister, Hazel!" she enthused a little too loud for my liking.

I sauntered over, took one look at the scrunched up little face in the white knitted bonnet and then sat down to play with my dog. It's funny, but I actually remember thinking, in a three-year-old sort of way, that this was an inconvenience and an intrusion.

Karen was badgering me.

"Come see wee Dorothy June!"

I wound my little dog and held it up by the tail so its body wagged.

*

MY MOTHER, MARY MAGEE (NEE HANNA) AND KNOWN TO everyone as Maisie, insisted on tying my hair up every night with little strips of cloth, in order to make ringlets. I loathed my hair. Mammy made me grow it until it was all the way down my back, and I'd have to sit and brush it a hundred times a day.

I didn't much like my hairbrush, either, as it doubled as an instrument of corporal punishment. Many was the time I'd be trying to escape my mother's wrath at some indiscretion, and I'd be sprinting around the house with my hair streaming out behind me... and mammy would just reach out, take a handful and yank me back. Then the hairbrush would appear and 'thwack', I'd be biting my lip, determined not to cry in front of Karen and Dorothy.

I have this neurosis, of which I am very fond and reluctant to part with despite the objections and denials of my mother and my sisters: after Dot was born, she was spoiled rotten, poor Karen was turned into a little slave, a 'get' who had to look after the baby and clean it and feed it and change its nappies... while I was completely neglected.

Now, I mean this in the nicest possible way. I love my mother dearly, and would not have a bad word said about her.

And I adored my daddy, Archie. He was this towering presence, usually grim-faced but capable of such a dazzling, eye-glittering smile that it made a dull day feel sunny. Everyone respected Archibald Proudfoot Magee. He had an inner strength and an aura of self-confidence that came both from his simple sense of decency and from his long-time interest in the martial arts. He was a black belt in Shuko Kai and, according to those he instructed, one of the strongest, fastest practitioners alive.

He was also a frightening prospect for any child caught misbehaving. He was, as such, a frightening prospect for me on a regular basis.

It was all the fault of the school. For some diabolical reason, the primary school I attended chose to employ psychotic bitches whose sole object was to make miserable the

lives of innocent little children such as myself. I would sit at my desk and cry and cry until they had no option but to call my mother to take me home.

When that didn't work any more, I simply mitched, usually with my best friend Jennifer. In the beginning, we weren't very sophisticated about the precautions we took. We'd knock on the doors of the houses opposite the school and beg for chocolate biscuits.

"Have you got any chocolate biscuits, missus?"

"What for?"

"Because we're hungry, missus."

"Does your mother not feed you?"

"No, missus."

"Would you like a wee sandwich?"

"No - just chocolate biscuits."

It wasn't long before experience taught us it wasn't safe to do this, so we began venturing further afield. The nearby woods seemed the best bet as an ideal hidey hole, despite the legendary tales of terror about the menacing gamekeeper, only known to the neighbourhood kids as "Fairy Boots".

"He'll get you in one of his traps and feed you to his dogs," they said.

Still, the draw of the woods in the big private estate, behind a stone wall, was too much for a couple of novice mitchers to resist. We came well prepared, throwing a rope over the wall and helping each other over. Jennifer went up one of the trees to get to the wild rhododendrons growing in crimson profusion throughout the upper branches. She reached them, and was passing down bunches to me when I heard a wailing war-cry that turned my blood to ice.

I had heard of this band of gypsy children, but this was the first time I'd actually seen them. They presented a horrifying spectacle - dressed in rags, with brightly coloured bandannas about their heads and great pirate-like rings in their ears, they were the genuine article and did justice to their dreadful reputation.

I took one look and turned tail, abandoning Jennifer without a thought. I ran like nobody's business, carried by the skinny little pins which had earned me the nickname "Wednesday Legs - Wednesday gonna break". I scrambled over the wall and pelted squealing down the road, where I was met by an elderly gent who managed to decipher my breathless tale. Emboldened, I led this reluctant rescuer back, over the wall, and into the forest. By the time we reached the spot, the gang of urchins had fled the scene, taking with them the blouse, skirt and shoes they had ruthlessly persuaded Jennifer to part with. The old man helped us out of the forest and we scampered off down the road, barefoot Jennifer in nothing more than a little pair of saturated knickers - she had wet herself when the gypsy boys brandished their rusty pen knives at her.

Unfortunately for us, the man who saved Jennifer happened to know where she lived. It wasn't long before her father - a fearsome man - came round to my house, where we'd taken refuge, and almost battered the door off its hinges. Needless to say, neither of us was able to sit down for a week.

The gypsy women were a feature of life in our neighbourhood. These strong women had come with their families from post-war Europe. They were the true tinkers, who sold clothes pegs and haberdashery and told fortunes and could lay a curse. They were far more glamorous than any of these modern day "travellers", many of whom have now forsaken the lovely old horse-drawn painted caravans in favour of the heated, fibreglass and perspex monstrosities of today.

Still, they were feared as much as they were secretly revered, and when word spread that “the gypsies are coming!” all the children would scurry indoors for fear of being snatched “for to peel potatoes” for the clan.

Back then, there were also the little gypsy “stick girls” who’d come to the door selling bundles of dry tinder, thruppence a clutch. You always knew which ones were in school, because they had their heads shaved after “Nurse Day”, when they’d been found to have nits and lice. My mother had warned my teachers that if they ever put me next to a child who’d had lice, their lives wouldn’t be worth living. To this day, I lean back if anyone puts their head too close to mine.

I had another run in with a bunch of gypsy boys.

My cousin William and I had decided to mitch school so we could go to Bellevue Zoo - away on the other side of town in North Belfast. Obviously, neither of us had any concept of distance, and we set off on foot. We also couldn’t have had much of a sense of direction, for we ended up near the Ormeau Bridge on the River Lagan, which rises in Lough Neagh and meanders its way through Belfast and out to sea.

Here we encountered a scruffy trio, a little older than us. We had been pretending we were tightrope walkers, balancing precariously on the railings that separated the pavement from the river. The three boys approached and attempted to push me into the river. William tried bravely to defend me, but the gypsies soon had the better of him and were just moments from depositing me in the river - despite me telling them I couldn’t swim - when a man in a car intervened.

He bundled us into his car and took us home, where we were duly met with my father’s belt.

My sister Karen told me afterwards she had come running up the stairs when she heard our woeful wailings, and that all she saw was an orange rolling out of the room “as if it was trying to escape”. I can well believe it.

Hidings were a regular feature of my childhood. Nothing that could be considered abuse, mind - and, it has to be admitted, well deserved in each case.

It also has to be said that I was quite adept at avoiding a thrashing, and many a time got away with whatever misdemeanour I’d committed.

My mother loved dressing me up in frilly outfits. I detested it. I was the original tomboy, saving up my pennies to buy catapults, bows and arrows, toy guns and marbles. I was at my happiest when I was up to my knees in mud.

Once - I can’t recall what the occasion was - we had a family get-together and mammy dressed me in this wretched “hoppy horse” dress for the photographs. I sneaked into my room, put a chair up against the door and slipped out of the window. I made my way into a nearby field to play footie with the neighbourhood boys.

When my absence was noticed, my mother sent out a little search party - comprising Karen. She found me and convinced me to come home. Mammy was furious - my dress was ruined, and I was as filthy as could be. Brandishing a grotesque pink dress she had borrowed from my cousin Olga, she pursued me up the stairs and into my room, where I took cover underneath my bed. She pulled the bed one way, and I shifted quickly, on my belly, to stay under it. So she moved it the other way, and I repeated my little manoeuvre. Karen was in fits of laughter, and even mammy had to see the funny side. I escaped punishment because no-one could keep a straight face.

It was shortly after Dot was born that Daddy came home from work one day, more excited than I ever remember seeing him.

Triumphantly, he threw down a newspaper on the kitchen table, open to a full page advertisement. He called all of us in and read it out aloud.

“Opportunities in Africa, skilled and semi-skilled. Help to build a country, carve out a future...”

My father’s hands were shaking and there was a tremor in his voice. He looked up at my mother, who cradled Dot in her arms. She met his glittering, happy gaze with more than a hint of uncertainty and fear.

It all seemed to happen very quickly. One moment, Daddy was enthusing about how he and two of his friends had discussed emigration to this strange place called the Federation deep in the heart of the dark continent... and the next, he was gone, aboard the Union Castle ocean liner. It was the beginning of 1956. We would not see him again for three and a half years.

Mammy was at first distraught. She had not been without my father since she was eighteen. She had wed at nineteen and given birth to her first child, Karen, that same year. But she was remarkably adaptable. While Daddy was in transit and then becoming established in the Federation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, she survived on the 28 shillings a week that she received in family allowance. This meant a considerable degeneration in the standards to which we had become accustomed on the above-average wages my father brought home as a skilled tradesman, working for Harland and Wolff - the shipyards that built Titanic among other great (and more fortunate) liners.

But it was not long before he had settled into his new work as a fitter and turner with Rhodesian Railways, and was sending a good portion of his wages back to Mammy on a regular basis. His enthusiasm for the colonies had, if anything, increased. His letters described a land baked by the sun, a country where crimson skies met tall, golden grasses, where steam trains thundered through the open veldt past indifferent herds of elephant and gangly giraffe galloping, slow-motion, alongside... where a sea of smiling, black humanity flowed in brightly coloured scarves and battered trilbys down colonial town streets wide enough for an ox-drawn wagon to effect a U-turn without stopping. It was, he wrote, a place where you could breathe in, and you were breathing in the rich scent of the red earth and the torrid wilderness and the green jungle, and when you breathed out, you could not see your own breath; where children so fortunate to have been born in paradise had never laid eyes on frost or snow, and who swam bare-arsed in the rivers and who ate their dinners with their bare hands as the sun bronzed their backs.

It was all a million miles away from the dreary grey streets, the long, dark winters, the damp and cramped indoor lifestyle of working class East Belfast.

But my father’s letters, read to us by our mother, might as well have been tales from the pages of Gullivers’ Travels. It didn’t dawn on us that we would someday be seeing those fairy tale sights, breathing those exotic scents, listening to the distant native drumbeat...

We lay in bed at night, the wind whistling through the gaps in the windows, cold rain on the window panes the only drumbeat we knew, and we listened to Mammy narrating the enchanted life of a father whose face was becoming more faded in our memories with each passing day. And after a time, the colourful yarns in the letters from Africa became confused in our minds with the interspersed chapters of those Lilliputian adventures, and of Alice in Wonderland and Around the World in 80 Days and The Jungle Book...

And so we would drift off to sleep, our impressionable minds aswhirl with images of steam trains and elephant guns and flying serpents and white rabbits. And we would awaken to the clink of milk bottles in the dark and the chill of winter and the wind and the rain.

But it was all we had ever known, letters or no.

I had my first real brush with death - and since then I have had many - when I was just seven. Daddy had been away three years already. Mammy had gone down the road to the shops shortly after we came home from school. Dot was looking for a toy under her bed. With the infinite wisdom of a four-year old, she found a box of matches, lit one and - holding the match up in the air above her bed, jammed her head back under the base. I imagine she must have stayed that way for quite some time, backside in the air, head lost in the darkness, burning match held high, wondering why it hadn't made any difference to her visibility.

Unlike my little sister's brain, the match had not stopped working. It was, in fact, doing precisely what a match is designed to do. The lace curtains at the head of Dot's bed sizzled and then burst into flames, beginning to ignite the wooden pelmet and blackening the ceiling. By the time I smelt the fire, wicked elves of yellow flame danced an Irish jig across the top of the room, disgorging black smoke with each gleeful pirouette. Dot was oblivious to the inferno, her little derriere wagging defiantly in the face of doom. Karen turned tail, screaming something about getting a glass of water. I, not being thirsty, lunged toward the blazing curtains, ripped them down and danced on top of them.

I have no doubt that if the fire had remained undetected for just a few seconds more, my sisters and I would have joined the horrifying statistics of children who have lost their lives in the most dreadful manner imaginable.

Of course, we had no real concept of danger. No sooner was the smouldering fabric doused, the smoke still thick about us, than we were under the bed with wee Dot, looking for the missing toy. It was an innocent time, long before the Troubles, when it was safe for three wee girls, a four-year old, a seven year old, an eight year old, to be out on the streets no guardian in sight. People then looked out for each other's children, and even the children of perfect strangers. It was an unwritten code. If you fell in the road and scraped your knee, a strange man would be lifting you up and dusting you down and giving you a penny to buy a sweet to stop your gurning... and not an eyebrow would be raised.

I quickly learned how elementary it was to relieve adults of their money.

"What about ya, mister... it's my birthday."

"Is that so. Here's thruppence for your birthday."

"What about ya, mister - it's my birthday."

"Wasn't it your birthday just the other day?"

"No mister."

"Well... here's thruppence for your birthday."

I loved the feel of money. Even if it was just a penny. I loved the feel of it in my hand. I didn't like to let it go. If we were given bus money, I would walk home rather than part with the coin. I would also hang onto the back of lorries. I heard of a wee boy who was killed doing this, when his coat got caught up in the back wheels. So I would take off my coat and shove it into my bag before I hung onto the back of lorries.

My siblings soon learned to hide their pocket money. My philosophy was that if anyone was careless enough to leave their money lying around, I would give it a better home.

Once, Karen was lying in bed, feeble with some ailment. She heard the tinkling tune of the ice cream van, the Mister Whippy, and summoned me. Then she made the grave mistake of handing me sixpence and asking if I would go down and buy her a Mars Bar and a few other goodies, to cheer her up.

I didn't come back. My big sister waited patiently as the minutes turned into hours. When I eventually came home to face the music, she was seething.

"Where's me Mars Bar?"

"I et it."

"Why'd you do that?"

"I got tired carryin' it."

"Where's my change?"

"I losted it."

Then I skipped away, fingering the sixpence in my pocket.

But I was not averse to working for money. I would run errands for neighbours, collecting messages (groceries), walking dogs, tidying and weeding back yards, cleaning windows... anything that yielded a few pennies.

Before long, I was mobilising children on the street, many of them older than me, in more daring money making ventures.

Within walking distance of our neighbourhood was a dairy farm. The farmer collected the silver foil milk bottle tops for reuse, and he'd pay a penny for ten. What he didn't know was that we'd discovered his store of tops in barrels at the back of his house. We'd sneak round, clutch handfuls, double back down the road, arrange them neatly and then saunter up to his front door and sell them back to him. He never did catch on.

Then we'd go stealing gooseberries from the Heany's house. There was one problem - they had a vicious Staffordshire bull terrier named Jock. The last time I was there, collecting a basketful of ripe berries to sell on the side of the road, one of my friends yelled "Jock's out!" and the chase was on. We scattered in different directions, whooping and squealing. I cleared a hedge, and Jock, a remarkably agile little brute, sailed over after me. I belted across the road, Jock in hot pursuit, and made for the scullery of our house, screaming for Karen to open the door. She heard me coming and flung the door open just as I reached it. I burst into the kitchen and shot a command at my sister, "Shut the door, shut the door!", but she was still looking at me in bewilderment when Jock darted between her legs. I turned to flee, and that single-minded little dog launched himself into the air at me and bit me right on the backside. It was as if he knew instinctively that I was the ringleader.

Up until now, I'd been satisfied with coins. Small change. Overnight, I acquired a taste for banknotes. It was a predilection that would remain with me forever more.

It was shortly after Daddy had come home from his stint in Africa. I was eight years old. There was a man on our street for whom I used to do messages. On this fateful day, I was due to fetch the money from him. I was walking up his garden path when something caught my eye. At the foot of the step was a Free State twenty punt note. A primeval urge possessed me. I snatched it up and bolted out of the yard as fast as my spindly legs would carry me. I didn't stop running until I got halfway to the bus stop three blocks away. There, I ran into my cousin Willie.

"What's tha'?"

"Money."

"It's not. It's not real, is it?"

"I don't know."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Found it."

"Where?"

"Under the hedge."

"What hedge?"

"Can't remember."

We walked as I caught my breath, studying the funny looking note. We bumped into Karen and her best friend, Marlene, who was my best friend Jennifer's older sister.

They scrutinised the money.

"It's real, all right," pronounced Marlene.

"Aye, I think it is, all right," said Karen. "I seen one of them before. It's from the Free State."

"Where's tha'?" asked Willie.

"Away down the South," said Karen knowledgeably. She was the most learned among us.

"Why does their money look so funny?" asked Willie.

"Because," explained Karen, "There's only Catholics down there."

Jennifer had appeared now. She wanted to know what we were looking at.

"It's Catholic money," said Marlene.

"Don't be touchin' it then," declared Jennifer. "You'll get a curse."

"You will not!" laughed Karen.

"You might," I blurted, snatching it back. I didn't like seeing it in any one else's hands.

The problem was, where could we spend this currency of the other realm?

"We could catch the train to Dublin," suggested Karen.

"They'd eat us for breakfast," shuddered Jennifer.

"How long would it take?" I asked. I was damned if I was going to be stuck with money that couldn't be spent.

Our ambitions were gradually reduced to seeing us huddled outside The Boulevard corner shop.

"You go in there, Karen," I instructed. "Tell him your mammy sent you to get it changed for to buy sausages at the butchers 'cause they won't change it for you."

"What if he-"

"Just buy some ginger nut biscuits from him," I snapped, knowing that the shopkeeper was well aware none of the kids on the street liked his ginger nut biscuits. "He'll believe its for mammy. Just do it!"

Karen ambled into the shop trying to look innocent. We prepared to flee.

When she emerged ten minutes later, she was beaming proudly. In one hand, she had a roll of rancid ginger nut biscuits. In the other, more money - real money - than any of us had, singularly or collectively, ever laid eyes on.

We decided to go into the city on the bus. We went on a shopping spree to shame all shopping sprees. I bought a bow and arrow set with rubber suckers on the ends of the arrows, and a Bunty Annual; Jennifer got a French-English phrase book (who knew why?); Karen got a set of playing cards and a brightly coloured medallion made of tin; Marlene a roll of material to make dresses, although she'd never made so much as a handkerchief before; and Willie just tagged along good-naturedly, content with a bag full of sticky buns.

We strode into Woolworths, mucky in our plainclothes but with all the cocky self confidence of the wealthy, ordered a roast chicken lunch with all the trimmings, left a generous tip...

A big dinner away from home, surrounded by shopping bags, does not depress me. It did, however, for some inexplicable reason, seem to upset the others.

"What's wrong with you lot?" I asked.

"Nothing," lied Karen.

"Why haven't you finished your chicken then?"

"I'm full."

I retrieved a drumstick from her plate, held it daintily between my thumb and forefinger and nibbled at it as I regarded the four glum faces at the table.

"You lot are scared of getting into trouble!" I laughed. They exchanged nervous glances.

"Don't worry about it - we'll bring presents home for everyone and they won't mind."

"Do you really think so, Hazel?" asked Marlene, brightening.

"Course I do."

"What kind of presents?" asked Jennifer.

"Groceries."

So we proceeded to fill a trolley with eggs, bacon, sugar, flour, vegetables, fruit, cakes, chocolates... and we struggled home on a bus, laden down with "presents for everyone".

My father had only been home six months, after three and a half years in Africa. We were all really only beginning to get to know one another again. He was missing Rhodesia desperately, every fibre in him aching to return. He worked out at his karate for hours on end in a bid to relieve his frustration as he awaited news of a new contract. All of us were acutely aware of the fact that now was not a good time to be upsetting Daddy. Karen was forever telling us to "be quiet" because he was meditating. We would stand outside the door to his room and listen to him doing his breathing exercises - "Shooooo - hmm... Shooooo - hmm". I used to close my eyes and imagine that he had learned how to levitate, and was floating about in his room, eyes closed and legs crossed, like some Eastern god.

We parted company with Marlene and Jennifer, and were just laying our share of the bags of groceries on the kitchen floor, when Daddy appeared, in the middle of the room. He was always doing that. You never heard so much as a single footfall and he would be beside you, or behind you, brows furrowed disapprovingly, eyes inscrutable.

"What's all this?"

"Presents," blurted Karen. "Look, real honey, and Earl Grey tea, Daddy!"

"Hmph," he picked up a bag of candied dates.

"Do you want one?" asked Willie. "You can have one, Uncle Archie."

"Where did this come from?"

Mammy came in. She peered out from behind my father, and her eyes lit up at the sight of the groceries.

"Oh my God!" she said, and started laughing.

"Get up to your rooms," my father told us, quietly.

We didn't argue. He was up shortly.

"Where did you get the money for those things?" he asked.

"I found it," I said.

"Where?"

"Under a hedge."

"I see."

He turned to Karen.

"What if that money belonged to an old person? What if it was all they had in the world, and now it's gone, and you didn't even hand it in to the police like you should have done?"

Karen swallowed hard. My father knew everyone's weak spot. He turned to me.

"No pocket money for a month."

When he had left us, Karen lay in her bed, sobbing.

"Oh my God, Hazel... I never thought of that. Some old lady could be going hungry, and we spent all her money! Oh my God..."

Karen tossed and turned all night, fretting about it.

I was so stuffed with roast chicken and sweets, I shut my eyes and went straight to sleep.

*

WHEN WE LEFT NORTHERN IRELAND IN THE LATE 1960's, THE official Troubles had not yet begun. There had always been tribal divisions among the Catholics and Protestants, but it wasn't as though they were openly killing each other in the streets... not yet, anyway.

It wasn't really talked about in my house, but I guess everything over the years - the other kids on the street, the school, little remarks by my friends' parents... had the cumulative effect of making us believe that Catholics were just second class citizens, inferior to us Protestants in every way. There was no melodrama in this. It was just accepted as a mundane fact, like salt is salty and nettles sting.

There were a few mixed families living in our area - Catholics married to Protestants - but we didn't associate with them. Again, it wasn't because of our parents - they didn't seem particularly interested in politics or sectarianism. It was our friends, who I guess must have had fairly hard line Loyalist parents.

Once, Karen was mortified when a Catholic boy walked up to her and her friends after school and kissed her right on the cheek.

"What did you do that for?" she gasped.

"I love you," he said simply. His name was Rory, and he was rather gorgeous. But his father was a 'Taig', and it just wasn't on for a good Prod to be seen with such a person.

Karen was teased for days by the other girls. In the end, she was yearning for the day that we were to emigrate.

Mummy began selling up everything we owned. There were people from the street and beyond traipsing through our house day and night, studying the furniture, the beds, the curtains, the paintings, the kettle and the cutlery, and even our toys. Karen and Dot were traumatised by the experience. I loved every minute of it - the air crackled with the same electric buzz of an auction, the almost tangible excitement of people who can sense a bargain, and there was the smell of money and the sound of money being counted, and rolls of money to be looked at. Overnight, it seemed that my parents became so wealthy. None of the things they had sold were actually taken away, as the neighbours who had made the purchases let them hold onto everything until we were leaving. Imagine that happening today...

On the last day, Karen was outside, sitting on the wall, when Rory crossed the street towards her. She jumped down and turned her back on him.

“No, hang on just a wee minute,” he pleaded. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble with your friends.”

“You did so! You’re a wicked boy, and I won’t have anything to do with you.” Karen felt frustrated tears welling up, and swallowed hard and fought them back.

“No, wait a bit. I have a surprise for you,” he said, undeterred. She kept her back to him. Two of the girls from up the street were watching intently, whispering and pointing. As Karen turned, red faced, to demand that he go away, Rory put his cupped hands to his mouth and began to blow into the little gap between his thumbs. For a full minute, Karen stood rooted to the spot as Rory puffed the distinctive melody of “God Save the Queen”. A tune synonymous with everything the Republican Catholics despised. When he was done, he stood and waited for her reaction. Karen couldn’t hold his gaze.

“I learnt it for you,” he said proudly. “My da’ wouldn’t like it, so I had to go up the street where he wouldn’t hear me practising.”

“Very nice,” Karen said, lamely.

“I hear you’re leaving,” said Rory with emotion. “I’m going to miss you.”

Karen took a step back.

“You’re not allowed to miss me!” she stammered. “You’re a Fenian.”

And then she fled indoors.

Many has been the time since then, that my sister has told me how that single moment stands out as one of the ones she most regrets. Forty years later, she still puts her hand to her mouth, shuts her eyes tight and shakes her head when she thinks about it.

*

WE FLEW FROM BELFAST TO LONDON AND ON TO JOHANNESBURG in South Africa. We arrived on my eleventh birthday, April 24.

My father was supposed to be met at the airport by a representative of the company that had offered him the contract. The plan was that the rep would drive us all up to Springs, the town where my father was to be based. No one turned up. After a long wait, Daddy managed to make contact with someone from the company. They told him to get to Johannesburg central railway station, and catch a train from there to Springs.

Unfazed, we caught a bus from the airport to the station. I remember pressing my nose up against the window of the bus as we drove along steaming tarmac roads, past commercially cultivated farms. I recall being more than a little disappointed at not spotting even a single elephant or lion.

But I did see plenty of black people - something I’d never seen in real life before. Dusty little black children sitting on upturned wooden crates on the side of the road, selling roasted corn cobs, or *mealies*, brightly coloured soft drinks in finger-shaped plastic bags called penny coolers, peanuts, single cigarettes...

Black women with impossibly balanced baskets on their heads, women with vivid yellow or orange or green scarves and dresses, with broad backsides and a confident, unhurried gait.

Black men on bicycles, young men and old, sporting patchy plaid jackets and battered old Trilbys, men with no shirts on at all, all sinewy muscle and sweat, men who glanced up at a little white girl on a bus and met her wide-eyed stare with an unblinking dignity, an unsmiling benevolence.

It was supposed to be winter in Southern Africa, but that first day was hotter than any of the finest summer days in Belfast. We were parched and panting when we disembarked at Johannesburg Central, lily white Europeans subdued by the mighty elements of this ancient continent. The teeming masses rose up before us at the station and the air was thick with the smell of toiling humanity and diesel and smoke. Our ears came under the assault of ten thousand voices speaking in tongues, a language rich in clicks and vowels. My father waded through the crowd ahead of us, my mother propelling us on from behind in his wake, until we reached the ticket counter, Karen, myself and Dot hand in hand, holding on for dear life lest one or all of us was snatched away for some heathen ritual in the jungle.

It was in the queue for tickets that we heard a familiar sound, the cheerful lilt of the Northern Irish. Mammy reached out, like a drowning soul reaching out for a lifeline.

The couple introduced themselves as the Latimers, and told us they too were heading for Springs, where they lived. They would be only too happy to travel with us and direct us once we reached our destination.

Daddy got to the counter and asked for the tickets, two adults, three children. Then he reached into his top pocket for his wallet. He smiled reassuringly at us, then checked his trouser pockets. The smile fell away and his face was drained of all colour. Everything was gone. Every penny. A life savings whisked away by an artful pickpocket. I understood more than anyone the anguish my father experienced in that awful moment. All the money gone. All the money... gone.

Our new-found friends ignored my father's protests and paid for the tickets. We arrived in Springs, hot, tired, dejected and penniless. The Latimers dropped us off in a taxi at Springs Hotel, where the company rep was due to meet us, and bade us farewell. Once again, no-one turned up.

So we sat in the reception, with no money for food or drink, and waited. I was swinging between the arms of two chairs when a large man and his wife sat down and proceeded to stare at me. I stared back, insolently, not in the mood for inspection by strangers.

"That child has on too much make-up," said the man disapprovingly to his wife. He had the harsh, guttural accent of the Afrikaner.

Before I could retaliate, my mother had responded with an Ulster frost in her tone.

"My daughter does not have a whisper of make-up on her."

"Jusses!" gasped the man, leaning forward for a better look. He reached out before I had a chance to back off, and rubbed a rough thumb over my cheek.

My father was just returning from the gents. He frowned and quickened his pace.

But the man was laughing like a child, and his grisly countenance was transformed into the image every child has of Santa Claus.

"Jusses... look at this, Helen! That's her natural colour!"

"Is it, Sam?" asked his wife, smiling and shaking her head. "Such rosy cheeks!"

And it was on the basis of my rosy cheeks that my parents struck up a friendship with Sam and Helen that would last for years.

That day they took us home with them and we were their guests for three weeks while daddy got settled into his new job and looked for a house.

Then the company for which he had come all the way from Ireland dropped the bombshell: they made my father redundant almost before he had even received his first pay cheque.

He was devastated, but he refused to be beaten. He had been planning to get us to Rhodesia once he had enough money saved, anyway, so now he simply brought his plans forward. He moved us into a cheap apartment in a run-down building, explaining to us that it was only until his papers were processed by the Rhodesian authorities.

On the day that we moved in, a pair of cheeky little boys popped their heads around our door and invited us out to play. Their names were Jacky and Danny and a naughtier pair you'd be hard put to find.

They taught us a great new game: dropping water bombs from the roof of the apartment block onto people in the car park six floors down.

This was wonderful fun - until one day I threw a device at a man just as he was climbing out of his car and - bang! - got him square on the shoulder. He was absolutely soaked. We rolled about on the roof laughing our heads off. As we got up to continue our game, this drenched monster of a man burst onto the roof and dragged us down the stairs.

He waited in our apartment until my dad got home.

"Who the hell are you?" my dad asked.

"I, sir, am the owner of this building. I came around today because there had been complaints about kids throwing water bombs from the roof. And what do you think happened when I arrived?"

My father looked from the still-wet owner to me and back again.

"I can't imagine," he said dryly.

"Your little darling here along with a couple of her reprobate buddies threw a bomb at me."

"A bomb?"

"A water bomb."

"Good grief," I could see my daddy was trying not to laugh.

"I want you and your family out of this flat by the end of the month."

"Fine," said my dad, "Now get out."

The glint in his eye assured the man that it would be a good idea to comply.

When he was gone, my daddy gave me yet another hiding - but that didn't stop me from loving him all the more. He had not cow-towed to the landlord. And he had seen the funny side - even if it didn't prevent him from tanning my backside.

It didn't really matter that we had been evicted because just a few days later the papers came through from Rhodesia and we were on the move again.

There's only one incident I can recall happening on the long train ride from Johannesburg to Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia. I remember it mainly because I came close, once again, to meeting my maker.

I had been watching from our compartment some of the children on the train jumping off onto the platform as we pulled into stations, while the train was still moving.

I got it into my head that this would be a fun thing to try, so the next opportunity I gave it a whirl.

I had not, however, reckoned on the speed of the train coupled with the shortness of my legs. I hit the platform running and immediately realised it had been an error of judgement.

Thankfully, at just the moment I was tripping forward - toward the gap between the rolling train and the platform - I was yanked back by the hair. My dad had seen me leap - his quick reaction probably saved my life. It did not, however, save my hide. I was unable to sit down for the remainder of the journey.

We arrived in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Southern Rhodesia after Salisbury. It was the seat of industry and the hub of the railway network. Daddy started work with Rhodesian Railways and began to earn relatively good money.

For the first two weeks we stayed with one of my dad's childhood friends, 'Uncle Bob' and his wife, 'Aunt Greta'. Then daddy found a little old house at 121A Grey Street. It had a green tin roof, a balcony all round and parquet flooring. The toilet was outside on one side of the balcony. The first time we walked into the house I noticed that my mom's legs to the knees looked black. Then I noticed the black on her legs was moving. Then I noticed my legs were black to the knees - and the black was also moving on me.

Only then did my mom start to itch. And I started to itch - we all did.

They were sand fleas. Thousands of them. Millions of them. That first day we learned how to do an African war dance, and we were doing it for a few days until daddy was able to arrange fumigation.

We were enrolled at Coghlan Primary School - my mother had to have our uniforms specially made because all of us were too small for any off the shelf. I think that may be where I first got a taste for tailor-made outfits.

On our first day at Coghlan we were teased relentlessly about both our tiny size and our broad Belfast accents - until I walloped the biggest, loudest girl, bloodying her nose. After that I was afforded new respect, as were my siblings. It did not take me long to recognise that you have to push people around if you want to prevent them from pushing you around. As each day went by, I became more and more aggressive, and the girls around me became proportionately more and more subservient to me. It's a lesson that has remained with me to this day - if you are nice to people, they invariably end up kicking you in the teeth. If you are nasty to people, they usually kiss your arse. Strange, but true.

One of the exceptions at Coghlan was a girl called Christine, who became my best friend and little partner in crime. We went absolutely everywhere together, mostly causing terror and mayhem. Her mother taught me how to knit. My first woolly masterpiece was an orange jersey. Christine knitted a pink one. My one had one arm too short and one arm too long, but that didn't matter to me - I wore it everywhere, proud as punch.

Christine followed me to high school - and we are still the best of friends today.

By the time I had moved up to Evelyn Girls' High, it became even more necessary to resort to violence to achieve respect, as now I was the smallest girl not only in my class but in the entire school. It didn't help that, because of my size, I had to wear boys' brown lace-up shoes for the first year because they were the only ones my mother could find to fit me.

To compensate for my stature I became by far the most troublesome child in the school. I persistently cheeked my teachers, on more than one occasion driving them to tears of frustration or rage.

"You, Magee, are an INSOLENT.... LITTLE... BITCH!" one of them screamed at me.

"Aye, Miss," was all I replied, with a smile, as if it was a compliment.

I learned to swim in Bulawayo, at Borrow Street Swimming Pool. I would walk from the house in Grey Street with my sisters Karen and Dot most afternoons after school and on the week-ends. By the time we got there we were sweltering and must have presented quite a sight - three panting little milk bottles marching barefoot and in single file through the turnstile, wearing nothing but our teeny weeny little costumes. We didn't even

possess a towel between us - drying off was not an issue: Within ten seconds of getting out of the pool every drop had been sucked up by the ravenous sun.

On one ordinary Saturday afternoon at Borrow Street Swimming Pool, I saved my little sister's life.

Karen and I had been happily splashing about in the shallow end of the Olympic-size pool when I noticed that Dot had disappeared. I looked around frantically and was relieved when I saw her standing on the edge of the pool near the deep end. She was talking to a big fat girl by the name of Colleen, who we had seen around but did not associate with because she had a name for being a bully.

As I watched, Colleen grabbed Dot's little arms and began to swing her around like a rag doll. Round and round they went. I swam to the steps, scrambled out and began to sprint as fast as my legs would carry me, slipping and sliding on the smooth, wet cement. But I was too late. Colleen had let go of Dot, flinging her close to the middle of the deep end.

I dived in after her. By now, thankfully, I was quite a good little swimmer and had just learned to keep my eyes open under water. After a few panicked seconds I caught sight of my little sister. She was sinking toward the floor of the pool. Her big blue eyes were wide and unblinking. She was staring at me, as if to say, 'Well, what are you waiting for?'. Her hair was spread out like a fan above her. I kicked out, grabbed a handful and then headed for the surface, trailing Dot behind me.

When I got her to the side and pushed her up onto the edge of the pool, she was spluttering and sobbing. I was incensed. I looked up and Colleen was standing over me, an evil grin on her fat, ugly face. I tried to get out and she pushed me back in. I swam to the shallow end, went up the steps and then ran like the wind to where Colleen was standing, taunting Dot.

"Little drowned rat - ha ha - little drowned rat from Ireland!"

As she turned to face me, I punched her in the mouth. She stood and stared at me for a second, not comprehending what had happened. Then the pain set in. Her mouth quivered, then turned into a snarl. Before she could retaliate, I kicked her in the shin. She fell over. I jumped on her and pummelled her bright red face until she had a blood nose, a split lip, a chipped tooth, a cauliflower ear. I remember actually choosing a new spot to punch each time I inflicted damage, determined to make mash of as much of her ugly face as possible. It took two male pool attendants to drag me off the bitch and Karen, Dot and I were ejected from the pool and not allowed back for a week. But when we did return, I was a hero to all the kids who had been terrorised by Colleen over the years. And Colleen kept a wary distance from then on.

On the week-end that we were barred from Borrow Street, we had nothing to do so we visited our Aunt Greta and Uncle Bob, who had two sons, Robert and Gary. They introduced me to a friend of theirs, who within hours would try to kill me.

His name was John and he had red hair and freckles and warts all over his hands. I don't know if he tried to kill me because I made some remark about his appearance, or if he was just a sick child. At any rate, he had taken a light bulb out of a wall-mounted lamp and then told me to reach up and feel around inside the socket for a ten cent piece he had hidden there. He said if I could find it, I could keep it.

So, of course, I reached up and was feeling about with two fingers when John flicked the light switch.

I was flung across the room and slammed into the adjacent wall. I don't know how long I was unconscious for, but when I came round John had disappeared and I was all alone. I

lay on the floor, dazed and sore all over. My heart was beating so fast it seemed to be just one single beat.

To this day, I don't know how I survived that first serious attempt on my life. But I do know that I never stuck my fingers in an electrical socket again, ten cents or no ten cents.

WE MOVED FROM GREY STREET TO A SLIGHTLY NEWER AND altogether bigger 'townhouse' in Fife Street as my father became more established in his work

But daddy was an alcoholic. There were years when he wouldn't touch a drop, and he was a responsible, loving, beautiful soul. But when he fell off the wagon, he generally landed on his head. He became unrecognisable. He did the most astonishingly stupid and puerile things. While he did not become violent as such, he could be very hurtful in the things he said and did. And the money he earned would often be lavished on the local drinking establishments to the detriment of our pantry.

I will not dwell on those times, because my father was so much more than his drunken alter ego. He was a loving father, a considerate husband, a hard worker, a crusader for peace and for justice, a man who respected his fellow man regardless of colour or creed. He was a disciplined martial artist, a community leader through St John's Ambulance Service and Alcoholics Anonymous. He was a straight talker, an honest man unafraid to give voice to his own convictions. But he was also open minded enough to listen to others. And he could be a lot of fun to be with.

Just one incident that happened while my father was possessed by the liquor demons is worth a mention. Not because of any hardship it caused, but because it proved to be the single most amazing revelation about who my father was, and what he had sacrificed for love.

We had not been in the country long when daddy was hitting the bottle hard. During one of his frequent binges, daddy had been persuaded to part with the rent money in exchange for a cine camera he had no idea how to work.

Not long after this, one of my mother's friends was due to be married. Somehow, daddy's services as a cameraman were volunteered.

The wedding was to take place in St Mary's, Bulawayo's Catholic Cathedral.

We had been away from sectarian Belfast long enough now to have learned that Catholics and Protestants outside of Northern Ireland were capable of living side by side without trying to kill each other. Religion was, in fact, hardly relevant at all. In fact, white Rhodesians would have placed even less stock in what church their neighbour attended than most places, because it was not religion that set Rhodesians apart, but colour.

So it was that a very Protestant family that hailed from a very loyalist part of Belfast was now mixing freely with Catholics and even preparing to enter that most forbidden of all forbidden places, a Catholic Church, for the purposes of witnessing what would have been considered, in the old country, nothing more than a pagan ritual.

Even at the tender age of twelve I was aware of the social evolution we had gone through since bidding farewell to our troubled home country. I still recalled the sectarian taunts that would be exchanged by children whose parents were ignorant enough to teach them the culture of exclusion and distrust. Of course, there were many in Northern Ireland who did not subscribe to such base bigotry, just as in Rhodesia there were many who did not believe that a man should be judged by the colour of his skin. My parents fitted into both of these categories. While they did not associate with Catholics while they lived in Ulster, this was the result of the neighbourhood in which they lived rather than for any

ideological reasons. And while they enjoyed all the privileges afforded to white people living in Rhodesia, they were always very liberal in their views about the rights of black people.

Nevertheless, what transpired as a result of my father's drunken purchase of a cine camera left me feeling quite bewildered and shaken - a hangover from the environment in which I had been raised throughout my most impressionable years.

It all happened on the Saturday morning that Lucy and Brendan were having their practise ceremony at the Cathedral. Daddy had arranged to meet them there so that he could try out the cine camera for the first time, to ensure that it was working on the big day.

While he was getting ready to go, my mother called Karen and I into her room and told us to shut the door.

She whispered: "I want you to go with your daddy and make sure that he doesn't get drunk. See that he gets to the church and that he comes straight home afterwards."

So we dutifully shadowed our father down the street to the Cathedral. We marched along behind him, through the gate, up the steps and into the mouth of an institution our wee Belfast buddies would have whispered was the gateway to hell and damnation.

Suddenly, the most wondrous sight was revealed to us. It was almost unbearably beautiful. The view down the aisle to the high altar made our hearts stop in sheer awe. Under a richly decorated corona it was bathed in a golden glow, splashed here and there with green and red and blue and a myriad other indescribably magical colours projected by intricate stained glass.

The alabaster Christ who hung, tortured and dying, on the giant oak cross above and behind the altar, was so very lifelike that my flesh crawled. It was beautifully horrible. Karen gasped and covered her mouth. I willed myself not to blink, for fear that the whole otherworldly scene would vanish, just as I might have done had I glimpsed a Unicorn or a fairy or an extraterrestrial visitor.

Above us towered lofty arches and at our feet was cold Italian marble. And bedecking the walls on either side were the tragic Stations of the Cross in dark, forbidding oils. To the right of the high altar was a statue of the Virgin Mary, her hands held up on either side of her in an attitude of despair and defeat, her Sacred Heart exposed, trapped in the embrace of a thorny vine, her achingly lovely face turned slightly to one side and down, as if there was something before her that she could not bear to see... and at her feet, fresh flowers and flickering candles, small consolation to a mother who had to watch the agonisingly slow and cruel murder of her only, beloved son.

And now, when Karen and I had gazed for a long while on each of these spectacles and were finally able to drag our eyes away, we realised that there was something desperately wrong with our father.

He was genuflecting in the aisle, and making the sign of the cross - kissing his thumb then touching it to his forehead, his heart, his left shoulder, his right shoulder. He rose and stepped forward, shifted into one of the pews and knelt down on the kneeling board and began to say a prayer neither my sister nor I had ever heard before.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee... Blessed art thou amongst women and Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus..."

God forgive me, I stood rooted to the spot and all I could think was, "My father's a Fenian... My father's a Taig..."

He finished his prayer and beckoned to us. Karen was ashen. We sat down beside our father.

"There is something I must tell you," he said softly.

"What's wrong, daddy?" Karen spoke first. Her voice was trembling.

"This," said our father, "is my faith."

And so it came to pass that we were introduced to the Catholic Church, and every Sunday thereafter, that was where we worshipped.

On the day of the Revelation, though, when the practise ceremony was over, Karen and I followed our daddy from the Cathedral to the bar, and all we could do was watch as he drank himself into a stupor. Then he leaned on us and let us help him home, and he rewarded us by singing all the way, Catholic hymns he had not sung since revoking his faith so that he could marry our mother.

*

I WAS THIRTEEN NOW, AND MORE PRECOCIOUS AND DEMANDING than your average teenager. I led a charmed life, mitching school, dressing up to the nines, plastering my face with make up I had either pinched from my mum or shoplifted.

I'd meet Christine after school and we'd go roller skating. Mum would usually foist Dot, two years my junior, on me. This would have proved tiresome if I had not developed a compromise: I used to take my little sister round the corner, thump the living daylights out of her and tell her she had to stay where she was and that if she wasn't there when I got back she'd get another thumping.

On this particular occasion, we decided to take Dot with us when we went roller skating. We joined the club - Christine, myself, Monica, Janet and Dot. The twins, Monica and Janet, didn't really like roller skating very much, they just went for the social side of it. But Christine, myself and Dot became very interested and became champion little skaters.

We used to hire the skates. They were only the very rudimentary skates that went on with straps. I wanted to do competition skating. In competition skating, you had to have good skates, and you had to have the club uniform made.

You must remember that my parents were still struggling to get established, and couldn't really afford all the luxuries. I was blind to such dreary facts, and told them that what I wanted for Christmas was a pair of Golden Leader boot skates.

In those days they cost £18 and five shilling, which was an enormous sum of money, and a price my parents simply couldn't afford to pay.

Of course, I threw a tantrum. I cried and I performed. They said they couldn't afford it, because if they bought for me, they'd have to buy for Dot. I said, forget about Dot, think of me. They said no, they can't afford it and that was that. Or so they thought.

There was only one shoe shop in Bulawayo, called Sanders. I visited Sanders by myself, and I went up to the accounts department and announced to the lady behind the counter that my mother had sent me there to order a set of size one Golden Leader boot skates.

She said that they had ones for £18 and ones for £24. I said I would take the £24 ones. The lady said she would order them in for December. They needed two weeks. I said that was fine.

She asked me for my mother's telephone number. I gave the number, but I gave one wrong digit. The lady said she needed a deposit, and I asked her how much, and she said she needed ten shillings.

I didn't know where I was going to get ten shillings from. Ten shillings was such a lot of money! But I was undaunted. I sold half of my clothes without my mother's knowledge, and I borrowed half a crown - two and six - from Christine, and we made it up to ten shillings. We went up to Sanders and we put the ten shillings down.

Christine said: "How are you going to pay for the rest of it?"

I said: "I don't know, but I'll think of something."

Two weeks later I went into the shop and the woman said the shoes would be arriving the next day.

I was nowhere nearer to getting the balance of the money. There was only one thing for it. I went home and confronted my mother.

"Mom, you know they have this special pair of shoes at this shop, you have to get them for me, you just have to!"

I worked on my mother, not my father. He would have just laughed at me and told me to go fish. Eventually, when I could see that she was breaking but not quickly enough, I blurted out my confession. I told her that I had gone and ordered the boots, and paid a deposit, and that she had to come to the shop and sign for the boots.

"You can pay them off," I said with a cute smile, knowing my mother's weakness for buying on the "never-never".

She said: "Your father will kill us."

"I know," I replied with a tragic shake of my head, "But we have to do this."

I pushed my mother into Sanders, and she went in and opened up an account, and the Golden Leader boots were under the tree on Christmas morning.

I skated with them in competitions, I did lots of shows and I had lots of fun. My mother went on to run up an obscene account at Sanders in her own right, so by the time daddy found out about it the cost of my size one Golden Leader boots had paled by comparison to mammy's shiny new shoe collection.

*

BY THE TIME I TURNED 15, OUR FAMILY FACED A NEW disruption. My mother had not been feeling the best and when her periods stopped she made an appointment to see the doctor because she thought she was going through the change of life.

When he had completed his examination, our family doctor shook his head and smiled.

"Mrs Magee, there's no change of life - you're four months pregnant."

There was great excitement because Michael was due on St Patrick's day, the 17th of March and, after three daughters, they were hoping for a son.

Typically late, Michael Douglas Fraser Magee was born on the 21st of March.

My mother and father decided to move house again. My dad had the opportunity of buying a house.

He told us: "I've found this beautiful house in Sauerstown."

Well, I heard Sauerstown, the wrong side of the tracks and thought "Oh no, not Sauerstown!"

Already a proper little snob, I was horrified.

We went to go and look at this house in Sauerstown. Daddy told us it was a big red brick house, a description from which I had taken at least small comfort.

When we got there it was just about the ugliest house on the street. It was a reasonable size - five bedrooms, a bathroom, separate toilet, lounge, dining room, kitchen, with a big garden whose main feature was a mature peach tree.

When I had finished inspecting it, I went around the side of the house and cried my eyes out. All I could think was, this is such an ugly house, how am I going to bring my friends to this!

But in any case, I had no say in the matter. When we moved into the house, I made friends with the neighbours across the road, the Smiths, and the neighbours next door, the Browns, and the neighbours around the corner, the Jones's.

We used to take turns at pushing Michael around in the pram. I quickly redeemed the situation by taking as my boyfriends both Derek Brown and Leslie Jones. And I met the little girl who was to become my best friend, Lynn, who would probably prefer to remain unidentified.

The Smiths put in a swimming pool, so we used to go and swim there.

Dot had also grown up quite a lot and had a little boyfriend by the name of Duncan. Duncan bought Dot a silver ring which Dot wore on her finger. But one day she had a fight with Duncan and decided to throw it in the driveway.

This, I do believe, marked the beginning of my enduring collection of rings.

I said "For goodness sake, Dot, don't waste the ring!"

I picked it up and put it on my finger.

"Oh, you can have it," she snapped. And so I gained a ring, and Duncan never got his ring back. I very quickly had my name engraved on the back of the ring, so it could never be reclaimed by either Dot or Duncan.

However, one day we went swimming at the Smiths and when I came home the ring had gone missing.

I was in South Africa more than twenty years later and I got a call from a man by the name of Barry Smith. He said that his mother and father had sold the house and the new owners were busy renovating the pool and digging up the garden around it and they found this silver ring. They had it cleaned up and were able to read the engraving bearing the name 'Hazel'.

"You were the only Hazel that was ever in the street and the only Hazel that we ever knew, and we were wondering if it was your ring."

It was, without a doubt, the very ring I'd lost all those years before. It has now been passed on to Dot's daughter.

*

WHEN I WAS 15, WE USED TO GO AND RAID ALL THE FRUIT TREES around us, Lynn and Colin and all the kids in the street. They were all in my gang, The Bikers.

My dad had bought me a bicycle and because I got so many punctures he replaced the inner tube with lengths of hose pipe. I was the only kid who rode a bike with hose pipe in the tyres and consequently was able to outperform all the other kids, especially when it came to races through the thorny scrub.

Every day after school Lynn would come to my house for lunch, or I would go to hers. We'd have baked beans on toast, or egg and chips, or toasted cheese. This day we came

back to my house, went to look for the baked beans and there were none. That meant we'd have to cook eggs and chips, which I didn't feel like having to do. I looked out the window and saw this big garden full of lovely ripe corn cobs, which belonged to the next-door neighbours.

I suggested that we climb the fence and steal some mealies, and we were in the middle of doing just that when we felt two big hands on both of our shoulders. It was Mr Neighbour.

"You can't jump over the fence and steal our mealies!" he screamed into our faces. I felt the urge to kick him in the groin, but thought the better of it and so resorted to copying Lynn, who was sobbing like a baby. We cried and performed and eventually he sent us packing home.

That evening, Lynn and I cycled into our driveway and parked there was this big police car. The policeman said he wanted to see both of us. My dad was standing behind the policeman and he said "That's it, now you're going to jail."

I said "What for?" with all the bemused innocence I could muster.

"For stealing the mealies next door."

So I had my first encounter with the police. We successfully revisited our earlier tactics and cried our eyes out. They gave us a warning that if it ever happened again, we would be in big trouble.

The second escapade with Lynn was when I begged and pleaded with my father to let me stay out overnight with her. I was 16 years old and my best friend lived across the road. Eventually daddy capitulated and said okay, as long as I was just staying there for the night and was not planning on going out.

Of course, Lynn and I had decided that we were going out to the first disco of our lives. The club was called the 'Devil's Funnybone'. Lynn hid two dresses, make up and a mirror in the garage, and we told her mother that we were going to the shops to have Cokes and would be home later. Lynn promised me that her mother would go to sleep at nine o'clock and wouldn't even hear us coming in.

So off we went to the garage and we got dressed and sneaked up the road. We walked for about half a mile, up to the main road, and we hitchhiked on the main road. We got a lift very quickly, all the way into town. We were dropped off on the corner of 14th Avenue and Lobengula Street, which wasn't a very good area of Bulawayo in those days, and we found this discotheque called the Devil's Funnybone. We met a load of our school friends outside and told the doorman that we were 18 and managed to get in.

That was the first night I fell in love to The Carpenters' song 'There's a kind of hush (all over the world)' - there have been many since - and I danced with a guy by the name of Fergus. I thought he was just divine and such a wonderful dancer.

All of a sudden at one o'clock, Cinderella was tapped on the shoulder... it was Lynn, her eyes wide and her lip quivering.

"We've got to get home, now!"

"How do we get home?" I asked, turning to Fergus like the lost little lamb which I most certainly was not. But Prince Charming couldn't help because he was on a motorbike and couldn't take two of us home on it.

So we found a little guy by the name of Adrian who became a very good friend later on. Adrian had a little blue Mini Austin and he promised to give us a lift all the way to Sauerstown, which was quite a bit out of town, but there was one small catch... he wanted a blow job from both of us...

Well, calling it a blow job might give the wrong impression. He had a blockage in his carburettor and in order to keep the engine running we had to get out and blow in his petrol tank. So every 500 metres up the road Lynn and I had to take turns at jumping out of the car and blowing in the petrol tank, until we got home at about two o'clock in the morning.

But Adrian wouldn't take us all the way home when he realised who my father was - everyone had heard of the Karate instructor Archibald Magee. So he dropped us at the top of the road. Lynn and I walked from the top of the road, high on excitement and hormones and petrol fumes, laughing till we wet ourselves, hugging each other, me telling Lynn, "Ooh, I love that Fergus", and Lynn telling me "Ahh, I love that Jock", who was Fergus' best friend.

When we got to the crest of the hill and looked down on our houses, the laughter died on the air and our faces fell.

"Oh shit," I gasped, "My house is lit up like Blackpool!"

And we looked at her house and I said "Oh double shit, your house is lit up like Blackpool!"

We sat down in the middle of the road in shock.

"Let's go," I said, ever the realist. "Let's run away."

"No, no," said Lynn, ever the optimist, "They must have just left the light on - they can't be awake at this time of night..."

So as we walked up the path, Lynn's little sister Anne put her head out of the burglar bars and said "Ooh, you two are dead, you two are dead!"

"Mr Magee's gone to town to look for you, and my mom went with him because she went to Mr Magee's house... my mom thinks you're dead, she thinks you've been kidnapped."

As usual, my first instincts had been absolutely correct.

"I told you we should have run away!"

"No, no," said Lynn, "Let's get into bed and we'll tell them we were here all along."

I had never heard anything so hair-brained before, but I was tired and the rather unpleasant after-effects of inhaling petroleum gas had begun to set in, so I agreed. We slipped out of our dresses and hopped into bed beside Anne, neglecting to remove our make-up.

We lay there in the dark, listening to our own heartbeats and ragged breath.

Suddenly we heard the cars coming in. Moments later the door was flung open, the lights went on, and there in the doorway stood Lynn's mum, her hair wild and her face streaked with tears. Altogether more terrifying a sight was the hulking form of my father behind her, quivering with rage... and behind him my only hope of salvation, my mother, trying to hold him back.

"Now Archie," she was imploring, "Take it easy!"

The next thing Lynn was dragged out of bed by her mum, knocked straight into the cupboard, the blood pouring from her nose, and I was grabbed by the ear, hauled off the side of the bed, lifted literally off my feet by daddy in a blind rage.

I got knocked around the head and the backside. I was beaten right down the passage. My mum came bouncing down the corridor like a little beach ball, clinging to daddy's shirt, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Archie! Now Archie, you're a Karate man, you're going to kill her, she's only a little girl!"

"Aye, I'll kill her all right," snarled my dad, which was not a very encouraging sign.

I said to myself, "Hazel if you don't do something quick daddy's going to kill me," so I put my hand to my head and went "Ooooh-aaah" and I swooned.

I stood up again and I repeated the process, but this time I stayed down on the floor, my eyes closed. And my mom said to my dad, see, you've killed her, you've killed our wee daughter!"

Daddy got such a fright. He picks me up in his arms and goes, "Are you all right love?". And I'm going, "Aah, ooh!"

So he carried me home and laid me gently in bed while my mom continued to panic, saying he'd killed me and that she was going to call an ambulance and the peelers (police) and the fire brigade. I opened my eyes and winked at my mom without my dad seeing, so she calmed down a bit.

Lynn was also knocked senseless by her mother, and we were both told we weren't allowed to see one another. But we used to send secret notes to each other, using Anne and Dot as our couriers.

After about two weeks of this, we arranged to meet at the top of the road on our bikes to ride to school. Lynn had come to her senses and finally agreed to my original suggestion: we would run away. It was unanimous - we'd had enough of these parents, they were not good enough for us, we would punish them by going far away and starting a new and better life.

We vowed to meet at the same spot the following morning.

Neither of us changed our minds overnight. We rendezvoused at 7.00 am sharp and counted out our savings, which amounted to two pounds, five shillings each - about five pounds altogether.

I had packed everything in my little school suitcase, and left one dress hanging in the wardrobe - as if they wouldn't notice - and Lynn had done the same. We padlocked our bikes outside a little hotel on the way to school, ran inside, changed into dresses in the toilets, hid our uniforms under a bush outside the hotel, jumped on a bus and got to the railway station.

But we didn't have enough money for return tickets to Salisbury - we had decided that we were going to go and live in the big city: Bulawayo was too small for us girls.

Anyway, we ended up buying two single tickets and had enough left over to get pies, chips and Cokes from the railway cafeteria. We jumped on the train and got as far as Gwelo (about half way) and only then did we admit our mutual misgivings.

We jumped off the train in Gwelo, but as the train pulled out we realised that Lynn had left her suitcase in our compartment... Now we had no option - we would have to hitch hike to Salisbury to retrieve it.

We stood on the main road for just a couple of minutes before a car stopped. Inside were two soldiers in uniform. Without a thought, we climbed into the back of their car, two dilly teenagers with absolutely no notion of personal safety.

The troops began asking questions:

"How old are you?"

"Twenty." Neither of us looked a day older than 14 - we were both pretty slow developers.

"Where are you from?"

"Bulawayo."

"Where are you going?"

“Salisbury.”

“What for?”

“To find jobs.”

“Okay,” said the driver, “This is the way to Salisbury, we’ll take you.”

A few miles down the road, he pulled off the main road and turned down a dirt track.

“What are you doing,” I asked suspiciously, only now beginning to consider the wisdom of the utter trust we had placed in two strange men, simply by virtue of their uniforms.

“We just have to check out this road - it’s part of our job,” he said easily.

He took another turn off the dirt track, down another track, and then another, and another. I was beginning to get nervous when we came back out onto the main road, and turned onto it. The guy in the passenger seat in the front kept us talking for the next two hours. He asked us our names, and we were stupid enough to tell him.

The next thing I knew we were approaching the city and I was looking at it and thinking, this is very familiar - Salisbury is a lot like Bulawayo, those old pioneers didn’t have much of an imagination.... when suddenly I realised that the reason it was so much like Bulawayo was that... it WAS Bulawayo.

They drive us directly to Central Police Station, and the police called our mothers.

Once again we got the living daylight’s thumped out of us. My dad did pause before dragging me out of the charge office to say thanks to the two soldiers. One of them winked at me and I pulled a tongue back. Thinking about it years later, I realised that I should have been thanking him.

This time we were separated, grounded, beaten and given extra chores. Worst of all, my pocket money was suspended indefinitely.

Lynn’s family moved to Riverside, away on the other side of town. This made it far more difficult for Lynn and I to see each other, but we kept in touch by telephone and even risked the wrath of our parents by sneaking out a couple more times to meet at the Devil’s Funny Bone...

*

IN THE MEANTIME I’D MET ANTHONY CRANE WHEN I WAS 14. He was the sixteen-year old son of a preacher man, the Anglican Reverend Crane. The Cranes were not well off at all and in fact struggled to make ends meet. They lived in Railton, considered “the wrong side of the tracks”. Anthony would later tell me how he had walked to school carrying his shoes, only putting them on once he arrived at the school gates, in order not to wear them out too quickly.

My dad brought Anthony into the Dojo and, knowing his parents’ situation, did not charge him for lessons. The first time Ant stepped up to the mat, my dad told him to try and throw me. He grinned at my dad as if he thought it was a joke, but his face fell when he caught my eye: I was staring grimly up at him. I moved in and he tried to take a step back, but I caught him before he could go anywhere, lifted him neatly off his feet and deposited him unceremoniously on his backside. When he stood up and dusted himself off, I knew we had a future together - he was still smiling, and there was not a trace of embarrassment or resentment in his sparkling eyes.

After that we became very close friends. He had a girlfriend and I had numerous little boyfriends, but that didn’t stop us from quickly gravitating into each other’s arms.

I began to see Anthony on and off, along with all the other little boys, one of whom was my first love, Fergus. I was not, however, allowed to bring any boys to the house.

*

I HAD JUST FINISHED MY EXAMS, AND DECIDED THAT I DIDN'T want to stay on at school. I told my dad, expecting to be frog-marched back to class but he just stroked his chin, thought about it for a moment and then said it would be okay if I promised to train as a nurse.

I agreed, and proceeded to apply for a job as an air hostess with Rhodesian Airways. But I was informed I couldn't do it because I was too short. They offered me a position as a ground hostess, but I didn't want to do that.

I applied to the police, but was told the same thing - I was too small. So I had to do what I'd promised my dad in the first place. I applied for nursing training, and was accepted. I had to move out of home and go and live in the nurses' residence, which suited me just fine as it was closer to Lynn's house.

I was 17. I made another boyfriend, by the name of John, who had actually come to the residence to look for his girlfriend. He walked in and said "Hi, is Sue around?"

I said she had gone off with a doctor's son, also by the name of John. I could see how upset he had become at this news, so I said brightly, "But I'm here!". He had to smile.

"Okay then, let's go to town for some coffee."

So I began to date John, who was at university studying optometry. Every time he had holidays, and on many weekends in-between, he would drive down in his canary yellow Austin Mini, and we had an exclusive relationship... at least while he was in town.

*

WHEN I WENT TO PTS I HAD A ROOM ON THE FIRST FLOOR. Although its windows were fitted with burglar bars, I was unfazed because my parents' house also had burglar bars which I had learned to remove by taking the screws out from the inside. From the age of 15 I would put a doll in the bed, shove a couple of pillows under the duvet and leave via the window, putting the wrought iron burglar bars in place behind me. When my dad put his head round the door, he would think I was fast asleep. Meanwhile, I was out on the town.

So at the nurses' residence, I simply reverted to all my old tricks. By the very first night, I had my burglar bars off and quickly established a lucrative little business - levying a toll on all the other nurses who wanted to sneak out in the middle of the night to meet up with their boyfriends. We'd clamber out the window, hop onto the balcony, climb down the trellis and rendezvous with all our men friends at the top of the road. Then we'd jump into their cars and go to the Devil's Funnybone or the La Boheme night club, and we'd come home at two or three, fit the burglar bars back on and go into work at seven o'clock in the morning.

Of course, I wouldn't let the girls go out my window until they paid me. One night Annie Fletch knocked at my bedroom door.

"Hi Hazel," she said sweetly.

"Hullo," I responded somewhat suspiciously. Annie was usually downright obnoxious.

"I need to go out."

"I see. Well, you know the deal."

"I don't have any money," she said and began to walk towards the window.

I stepped in her path.

"Uh-uh," I shook my head and extended my hand. "Cash first."

"I don't have any money. I'll owe you."

"Sorry," I said. "I don't do credit. And anyway, there are too many sisters around tonight. If you get caught you'll get us all into trouble."

"I won't get caught. You have to let me go," she was beginning to lose her temper. I sensed a brawl coming on and, while perfectly capable of defending myself, I had a big date the following night and didn't fancy sporting a black eye.

"Sorry, love, but you have to go now." With that I shoved her out of the room and locked my door before she knew what was happening.

"You bitch," she screamed before stomping away down the corridor.

While I went back to preparing my face pack, Annie went up to the second floor - where there were no burglar bars - climbed out of a bathroom window and onto the drainpipe. Half way down, the drainpipe broke and Annie fell to the ground, snapping her leg in two.

My chips were up. Before being expelled, Annie told the matron all about my little business. Of course, I denied it flatly, knowing there was no actual proof. They couldn't touch me. But they could touch my burglar bars, and they did. In fact, they welded them. But it wasn't the end of the world because we only had a month to go before we were to move to the main nurses' home. At any rate, I discovered that I was so skinny I could fit between the burglar bars if I went at it at the right angle... so I was still okay.

When we became fully fledged State Registered Nurses, we worked different shifts - from seven in the morning 'til one in the afternoon, or from one until seven at night.

If you got a pass you had to be in by ten at night, or by half past eleven if you had a late pass. Because most of the girls were skint, and I always had some little money making venture on the go, I was often able to buy their late passes, thus ensuring that I had the most active social life.

If I wasn't meeting John, then I was meeting Anthony Crane, who I had been dating on and off since I was 14. It was sometimes difficult because we were on opposite ends of the town and he didn't have transport.

In my second year I decided I wanted the independence of my own apartment. When I told my father I was moving out of the nurses home, he completely disowned me for six months. He assumed that I would become wild and start bringing boys home, and he wouldn't be around to put the fear of God into them.

He was quite right. Did I have fun in the apartment! That's where I finally lost my virginity. I had decided to go the whole way and try it - but it wasn't actually in the flat itself. It was on the balcony.

I was already 19 when I had my first sexual experience. It happened when I accompanied Anthony to a party at a farmhouse outside town. I wore a silver lame dress with a hood at the back, but the struggle to get the bloody thing off was a pain in the bum - the passion was hot but the dress didn't want to come off.

Anyway, the first experience was a bad one - it was all this big to-do about nothing - it was over in a few seconds, I thought what happened? Anthony was evidently also a virgin.

But I decided to go back for seconds. I had no bust - I wore a size 28AA - I was painfully thin, and I was a very late developer. But by God did I make up for it!

My first time on that balcony suspended over the quiet midnight streets of little Bulawayo was with the man I would ultimately marry, Anthony Crane.

It was wonderful, so wonderful in fact that I was insatiable. Poor Anthony dragged himself home at six in the morning, so exhausted it took him two days to recover.

I, on the other hand, was made of sterner stuff. The very next day I thought, wow, I have to try that with someone else to see if it's just as good. So that night I invited round a good looking young man I'd had my eye on for a while. He was a Greek god by the name of Daryl, and he had a lovely bum. One night of passion was enough though. It was super, but didn't compare to Anthony, so I had my answer.

Shortly after our mutual sexual initiation, Anthony asked me out to dinner, saying he had some important news. We had finished our starters and were waiting for the main course when he told me he was moving to Chiredzi, hundreds of miles away, to take up a job as a turbine engineer on Anglo American's Hippo Valley Estates.

"Will you marry me, Hazel Magee?"

I didn't hesitate. I had grown to love Anthony first as a boy, then a man, then a lover. He had a beautiful face and a beautiful nature to go with it. And he adored me. There was no other answer.

"Let me think about it," I said. Even in the face of such obvious rewards, it went against the grain to appear too eager.

Daddy still wasn't speaking to me, because he knew I was up to mischief in my new apartment, so I had to be creative if I wanted him to pay for the wedding, which of course I did. There was no way we could afford the lavish wedding I had always dreamed of - Anthony hadn't started his new job yet, and I earned barely enough to pay my rent and cover the essential costs of adding the latest fashions to my wardrobe.

So I phoned my father at work.

"Daddy," I simpered, "You were right, I can't afford the rent, I should never have moved into an apartment in the first place... Please can I come home, please, please, daddy..."

And he immediately softened and said: "Don't worry my sweetheart, I'll come and pay the rent and fetch your stuff and I'll bring you home."

And so I went home. My mom had gone overseas to Northern Ireland to visit her family and show off little Michael. Their homecoming, I knew, would be the perfect opportunity to announce the engagement. I arranged a big welcome home party, inviting all daddy's friends. I knew that when I pushed Anthony up to deliver the news, my dad would feel obligated to grin and bear it because he wouldn't want to embarrass any of his pals.

So the big night arrived - August the 1st - mam and Michael made their entrance, the drink began flowing and music filled the air. Midway through the celebration I prodded Anthony and he got up to say his piece.

Daddy was not as surprised as I'd thought he would be. He had always liked Anthony, who he saw as a modest, well-mannered and industrious young man. Of course, Anthony was all these things, as well as being a highly satisfying lover, a credential my father had no reason to be aware of.

Many hugs and handshakes later, I sidled up to daddy and put my head on his shoulder.

"Daddy..."

"Yes, my love?"

"I love you so much."

My dad hugged me 'til I was sure my ribs would snap, but the moment had achieved its desired effect: we had the attention of all his friends.

"Daddy?"

"What is it my sweetheart?"

"You know how we want to get married next year?"

"Yes..."

"Well... what kind of wedding do you see me having?"

"What kind?"

"Well, do you think you could afford a nice wedding?"

Daddy turned purple and glanced nervously around. Everyone was listening.

"Of course I can!" he blurted recklessly. "It'll be the biggest, best wedding this town has ever seen."

For a moment I considered getting him to put that statement in writing, but thought the better of it. Anyway, I already knew enough to know that a verbal contract was binding.

We originally planned to get married on my twentieth birthday, which was April the 24th. But I changed my mind when I realised that I'd lose out on presents because, naturally, people would opt for only getting us wedding presents.

So we were married on May Day, the 1st of May, 1970.

It was, true to daddy's word, a huge wedding of 450 guests, five bridesmaids, two pageboys and a flower girl. I really had the most wonderful wedding, in St John's Cathedral.

Anthony's father, an Anglican preacher, performed the ceremony jointly with the Dean of Bulawayo, the Very Reverend C.A. Shaw. I had wanted to be married in the Catholic church, as this was my father's faith, but when we went to see the priest, Father Odilo, he said he would marry us with pleasure but Ant would have to sign a document promising to raise any children we had as Catholics.

Anthony dug his heels in, so I settled on an Anglican wedding - the compromise being that I would raise our children any way I saw fit, in the faith of my own choosing.

Anthony's brother Geoffrey was best man. I was attended by my sisters, Karen and Dorothy, as well as by Jennifer Crane and Anne Gowland. They wore the rainbow colours of lemon, lilac, blue and pink and my flower girl, Patricia Dunn, wore light green. My pages were my little brother Michael and Karen's eldest son David. They wore navy blue and carried a purple ring cushion fringed in gold.

My gown was in Victorian style, combining chiffon, lace and satin, was trimmed with drop pearls and daisies and had a long scalloped train.

When we left for our honeymoon in Durban, I wore a blue and white outfit and snakeskin accessories.

By the time we returned home, I had already settled into the idea that I was now a wife and that suburban bliss and motherhood would follow. I closed the door on my wild and wicked past.

Ant started his job as a turbine engineer at Hippo Valley estates, and we moved to Chiredzi.

I stopped nursing and took a job at Standard Bank in Chiredzi. I loved it.

At work one day I was drinking coffee but it tasted disgusting and made me feel nauseous. I poured it down the sink and made a mental note to mention it to the kitchen staff.

I returned to my station behind the client services counter just as a man came in.

He took one look at me and said: "Tell me, when is your baby due?"

I said: "I'm not having a baby."

"You are having a baby, I can see it."

I dismissed it and didn't give it another thought. But a couple of days later I was feeling ill again and made an appointment to see the doctor.

He carried out a few tests and told me to come back the next day and when I did - lo and behold, I was pregnant.

I sat down and cried my eyes out like a baby and said I didn't want it because we'd only planned to have a baby in two years. I detested it when things didn't go according to my plans.

But when I realised there was nothing to be done about it, I accepted it and even grew to enjoy the idea.

I had everything, my own house, my own car, we had a wonderful social life going out to dinner dances with friends, I played tennis, squash and basketball, went horse-riding... I had servants to cook and clean for me and a doting husband who worshipped the ground I walked on. In short, I was a spoiled little bitch.

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THE WAR IN RHODESIA HAD BEEN ON THE BOIL SINCE IAN Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain on November 11, 1965. By 1972 it had gathered momentum with the mass mobilisation and training of African Nationalist guerrilla fighters by the Russians and Chinese.

There were two main factions: ZANLA, headed up by the young firebrand Robert Mugabe; and ZIPRA, led by Joshua Nkomo. While they were both fighting for the same cause - self-determination by the black majority - they represented two very different tribes that had been traditionally hostile for generations. Mugabe derived his support from the Shona people who mostly inhabited the north of the country, Mashonaland; while Nkomo was of Matabele stock, the descendants of the Zulu, who hailed from the southern half of the country, Matabeleland.

The 'terrorists', as they were referred to by white Rhodesians, were increasingly scoring successes with their hit-and-run acts of sabotage, mainly in the countryside. The frustrated Rhodesian military responded by pouring troops into the remote rural areas affected, and the war took on all the characteristics of the Vietnam conflict. But resources were spread thin, and increasing numbers of men were called up to support the 'war effort'.

Anthony received his call-up papers in 1972 and acceded without question to what he saw as his national duty.

The baby was due on November the 18th of that year. Anthony was scheduled for another six-week stint in the bush from the middle of October to the end of November, so the chances were that he would miss our first child's arrival. We decided it would be best if I went to Bulawayo to spend the last few weeks of my pregnancy with my parents.

As it was unsafe to travel by road I would fly to Bulawayo while Anthony drove the car up for me before setting off for his camp.

On the 18th of November I started having pains and I was convinced I was having the baby. I told my mother and we rushed into hospital but it turned out to be a false alarm.

Four days later we went through the whole rigmarole again, but once more the baby changed its mind.

On the 24th I woke up with the most terrible cramps. My dad had gone fishing, my mother couldn't drive and I was in no fit state to get behind the wheel of a car.

"Stay here," she commanded, "I'm going to get help."

She returned with the next-door neighbour, Derek Brown, who had been one of my childhood boyfriends. We used to play together and I used to hold his hand.

Anyway, Derek drove while mam held my hand and off we went to hospital, a private, Catholic institution called the Mater Dei, the Mother of God.

I was perspiring and moaning with the agony of these terrible cramps, convinced that this time the little blighter was going to make an appearance.

One of the sisters says to me: "Come through, Mrs Crane, let's put you on the bed. I have to give you an examination."

So she does the exam and says to me, "You are two dilate - you're going on for three dilate, this baby's going to be born today."

I groan: "Get my husband, get my husband!"

She says: "No, no, first we're going to prepare you, then we'll get your husband."

So they shave me. I've got my legs up in stirrups, and the next thing the sister brings in all the equipment to perform an enema.

"What are you doing?" I squeal.

"Come now, Mrs Crane," says the sister sternly. "Your mother tells me you were a nurse, so you should be perfectly aware of what I'm doing."

"But I don't want an enema, take it away, take it away!"

She ignores me. And she's just about to insert the tube up my bum when the curtains are pulled back and in walks Derek with my suitcase.

He stood wide eyed for a moment, his jaw literally dropped, quickly followed by the suitcase.

I nearly fainted. I groaned: "That's not my husband, that's NOT my husband!"

But the nurse behind him hasn't heard. She's trying to push him into the room and he's trying to back out of the room, and I'm trying to get my feet out of the stirrups at the same time as puffing and panting with the pain of the contractions.

When Derek finally managed to turn and bolt, the sister got started with the enema.

"Now," she says, "You can hop off the table."

"You're joking."

"I am not. Just keep your legs crossed and jump off the table."

Well, let me tell you, when I jumped off that table, I skidded to the toilet, leaving a trail of soapy water behind me.

I was yelling: "This baby's coming, it's coming now!"

When I got to the toilet I was sitting there shouting to my mother: "Mam, get here, this baby's coming in the TOILET!"

And she's going, "Stop worrying love!"

And I'm going: "You don't understand, it's falling in the toilet!"

But just as suddenly as it had come on, everything stopped. Nothing happened. The next day they sent me home.

On the 28th of November Anthony had just come home when the contractions started up again.

I said: "I think this is definitely it." But I hung on all night in labour, not particularly eager to go through the whole ordeal again for nothing. When morning came and the contractions were coming closer together, Anthony rushed me back up to the Mater Dei. They called in a gynaecologist, Bernie, who said the baby was in stress because of the night's contractions.

"We'll have to do an emergency Caesarean."

So they wheeled me downstairs to theatre, but before I went in, between huffs and puffs I said to my husband: "I know that this is my daughter, but if it's a boy, which I know it's not, I want yellow roses, and if it's a girl I want red roses, do you understand me?"

He said: "Yes Hazel, I understand you."

In those days when you went in for a caesarean they gave you a full anaesthetic, so it was about two hours later before I began to come around. I put my hands on my stomach and I murmured: "Ooh, bliss there's nothing there, wonderful!"

In my state of semi-consciousness, I opened one eye and saw the red roses, so I knew that I had a girl. But Anthony was shaking my arm and saying to me: Hazel, wake up, we have a problem, wake up!"

I said: "What's the problem, there's no problem, oooh, mmm, thirsty..."

"Hazel wake up!"

"What is the matter, Anthony my darling?" I heard myself saying, but I hadn't said a word. I had drifted back into the deliciously woozy state that I had no intention of abandoning just yet.

"Hazel, wake up - our baby's black!"

Well, I immediately sat straight up in bed and blurted: "I'm sorry, I'm Irish!" and then fell back again.

I came back about ten minutes later and said: "What did you say?"

"Our baby is black."

"No, no, you've made a mistake, they've given us the wrong baby." I was giggling now.

"Please Hazel, wake up."

I managed to sit up and focus on Anthony. His eyes were wide with anguish. Suddenly I was afraid.

"Our baby is in trouble."

I had a tiny, one pound fourteen ounce little girl who was in serious trouble: what had happened was that the placenta was deformed and hadn't been feeding the baby, so she was tiny enough to fit into a cupped hand. They hadn't expected such a small baby in the theatre, so when they pulled her out they didn't have the requisite equipment. She didn't breathe for eleven minutes and had turned a dark navy blue colour.

As the medical staff didn't have an incubator ready, they wrapped her in a blanket and when they burst out of the theatre, all they had time to say to Anthony was: "Get a priest, your baby is in serious trouble."

And all Anthony saw of the baby as they hurried her away was this mass of black hair stuck to her head, and this little blue face which he thought was black.

When they wheeled me back to theatre they had already started giving the baby oxygen. There was a drip in her head and one in her toe and a tube in her nose. The doctor said if she made it through the first twenty four hours she would stand a reasonable chance of survival. Her lungs were not fully developed, he explained.

One of the sisters asked for her name so she could pray for her. The name we had picked if it was a girl was Denya-Louise, but when I looked through the little porthole of the

paediatric intensive care unit at my tiny baby I whispered to Anthony: "I want to call her Hayley." It just seemed to fit such a fragile little thing.

There were four babies in the ICU that night: twin boys who were actually bigger than Hayley, both of whom died before dawn; there was also another little girl - her name was Michelle - and she was slightly bigger than Hayley. She made it.

They say in life that females actually have the stronger survival instinct. My little girl and I are testament to that fact.

My mam was standing with her hand on my shoulder as Anthony and I gazed through the glass at Hayley.

"Hazel love," she said quietly, "What's her middle name going to be?"

I hadn't thought about it. For a moment I considered Mary, my mother's name. But then 'Hayley Mary' would have sounded too much like a parody of the Catholic prayer.

So I decided on Hayley Lynn, after my best friend, who was also to become Hayley's godmother. As a compromise, I finished it off with Marie, a variation on Mary.

So Hayley Lynn Marie Crane was born on the 29th of November 1972. She remained in hospital for nine weeks, until she weighed five pounds.

The day I brought my first child home, my husband had been called up for another six weeks. Doug, a very good friend, drove me to the Mater Dei to fetch Hayley and bring her home. When Anthony's superiors heard about it, he was discharged early from his stint and so for the first time we were able to enjoy our baby at home together.

We travelled back to Chiredzi. I had this baby that was so chronologically aware it was frightening. The nuns had given her three-hourly feeds in the hospital. They had been able to take it in shifts, but I certainly didn't have the stamina to go around the clock, feeding the baby every three hours and then spending an hour to two hours winding her.

By the third night of having Hayley home, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I was exhausted. Anthony was very good, but he had to work and at any rate didn't have the equipment to feed a baby, so there was only so much he could do to help.

Anthony was fast asleep when Hayley woke me up at four o'clock. I had only just fallen into an almost comatose state. I dragged myself off the bed and lifted the baby. I placed her gently on one of the baby wraps, and I slowly wrapped her little feet and her little hands in this material envelope, and I covered her little head, lifted her up and walked over to the open window.

"One," I said softly, cradling the noisy little bundle in my arms.

"Two," I swung it a little faster.

"Three," I murmured happily, eyeing the open window.

I was just on the verge of launching my baby out of the window when I heard Anthony's soothing voice behind me.

"Hazel, give me the baby."

I said, quite calmly: "But the baby's going out the window."

Anthony just chuckled, took Hayley from my arms, placed her in the big pink Italian pram we had bought and wheeled it through to the nursery. And from that moment on, that's where she spent her nights. She soon learned a new feeding routine, but I think when she spent her first few nights getting used to the idea of crying and not being responded to, she started sucking her thumb - a habit which has survived to this day.

Despite those rocky beginnings, for the next three years I tried desperately to have another baby because I wanted to give my husband a son. It wasn't as if we weren't

putting in the effort: as they say, practise makes perfect - and we were always practising. We had lots of fun getting to know each other's bodies, sexual likes and dislikes. In short, we were at it like jackrabbits.

But it wasn't all fun. I lost three babies before I could carry full term due to the complications of Hayley's birth, two at nine weeks and one at five months. It was an emotionally disturbing time which I do not like to recall.

Then, in the fourth year, I fell pregnant with my son Anthony Junior.

When I was six weeks I started to haemorrhage and was rushed into hospital.

My doctor, Paul - who was so absolutely beautiful that for a time I wanted to name my son after him - said to me: "Hazel I think we should do a D&C."

I said: "Over my dead body this time are we going to do a D&C, because I want this baby. If this baby is going to come away it'll come away naturally."

"But Hazel, you could die."

"I don't care, I'm keeping this baby."

I stayed in the hospital for three weeks. I was out for six months, and then had to be readmitted for yet another three weeks after the haemorrhaging began again.

Anthony was due for another six weeks in the 'sticks' and so, once again, we decided it was best that I go to my parents in Bulawayo because I was into the last three months of my pregnancy.

I was getting injections because my placenta was deformed, and the gynaecologist in Bulawayo was following very closely the progress of this pregnancy. I also had a paediatrician on standby so that when little Anthony was born there would be specialists at the ready - we weren't going to have the same drama that we had with Hayley's arrival. I was seven months pregnant when Anthony began packing his army duffel bag again.

It was the second week of July when we got to Bulawayo. Almost immediately, I had an altercation with Anthony's mother. She was annoyed that I didn't want to stay with them. Of course, being a woman, I was more comfortable staying with my own mother. Ant's mother had said it was obvious that I didn't like spending any time in her home, and of course she was right. Although they were my in-laws, they were still like strangers to me. When I wanted to get something out of the fridge, it was rather difficult for me because I was quite shy - and her stern manner didn't help matters.

Because of the row, Anthony wasn't talking to his parents. But the night before he was due to depart for camp, I had a bad feeling. It was nothing I could put my finger on, but something just didn't feel right. I knew instinctively that it would not be right for Anthony to leave town without saying goodbye to his parents.

"Listen my darling," I said to him, "Take your daughter and go and see your mom and dad." His first reaction was to refuse, but in the end, as usual, I did persuade him. He took Hayley to visit them for a couple of hours. I am so grateful that he went that day.

That night we went to bed at about ten o'clock. I held Anthony close and slept fitfully.

When I woke up just before dawn, Ant was dressing quietly in the dark. I sat up.

"What are you doing?"

"Go back to sleep my love," he whispered. "I'll wake you just before I go, to say goodbye."

"No!" I shot back, throwing aside the covers. Hayley, who had slept with us, rolled over and moaned something in her sleep.

Anthony had said to me the night before that he didn't want me to travel with him to Gwelo, because there was always a possibility of an ambush. Henry, Karen's husband, was to pick him up and deliver him to the camp, which was at 10th Battalion in Gwelo, about two hours' drive away. But I insisted on going. Every fibre in my body was telling me that I needed to make this journey with my husband.

We kissed a sleepy-eyed Hayley goodbye, leaving her with my mum and dad. Karen had also persuaded Henry to let her come on the trip, so we all piled into Henry's car and made for Gwelo. Anthony sat up front with Henry, his FN rifle at the ready, while Karen and I sat in the back, also armed with primed weapons, all of us keenly aware of the dangers of travelling by road through potentially hostile country.

When we arrived in Gwelo, Henry parked outside the gates to 10th Batt. I embraced Anthony and he kissed me tenderly on the lips. He winked reassuringly at me, patted my belly and, without another word, strode off through the gates. I watched him walk away until he was out of sight, the growing sense of unease I had been experiencing for some days now threatening to overcome me.

I turned to my brother in law

"Henry, I want you to drive around the block a few times, okay?"

He flicked away his cigarette, looked knowingly at me and nodded his head.

On the third circuit, we saw Anthony's 'stick' loading up one of the big Crocodile anti-land mine personnel carriers. I caught a glimpse of Anthony, but he didn't see me.

"Okay," I said quietly, "Now we can go."

Just outside Gwelo, Henry stopped the car at a service station to refuel. Karen and I went into the little shop to buy some Cokes. When we walked out, the truck we had seen Anthony loading pulled into the station. Anthony was one of the first to hop out of the back, and he had a wide grin on his face as he ran over and hugged me goodbye one last time.

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AT THE TIME, THERE WAS A VERY POPULAR RADIO PROGRAMME called the 'Force's Request Show'. Troops in the bush could send in requests and messages for their loved ones, and their wives and relatives could do the same in return.

Every week without fail I would listen in, in the hope that I'd hear something from Anthony - the only other form of communication during the six-week stints was the post that was delivered on Tuesdays - Ant would send two letters to me every week, knowing that I would open one immediately, and then save the second as a treat for the weekend.

A week after Anthony said farewell to me in Gwelo, I whooped with delight when the presenter of the radio show read out a message from him.

"Lance Corporal Anthony Crane of 10RR Light Infantry sends his love and kisses to his wife Hazel, four-year old daughter Hayley and his unborn child... and asks that we play for them a song he heard for the first time on radio this week - it's a new one from old favourite Roger Whittaker, and it's called The Last Farewell."

I wept as I listened to the achingly beautiful song. The emotions that ran through me as the last note died on the air were too intense to be simply those of a young wife missing her man. There was so much more to it. It was too dreadful to dwell on. I dried my eyes, turned off the radio and forced it out of my mind.

Hayley and I were staying with Karen and Henry. On 17th August 1976, an insurance broker friend of mine, Trevor, phoned me up at about 8:00 o'clock in the morning. He sounded distressed.

"Hazel, I've just fired my secretary. I need your help... I've got some urgent letters to get out, I need you to come in and type them up for me. Can you come in at about nine?"

I said: "No problem, but I can't get in that early. I've got to wait for the post - I'm expecting my letters from Ant, and the postman only gets here at about five past ten."

"Okay, thanks Haze - just come in as soon as you can."

I waited for the post which arrived at 10:15, and I got the two letters from my husband. I rushed into the Trevor's office, getting there at about a quarter to eleven.

I sat down and typed up all the letters, put them in envelopes and at about ten to twelve the phone rang just as Trevor, who had been down the corridor to the main reception, walked back into the front office. I answered it and put it on hold, waving Trevor to a halt before he could disappear into his office.

"Trevor, I've done all your letters and put them in envelopes."

"Oh great, give me the bunch."

I handed them to him and he turned and went back the way he had come, taking the letters to the main reception so they could be posted.

I returned to the caller I had put on hold.

"Hullo, sorry to keep you holding."

"Hazel-"

Even though the voice was barely a whisper, it was evidently racked with despair and agony.

"Hullo?" I said hesitantly, not recognising the voice.

"Hazel, it's me - Mrs Crane."

She was sobbing now. My normally razor-sharp instincts were compromised by my feelings for the woman. I had still not forgiven her for some of the more hurtful things she had blurted when we'd had our row just weeks before.

"Oh. What is it?" I snapped aggressively.

"Please Hazel... I don't want to fight. Please... can you come round."

"Come round... to your house? I'm sorry, but that's not possible."

"Hazel-"

"I expect an apology because you were very rude to me the last time we spoke."

"Please Hazel," she pleaded, "We need to put our differences aside. Please come to the house."

I had never heard Anthony's mother in such a state, could never have imagined it possible. She had always seemed to me to be incapable of any outward displays of real human emotion.

"What's the matter?" I asked, my tone softening.

"Just please come to the house now, Hazel."

"Okay. I will."

As I replaced the receiver, Trevor came flying into the office. He was white.

"Let's go," he stammered, apparently in shock.

"Let's go where?"

"Just let's go."

"Fine," I said, gathering my things. "Let's go up to Haddons. I feel like some toasted cheese and tomato. This baby is a hungry one-"

"No, no," he cried, snatching my car keys from me. "Let's go. I'll drive."

"Trevor," I stared at him. "No-one drives my car... What's wrong with you?"

"Let's go," was all he could muster, grasping the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb in distress.

"Trevor, what's wrong?"

"I'll explain on the way, I promise," he lied.

"I can't just go off with you anyway. I have to get something to eat and then I have to go and see my mother-in-law. She was just on the phone, she sounds upset, she wants me to go to her--"

"I know, Hazel. Let's go."

"Trevor what is going on?" I was becoming impatient now.

"Please Hazel, this is important. Will you just trust me?"

"Okay, but take me for a toasted cheese and tomato first."

"I'll take you afterwards. Now let's go."

We got into the lift and I watched as Trevor became more and more agitated, jabbing the ground button until I was sure he would drive it through the steel. We got to the ground floor and crossed the road to where I'd parked my car.

"Give me the keys, Trevor."

"No, Hazel, I'm driving."

"The hell you are - you're not insured to drive my car, you know that. Give me the bloody keys."

Having been witness to my temper on one or two occasions, he wisely handed over the bunch. I got in and let him in the passenger side.

I pulled off and Trevor said: "Turn here," but I ignored him. I made for Haddon & Sly, a departmental store with a little tea room that served the most delicious toasted cheese and tomato.

"I don't want to see my mother in law."

"You have to."

Something in his voice finally penetrated. I took the next turning and doubled back.

"Hazel, who's your gynae?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Sheila's having a few problems."

"Oh... Bernie."

"Do you have his number?"

"Yes, it's in my book in my bag... I'll give it to you later."

But the words were barely out of my mouth when he had lifted my handbag off the back seat and started going through it.

"Trevor, don't go into my handbag."

"I'm looking for the book."

"Don't go in my handbag!"

But he ignored me and as I was driving there was nothing I could do about it. He finally fished my address book out and took down Bernie Sandler's telephone number.

I parked outside my in-laws' house, opened the gate and walked down the path towards the house, Trevor trailing behind me. About halfway up the path there was a chapel and as I approached it I could see the door was slightly ajar. I heard a woman sobbing from within.

Suddenly it struck me. I stopped dead in my tracks and began to back away. Trevor put his hands firmly on my shoulders.

"Do you know what... I don't want to go in there," I said softly.

"No Hazel, you have to go in."

"Don't make me."

"Look, you have to go in. Remember, you're having a baby, just look after your baby."

I turned slowly and stared at him.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked, my lip beginning to tremble. He shook his head. I turned and walked very slowly to the door of the chapel office. I looked into the dim interior.

My mother-in-law was sitting on a chair against the wall. She was as white as a ghost. An awful sob shook her whole frame.

As I walked into the small office that was attached to the chapel, a man appeared from behind the door. He had crosses on his shoulder. I took one look at him and I knew he was the army chaplain. I grabbed him firmly by the upper arms.

"Don't tell me... just tell me he's hurt, just tell me he's hurt."

"I'm sorry, Mrs Crane. Your husband was killed in action at seven o'clock this morning."

"You're a liar, you're a liar, I don't believe you!"

My mother-in-law stood up and walked stiffly towards me.

"Hazel, I'm so sorry-"

I hit her with my fist, knocking her to the floor, and as I turned and ran out of the room Trevor was standing there with his arms wide open, and he caught me and put his arms around me, so tight that I couldn't break free.

"Calm down, girlie," but I was hysterical - I was screaming incoherently, and the next thing Trevor hit me across the face and I went out for the count.

I came to about an hour later. They had carried me into the house and laid me on a couch in the living room. I remember waking up and looking at all these people who were crying and Bernie, my gynaecologist, was sitting beside me. Before I could sit up he had injected a strong tranquilliser into me.

The injection knocked me out again for about two hours. I was weeping before I even came around the second time. I opened my eyes and sat up, instantly conscious of the awful truth. Anthony's older brother Geoffrey was sitting beside me now. He wore an army uniform. His eyes were swollen from the tears he had shed. I stared at him without saying a word. He reached out and touched my hand. Then I heard the cruel words leaving my mouth.

"Why couldn't it have been you? Why did they take Anthony away? What's wrong with God?"

I remember everybody saying to me, please stay, but all I wanted to do was to go home. I didn't scream or perform any more. I went quiet. I showed no emotion. I was cold.

When I got back to Karen's house all I wanted to do was see my little girl. The rest of the time was like a haze. I don't remember much about it. Anything I tried to eat would not stay down. I was asked if I wanted a full military funeral or a semi-military funeral for Anthony. I chose the full military funeral. He deserved it.

I went to the church on the morning of 20th August. I still have the dress that I wore that day. There were things said that I regret to this day. One of these was when my father-in-law met me at the funeral house that morning. He was crying openly. He said

Anthony's mother would like to put a wreath on the coffin. I could not see beyond my own grief. I spoke without looking at him.

"No-one will put a wreath on my husband's coffin - not even the army - except me and my unborn child and my daughter."

"But Hazel, Anthony was our son..."

"He was my husband, my child's father, and this unborn child's father, you don't realise that - he was mine."

Emotions. It was emotions.

The funeral director asked me if I wanted the coffin open or closed. I asked if I could see him.

Anthony had been cut in half from the waist down. One of his hands had been blown off. He had powder marks on his face.

Anthony had always had the most gorgeous hair, jet black with a beautiful shine. He was a very good-looking man, a man that you would turn and look at in a room, very quiet, very reserved, but strikingly handsome.

I stared at the shattered reflection of my darling in the coffin.

"Why did you not wash his hair?" I murmured to the funeral director who stood behind me. "Why does it not have that shine?"

There was no answer.

"Close it," I said quietly but firmly. "Close the coffin."

One quarter of the way through the service my waters broke and I was carried out of the church. That was the last I saw of Anthony's coffin.

They rushed me to hospital and I went onto a drip.

"The baby's too small," they said to me. "We have to keep you very still."

Bernie was saying to me, "Hazel, we have to pull you through this," and I remember saying, "I'm strong, I'll do it, don't worry, this baby will live."

They let me out of the hospital a week later and I returned to my sister's home.

I don't remember much of that time because they had me heavily drugged on tranquillisers that I could take with the baby.

When Anthony was killed it felt like the bubble in which I'd been living was literally burst. It's an analogy that is somewhat overused and no-one really appreciates the sense of it any more. An all encompassing, warm, safe environment encapsulated in what appears to be an indestructible bubble. Day after day, week after week, month after month, the bubble holds, until you have been lulled into a false sense of security and ultimately forget that the bubble even exists. Until it explodes away overhead, and everything around you disintegrates under the merciless glare of reality. Everything, in one single, split second moment.

Anthony treated me like a rare and fragile porcelain doll. I was the personification of the suburban Rhodesian spoilt little bitch. Everything I ever wanted, I was handed on an ornate silver platter. I had a lovely home, a car, a beautiful little daughter, a beloved new child growing in my womb, attentive maids, a leisurely lifestyle that consisted of breakfasts in bed followed by warm baths in scented oils, shopping excursions, safari holidays... And the utter adoration of the beautiful man I loved equally in return.

When they told me he was dead, it was as though an unseen hand plunged a needle into my belly and injected into me a black poison that swiftly devoured my innards, leaving me mortally wounded and yet this fate was so unspeakably cruel that I remained alive. Alive enough to know that I was dead. I stopped thinking about my little girl, and my unborn infant, let alone myself. Nothing mattered any more.

One night just three weeks after Anthony's funeral, I said goodnight to Henry, Karen and their children. I carried Hayley, who was already sleeping, into the room with me, and I put her into the bed beside me.

I don't remember taking the pills.

My father came past my sister's house about an hour later, at ten o'clock. He wanted to go fishing in the morning and Henry had a special type of rod that my dad wanted to borrow. It was in the spare room in which I was sleeping.

He came into the room very quietly so as not to wake me or Hayley. He used the dimmer switch on the light and tiptoed over to the cupboard where the fishing rod was. But when he glanced at me he noticed that my head was at an impossible angle. My breathing wasn't natural and when he came closer to examine me he saw saliva dribbling from my mouth. When he tried to wake me he couldn't, and he realised what had happened. He shouted for Karen and Henry and moments later they were pouring saltwater into me and walking me up and down and calling for an ambulance.

I remember the lights of the ambulance. When I got to the Mater Dei I was rushed into theatre and heard them saying they couldn't give me a stomach pump because I was pregnant, and they had to get the gynae there but it was three in the morning... Then I lost consciousness again.

I awoke and Bernie was leaning over me, the lights of the theatre creating a halo around his head.

He said to me: "How can you be such a stupid girl, when I tried for seven months to keep this baby alive and for one moment of weakness you're going to lose it? Well I'm not going to let you do this Hazel - you're going to have this baby."

I closed my eyes but he was slapping me sharply across the face.

"Stay with me!"

I stayed awake until six in the morning when they took me down to the main theatre. They had decided to do the emergency caesarean. My paediatrician was there, Bernie was there, as well as four or five of the sisters of the hospital.

My son was born on the 23rd of September 1976, weighing five pounds.

When I awoke, it was in a darkened room to the sound of whispers. My father leaned over me, looked into my eyes, kissed me gently on the forehead.

"You have a little boy. A beautiful little boy," he murmured.

I didn't want to know. I turned my head away and wept inwardly. Not a tear escaped into the real world.

When they brought little Anthony to me for the first time I rolled over and stared at the wall. I would not look at him, let alone touch him. No amount of pleading on the part of the doctors, the sisters, my mother, my father, Karen - anybody - would change my mind. I wanted to shut down my senses. I wanted to feel neither love nor grief ever again. They

were inter linked. One could not exist without the other. If I closed my heart to both of them, I stood a chance of retaining what tiny shred of sanity still existed.

The news of little Anthony's birth made headlines in Rhodesia - 'War widow has baby boy'. The sole television station and the radio stations devoted long bulletins to the story. Thousands of letters of both condolence and congratulations began to pour in, penned by total strangers. One of those letters was to change my life forever.

It was from a woman named Paddy. She began her note by introducing her family.

"I have a special daughter aged eleven, a special son aged nine, a very, very special son aged five and another special son aged three. I also have a new addition to my special family waiting to meet us all when he or she is born in two months time.

"We wanted you to know that we understand what you have been going through. My husband died when the army truck in which he was travelling was involved in an accident and caught fire.

"I did not have the opportunity to tell him that I was expecting again. I know he would have been overjoyed, and do not need to explain to you how much I ache for the joy I would have seen in his eyes if I had not been so cruelly deprived.

"But I wanted to tell you that I feel so fortunate to have all these special reminders of the man I loved so dearly. All our children are truly special, but one even more so than all the others: for he is my beautiful five-year old, who was born with Downs Syndrome.

"Imagine how infinitely more tragic our circumstances would have been if we had been left on this world alone, you and I. How truly blessed we are that these precious parts of our beloved men are with us today, and forever.

"Your husband and mine live on in the smiles of our children, in their laughter, in their tears, in the warmth of their little bodies, in each tiny heartbeat. How blessed are we!"

I read, and reread the letter. As I did so, it felt like someone had flicked a switch inside of me. It filled me with a warm radiance until I felt that I would burst with it. I leapt out of the hospital bed, made a quick phone call to Karen, got dressed and told the startled sisters that I was discharging myself. I collected little Anthony, my beautiful, special baby son. And when I looked into his blue eyes, it was his father who gazed lovingly back at me.

After I was physically and emotionally reunited with my children, I made contact with Paddy. We became fast friends, and I continued to learn many more secrets to happiness from this most remarkable and beautiful person. I became strong through her unflinching philosophy that life was meant to be lived, and that it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. It is a guiding principle that abides with me to this day.

Some time after her last child, another little boy, was born, Paddy met a wonderful man who asked her to marry him. John loved her children as dearly as she did, and promised be just the husband and father they all deserved.

Paddy came to me one day and asked if I would mind looking after the children while she went to meet John's parents for the first time. She was trembling with nerves, as this was to be the moment they told his mum and dad that they intended to be married, and that they would suddenly find themselves grandparents to no less than five boisterous children.

John's parents were overjoyed at the news. They welcomed Paddy and the children with open arms and in celebration.

When the time came for the wedding, Paddy asked if they could use my car and I gladly agreed. It was a wonderful, joyous event, all the more special because the children were there to be a part of it all.

Months passed. One morning I received a phone call. It was Paddy. She spoke so softly, I wasn't sure I had heard right. There had been a guerilla ambush. John had taken thirty-six bullets.

"My God," I choked. I could think of nothing to say. I didn't have to tell Paddy that if there was anything she needed, I would always be there for her, just as she had been there for me. I struggled to find words that might be of some real comfort. Then it struck me.

"Paddy," I wept with her, "The children. You still have the children."

Such was the resilience of this woman that just a year later she met and married another man. She called to tell me that they had had a private ceremony, because she could not face another big wedding. She fell pregnant, but the baby was stillborn.

Despite tragedy striking time after time after time, Paddy continued to smile in the face of it all. She was telling the gods of fate that she was stronger than anything they could mete out. She would not be broken by them. She lived for her children, but it was more than that. She was also living for herself. That taught me a valuable lesson, one which has changed my outlook on all the cruel curve-balls life has launched in my direction. I laugh in the face of adversity.

*

WHEN I LEFT THE HOSPITAL WITH BABY ANTHONY I SPENT JUST A few days with Karen before making the decision to travel back to Chiredzi and start arranging to pack up the house. There was no question that I would be able to stay there ever again. I simply wanted to remove a few personal effects, arrange for the rest to be put into storage and start looking for a house in Bulawayo, close to my family.

As soon as I turned the key in the lock, I knew it was a bad idea. The door swung open and memories flooded out of the house, engulfing me. My first instinct was to turn and run, but I clenched my teeth and stepped over the threshold.

On the morning that Anthony and I had left our home together, he had taken me to the airport and then returned to the house to shower, change and get together his things for his stint in the army, before driving down to Bulawayo to meet me.

Now as I walked through the house, everywhere I looked there was a reminder of him. I saw his mug left on the corner of the kitchen counter... he must have made himself some coffee before he got himself ready. A cigarette end was stubbed out in an ashtray near the mug. I imagined Anthony standing in the kitchen sipping his coffee and drawing on his cigarette, quietly reflecting on his life and the risks he was about to take. In my mind's eye I saw him smile to himself at the thought of the wife and daughter he loved so dearly, and the new baby on the way.

He had walked through the living room, taking off his shirt as he went and throwing it over the back of the settee. I lifted it to my face. His scent lingered on it.

He had kicked off his shoes in the bedroom. The rest of his clothes lay in a pile on the bathroom floor. I closed my eyes and imagined my husband's gorgeous body. In the privacy of our home, without a witness about, I allowed one more tear for my darling Anthony Crane to roll down my face. Then I walked out of the house, not taking a thing, not looking back, and I closed the door behind me and locked it. And as the mechanism turned and settled, so a parallel action was taking place in my heart. I locked the door on that part of my life, and walked away from it.

*

I STARTED TO LOOK AROUND FOR THE HOUSE THAT I WANTED TO buy and I found one in Kumalo, which was a very Jewish suburb of Bulawayo.

I knew that I couldn't afford the house then - but I also knew that I was going to make enough money to afford it.

I've always known that I had it in me to succeed. I guess a lot of people feel that way, but most of them suffer frequent flashes of indecision and self-doubt. I have not had that problem. I decide. It's my most common expression: I decided to do this, or that. Prevarication is not part of my make-up. There's not enough time to dither. Every second counts, because there's no way of recapturing it. I have no patience with people who tell me they'll get back to me. When I hear someone uttering these words, I no longer have any further dealings with them.

As for self-confidence, I have always had that in bucket-loads. You have to love yourself before you can expect anyone else to love you, or admire you, or even respect you.

And I have discovered that there is an undeniable link between confidence and success. If you know, really know, that you can do something, then you will not fail. And if you do not close your mind to any opportunity, any stepping stone on the road to material success, more opportunities will be thrust in your path.

It's a true phenomenon that the moment you allow your mind to recognise something, suddenly you will find yourself seeing things you never would have seen before. I will guarantee you that before you've met your first lesbian, you wouldn't be able to pick out the lesbians in a room full of women unless you were told, or unless they had their tongue in the mouth of another woman. But once you have come to know one, your mind develops this amazing ability to hone in and identify.

The same principle applies to money. Most people start off their working lives accustomed only to very ordinary sums of money - enough to pay the bills and get from the beginning of the month to the end of the month - just.

As they progress in their careers, those sums of money invariably increase. At the start, to have imagined a salary that went beyond, say, a couple of thousand a month would have been impossible. But when that number is achieved, it doesn't seem like a lot at all. The next psychological barrier is set. And when that one is achieved, so the next and the next. To a man who has never seen a hundred dollar bill, let alone had one in his pocket, the first crisp note is a huge novelty. But not the second or third. By the time he's had ten or twenty, it's meaningless. Naturally, the same applies to a five hundred dollar bill, a thousand pound cheque, ten thousand, a million...

And generally, once you have experienced each level, it becomes just as impossible to imagine yourself on the lower rungs of the ladder as it had been to imagine yourself on those higher up. This is why I have always insisted on living just beyond my means, right

up until I no longer needed to count the pennies and could live any life I wanted. It was the reason for my success. I always ensured that I drove the best car, lived in the nicest house in the best neighbourhood, wore the latest fashions, was always dripping with jewellery.

When I was fifteen years old and living in the quaint little colonial town of Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia, I realised very quickly that if I wanted to be a trend-setter - and I did - then I would have to be inventive. In the mid-60's in a landlocked, isolated little country in the middle of Africa, high street fashions arrived in our boutiques a year or more after they were passé in Europe.

I subscribed to a couple of elite fashion magazines and sat down with our maid, Prisca, who had a gift for dressmaking that I recognised instantly from the beautiful cut of her handmade clothes.

"Prisca," I declared, "You and I are going to change the face of this dreary little town."

Together we set about copying the designs from the photographs in my magazines. I would buy the material, using money I had saved, earned and pinched. Many a haberdasher unwittingly contributed yards of lovely material while one of my trusty friends distracted the sales staff.

Literally within days of receiving my latest fashion journal, I would be strutting through the streets of Bulawayo, turning heads, wearing the same outfits that film stars were wearing in London, Paris, New York. And before long, I had a wardrobe of pirated designer clothes that would have been the envy of discerning women anywhere on the planet.

From an early age, I loved being the centre of attention. I still do.

At any rate, I make no apologies for my self confidence or my love of myself. If you cannot love yourself, you are insulting the work of the God of Creation. I, for one, have no intention of offending someone so important.

I moved into my new home with my children and my furniture. It wasn't easy - I was on a modest war widow's pension and had very few marketable skills. I had abandoned my nursing career while it was still in its infancy and had no intentions of returning to sponge baths and bed pans. I could have gone back to working behind the counter in a bank, but this also did not appeal to me. Besides, my children were all-important and as such I needed a means of earning an income that was flexible enough to allow me to work around the needs of a four year old daughter and infant son. While I did not know quite how I was going to achieve it just yet, I had no doubt that I would somehow make enough money to give my children the best opportunities in life. That was a nonnegotiable certainty.

In the meantime I had the task of getting some of my more valuable belongings from Chiredzi to my new home in Bulawayo. I asked Karen's husband, Henry, to drive up to Chiredzi in the pristine Peugeot 404 station wagon Anthony had bought me just weeks before his death. He agreed and set off one sunny morning. I waved him goodbye, unaware that it would be the last time I would see my beloved car.

Henry had just cleared the crest of the Blue Hills in Essexvale when he encountered two army trucks - one overtaking the other. There was nothing for him to do but aim the car directly between the oncoming trucks. My brand new Peugeot was squashed and my brother-in-law ended up in hospital, lucky to be alive.

I immediately kicked up a stink in the offices of the Ministry of Defence, demanding to speak to the most senior civil servant, threatening to go to the Press if I didn't get any satisfaction. I walked out with a cheque generous enough to buy me a BMW. It was maroon and absolute luxury.

My prestigious address and lovely new car provided me now with the springboard I needed to re-enter society after months of grieving and solitude.

I'd met up with my old school friend, Angela, and we began going out on the town together. My little sister Dot, who was now married and living in Gwelo a couple of hours outside Bulawayo, would come down and visit with Karen, and the three of us, with Angela in tow, would make an entrance at all the most happening night clubs. Despite our married names, everyone still referred to us as the Magee sisters and we swiftly regained our old reputation for being the life and soul of any party we deigned to attend.

It was not long after I started going out again that I met a soldier in a night-club who told me the full story of how my Anthony had perished. It was a tale quite different from the terse official version I had been given.

We got talking quite by chance. I asked him which regiment he was with and he told me 10RR. He must have had quite a bit to drink, as he would have recognised me if he had been sober. It was the same regiment my Anthony had been in when he died.

"Did you know Lance Corporal Crane?" I asked quietly.

He started, then focused his eyes on me.

"Jesus, you're Ant Crane's wife..."

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry."

Something in the way he lowered his eyes and took his hands off the counter raised my suspicion. It was as though he was apologising rather than offering sympathies.

"I already know," I lied smoothly.

"You do?" he darted a nervous glance at me. I put my hand reassuringly on his arm and smiled benignly.

"Don't be embarrassed," I cooed.

"I don't know what to say, Mrs Crane-"

"Please, call me Hazel."

"Sorry, ja, Hazel. I still can't forgive myself... but it was a genuine accident..."

I gritted my teeth, but managed to keep the smile on my face.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"I thought-"

"Yes, I do know. It's just, I want to hear it from you."

He hesitated. Then he breathed a long sigh. "Ja, okay. It's the least I can do."

Then he proceeded to tell me in detail the true story of Anthony's last hours.

My husband had been tasked to lead a 'stick' - a section - of four troops on a routine follow-up exercise just outside Gwelo. There had been a reported sighting of a small band of "terrorists", and Anthony's stick was just one of several deployed to the area to hunt for the guerrillas' local base and possibly root out any arms caches.

When darkness fell, Anthony instructed his men to dig in while he planted half a dozen Claymore land mines in a circle several yards from the camp, strung together with a

tripwire. Then he rejoined his men. They were preparing to turn in for the night when the communications pack crackled and the group's call sign was announced.

When the radio operator responded, Anthony and his men listened with growing dismay to what HQ had to report. The translation from code was grim.

"Previous estimates on target group grossly underestimated. Not eight, but twenty-eight. Not heading west, but east - directly in line with your position. ETA imminent. Evacuate post haste to collection rendezvous."

In the pitch dark, knowing that a force almost six times the size of his own was possibly within just one mile of their position, Anthony was now faced with the prospect of having to disarm the explosive cordon in limited visibility - and at speed.

His only option was to use all his men for the task, something he would under normal circumstances never have done.

He instructed the men to walk slowly beside him, searching for the trip wire by torch-light. They found it easily and Anthony knelt to disarm the first land mine. But somewhere in the darkness behind them came what sounded like twigs breaking underfoot.

Anthony heard it and whispered hoarsely to his men: "Don't move!"

But it was too late. One of the younger troops had swung around to face what would turn out to be nothing more than a phantom. In so doing, his webbing caught on the tripwire, and the device Anthony was only beginning to disarm exploded just as he stood up to get away from it.

The white light faded back to dark and the sound of the explosion echoed away across the veldt and was replaced by the agonised moans of the injured. The stick medic was killed outright by shrapnel thrown out by one of the most vicious devices ever introduced to warfare. Incredibly, Anthony was still alive, and conscious. His legs had been cut away and his lifeblood was quickly escaping him, pumping out and being gratefully absorbed by the parched ground on which he lay.

Two others, including the soldier who had accidentally triggered the explosion, were also badly injured, although not life-threateningly so. Only one member of the group escaped unscathed as he had been shielded from the blast by his comrades.

He quickly radioed news of the disaster to HQ and requested a chopper, which was confirmed, and then set about administering what first aid he could. He began with Anthony, although even to his untrained eye it was evident that the chances of survival were slim. He managed to staunch the bleeding, and then gave Anthony a morphine jab.

Within twenty minutes they heard the chopper, during which time the uninjured soldier had succeeded in dismantling and disarming what remained of the explosive cordon.. A beacon was lit and the helicopter landed close by. They had to move quickly, intensely vulnerable to attack.

Anthony and the others were strapped into gurneys and laid on the floor of the chopper. The unscathed soldier climbed up front in order to give the trained medics on board all the room they needed to treat the wounded.

The first thing the medic assigned to Anthony did was to administer another ampoule of morphine.

The soldier on the ground who had given the first dose could not have known that he should have pressed a yellow sticker to Anthony's forehead, indicating that morphine had already been given.

If the medic had not been right beside Anthony when the land mine exploded, if he had survived and been the one to attend to Anthony, it is quite possible that the mistake would never have been made.

But the medic on the chopper assumed he was giving the first dose. Within minutes, Anthony's already-shocked body succumbed to the overdose, and he gladly went away, leaving behind the din of the rotor blades, the stench of cordite and blood, the broken, blackened body that was no longer of any use to him...

"I'm so sorry, Mrs Crane," the soldier at the bar was saying again. "I was the medic in the chopper..."

I stepped forward and hugged him. It was partly because I didn't want him to see the tears welling in my eyes. But it was also because I knew that what he had done, even though it was unwitting, was probably the best thing he could have. I had seen a lot of the army guys in wheelchairs who had been crippled in combat. I would experience a sense of relief, because I knew that Anthony had always been a very physical man, and proud of it, and I had no doubt that he would have hated being reduced to a helpless wreck in a wheelchair. I believe I could have handled it, but I think Anthony would have been inconsolably miserable.

"Thank you for forgiving me," said the soldier as I released my embrace and turned away. I paused for a moment, then walked away without saying another word.

*

I WAS AT A SHOW JUMPING EVENT ABOUT NINE MONTHS LATER when I was introduced to Harry. That meeting set in motion a chain of events that would set me on the path to material success and a life of crime. And it would also bring me the closest to death I had ever been.

Harry's family owned a gold mine in a place called Belingwe. Shortly after we were introduced, he started to call me. I was really very nervous, because I hadn't gone out with anybody after Anthony. I didn't know how to handle it - but I was trying. I knew I had to get on with my life, for my sake as well as for my children.

Harry got on really well with Hayley and little Anthony. I started to see him on a more regular basis.

Then came the big crunch, when I decided to sleep with him. I didn't have to sleep with him, but I wanted to. I was 27 years of age. I was healthy and vibrant and I had my needs. That night we went out to a restaurant and had a lovely, romantic meal. We came home to my house and before long we were kissing passionately.

We slowly removed each others' clothes and made love for hours.

When it was all over, I remember looking at him and thinking to myself, "Oh my God, what have I done? Now I'm going to have to marry this man!"

That's how naive I was. My heart was pounding. I was torn between running away and doing the more sensible thing - talking to him about my fears.

In the event, I locked myself in the bathroom.

Eventually he came to the bathroom door and said: "Hazel, is everything all right? Are you okay in there?"

"No," I cried. "I'm not all right, I'm not coming out, you must go home now."

"Don't be silly, I'm staying the night."

“You can’t stay the night, go away!”

Anyway eventually I emerged from the bathroom and Harry took me in his arms again and stayed the night.

Harry began to spoil me, buying me expensive gifts, wining and dining me. So I got a taste of the good life and liked it.

But Harry was away a lot, in the army, and I began to go out with other men. I used to play squash on a regular basis and as a result met lots of fit young talent.

Because I was always going out to night clubs I also met lots of sexy musicians. I had the most wonderful affair with one of them, a fabulous man called Gary. Every girl was after this guy. He was married, but was going through a divorce. He’d been married quite a few times, actually. Gary, who was older than me, was a very passionate lover, and I learned a lot from him... Harry on the other hand was very conservative, a missionary-position kind of guy. Gary and I used to try all sorts of things, most of which quite tickled my fancy..! We never got much further than the front door without ripping each others’ clothes off.

Harry came back from the bush and came round to see me. He was a really good looking man, beautiful, had wonderful manners, was really good to go out with... He was also getting quite serious. I opened the door to his knock and he handed me a big Pink Panther soft toy.

Tied around its neck was a little box, and when I opened the box there was the most beautiful diamond engagement ring inside it.

I nearly fell over, because I wasn’t prepared for an engagement ring, let alone engagement. But I didn’t have the heart to disappoint him, and after my marriage he was my first lover so I had always kind of thought that I would end up married to the man. And besides, the diamond in the ring was one of the biggest I had ever seen.

I thought about it long and hard for about half an hour and finally agreed to get engaged to Harry. But one Sunday I was lying in bed late in the morning, as one does, and I decided this man was not for me. I just couldn’t handle the thought of tying myself down, just when I was beginning to discover myself.

This particular Sunday he had invited me to meet his family for lunch in Belingwe, which was a two hour drive from Bulawayo. Hayley was staying with some friends but little Anthony was to come with me. I put him into the car seat in the back, and I took my gun with me because the road was full of so-called “terrorists” in those days.

As I drove along I tried to work out how I was going to tell Harry that I wanted to call off the engagement. I decided the direct approach was best. In one fleeting moment of insanity, I actually considered giving him back his engagement ring, but then I came to my senses. It would only insult him and indicate to him that he had no hope of changing my mind in the future. I did not wish to destroy the man.

Just outside Bulawayo Anthony started to cry in the back, so I pulled the car over to the side of the road, and moved the car seat, putting him on the floor by the bullet proof fire wall on the passenger side, so that he was looking up at me while I was driving.

We continued the journey and about an hour out of Belingwe I was driving at about 100 miles an hour when all of a sudden out of the bush came a truck with three young black guys in it and about five more standing on the back of the truck.

I had two options: I could either change lanes and drive into oncoming traffic, or swerve to the side of the road, which I did. The truck clipped the back of my car and it spun in

the middle of the road, skidded across the road, missed another truck coming from the opposite direction, rolled off the road, through a ditch and straight into solid rock.

I went face-first through the windscreen and fell back into the car. I felt no pain. I immediately began looking for the baby. I couldn't see him. I tried to open my door. Blood was streaming down my face, obscuring my vision. I couldn't get the door opened. Somebody was on the outside, shouting, and then the side window shattered and all I can remember thinking is: "Oh my God, terrorists!" and I was feeling about on the floor for the gun that had been under my seat. Then I passed out.

When I came round, someone was pulling me out of the car, and I was mumbling. "I have a baby - a baby in the car..."

But they couldn't find the baby. Anthony had somehow been flung out of the car and was lying in the ditch beside it.

I was across the arm of a black man and I thought it was a "terrorist". My face felt as though it was on fire, and I had a searing pain in my arm and my back. I passed out again. What had actually happened was that a missionary had been passing immediately after the accident and had stopped. He and one of the black men with him had smashed the window, and in pulling me out of the car they had sliced open my arm and my back on the broken glass.

When they found Anthony the missionary had stopped another car and they had taken him off to hospital while they got me into the back of another car - apparently Anthony was breathing very strangely, but when I came to again on the way in to town they kept telling me that he was okay.

When we got to Bulawayo Central Hospital, they had a team of doctors and surgeons waiting. I was rushed into theatre. I had a broken nose, fractured skull, shattered cheekbones, a broken arm, two broken fingers and some broken ribs.

In the meantime, someone had found my identity card and had phoned my father, who had rushed to the hospital with Karen and Henry.

Karen quickly located Anthony - miraculously, there wasn't a scratch on him.

Meanwhile, Harry had come looking for me and had found my smashed car on the side of the road, so he had raced to Bulawayo Central hospital.

My whole face was so badly disfigured they wouldn't give me a mirror. Eventually, when I was moved from intensive care to a private ward, I saw my grotesque reflection in one of those tin plates you got in hospital.

All my visitors had gasped when they saw my face, so I knew it was going to be pretty horrible. But nothing could really have prepared me for the monster that stared up at me.

Rob, a guy who I sometimes played squash against heard about my accident and came to visit me. He brought with him a chap by the name of Brent, who was a prosecutor - and he was absolutely beautiful - I took one look at him and said to myself, "Wow, what a catch!".

I was still wearing the engagement ring Harry had given me - but I quickly hid it under the blanket when Rob came in with Brent.

I got chatting to Brent and he said if I needed any help he would come up to the hospital. His visits became more and more frequent.

In between my visits from Brent I was being doted upon by Harry. I still didn't have the courage to tell him that I wanted to call off our engagement.

I found myself sitting through Harry's visits and thinking only of Brent, desperately looking forward to our long discussions. Brent had an amazing mind as well as a pretty face and delicious body. He seemed completely unfazed by my hideous appearance. Eventually, Brent did learn that I was engaged to Harry but even this did not seem to deter him.

When I was discharged from the hospital after some weeks, I was still disfigured from the accident. My nose had been very nearly shorn off and would require painful reconstructive surgery.

Brent continued to court me. We would play squash together - he was a brilliant player, and I liked the fact that he played to win, not simply letting me beat him because he had an ulterior motive, as was the case with so many men.

We started seeing each other more seriously over a period of weeks and months and I found him stimulating and intelligent company.

One problem was that he was very religious, into the Baptist church. While this was not immediately an obstacle, it would prove to become one later in our relationship.

Anyway, I spoke to him about Harry and he gave me some good advice.

"Look, Harry will want to own you. Is that the life that you want?"

"No, I want a life where I'm living it."

"Fine, so then you know what to do. The ball is in your court."

"You're right."

So I phoned Harry and asked him to come and see me, and I broke off the engagement. Before I could say anything at all about the engagement ring, Harry gallantly told me to keep it. Thus began my collection.

I started to go out with Brent, more overtly than before. While Brent was quite talkative when we were alone, he was painfully shy in company, a fact that I found quite surprising considering the fact that he was a prosecutor.

He spoke a lot of his work, and I began to take an avid interest in the law - but most particularly the loopholes in the law. I spent many hours throwing complex legal questions at him, and building all sorts of scenarios to see if he could whittle them down in law. A good deal of what I would use in my defence in years to come was as a direct result of my months with Brent.

In the meantime I had bumped into John, the fellow I'd been going out with when I met Anthony, and we'd had dinner together a few times, and I had also met an up-and-coming young doctor by the name of Jonathan, who I started to see on a social basis, while at the same time getting more and more involved with Brent.

Eventually Brent and I came to the stage where we became lovers. It was quite a surprise to me when it did happen, because we had been going out for so long we had become good friends. The thought of having sex with him seemed odd, but it felt rather nice all the same.

Brent was a bit younger than me, and I was delighted to discover that he was still a virgin. I had to teach him all the tricks of the trade, which was fun - really, really fun. And we proved to be very compatible. Brent took great personal pride in bringing me to orgasm, a position I actively encouraged.

The time came for me to meet Brent's parents. They were fine with me until they found out that I was a young widow and had two children. I don't think they wanted that for their son. I think I would have married Brent but for his family. His mother was

particularly stony-faced with me, so much so that I deliberately shocked her. She was going on about all her son's virtues when I interrupted her and told her he was also very good in bed. Of course, she thought Brent was still a virgin and the thought of him with such an evidently scarlet woman, tainting his purity, very nearly made her faint.

Anyway, there were big arguments and lots of drama, and I was loving every minute of it but I think Brent was having a miserable time. So that was how I came to part ways with my very first toy boy.

I turned my attentions to the doctor, Jonathan, as well as a new man named Howard, among others. My friend Angela was almost as active as me, so it was inevitable that we ended up swapping dates.

Angela was rather like Zsa Zsa Gabor out of Green Acres, because she lived in a funny little house that had wooden floorboards and funny little nooky rooms and a fire place which always seemed to have mice coming out of it, but she couldn't afford anything else and anyway it was very comfortable. She had a great big brass bed that we could tie ourselves to and we had lots of fun with our respective (and sometimes shared) men friends.

Angela was going sort of steady with a big guy by the name of Geoffrey. He was the jealous type, but fortunately for Angela he was also a farmer, so he spent much of his time out of town. Angela, not being a great believer in fidelity, started seeing a nice Jewish man who thought she was wonderful. Funnily enough, like Brent he was also a virgin, and Angela was over the moon the night she succeeded in breaking his virginity. She absolutely gave him the turn of his life.

Anyway, one night Angela met another guy and decided that she liked him. Geoffrey was away on his farm, and Angela's knickers had not seen any activity for a few days. She decided her new man was good enough to eat and she was going to have him that night.

So she took him back to her pad and duly had him tied to her bed. His name was Gary, he was from England and he was lovely. But things were just getting hot when the next thing Angela heard her dog barking and then footsteps on her balcony. She looked up from the job in hand and there in the open window was a hand pointing a pistol at her. Angela screamed, poor Gary echoed it and the next few seconds were spent in a frantic attempt to release his bonds. Meanwhile Geoffrey was pulling the trigger of his pistol, but had neglected to release the safety lock.

Untied, but with brightly coloured scarves still attached to his wrists and ankles, Gary fled the house bare-arsed and was never seen again.

I was called out in the middle of the night to mediate and we sorted it out and the three of us, Angela, Geoffrey and I, ended up laughing until we cried.

In the meantime I had been giving a lot of thought to how I was going to achieve my ambition of becoming fabulously wealthy. I would never have been content simply living on the modest war widow's pension I was receiving. A legitimate job was not going to cut it. As far as I could see, the only way I was going to make lots of money fast was by breaking the law. The long conversations I'd had with my prosecutor lover Brent had opened my eyes to some of the schemes other people were up to. I believed I could not only improve on their efforts, but most importantly not get caught.

My attention was drawn to one type of illegal activity in particular: the smuggling of gold.

Rhodesia at the time was lousy with the precious metal. Gold mine head gears were almost as common a sight in this country as windmills in Holland. And the miners who went underground to bring the stuff to the surface were quite poorly paid and as a result supplemented their meagre incomes by keeping the odd nugget as an unofficial bonus.

All that was required was to make contact with some of these enterprising miners, negotiate a mutually agreeable price, and then smuggle the gold across the border into South Africa where it could be fenced at a much higher price to private jewellers. The profit margins, generally, could exceed three hundred percent. To me, that sounded like a risk worth taking, and an infinitely superior pursuit to working nine-to-five and giving half my earnings to the tax man, who was not my child.

I also knew something of the trade from listening to my ex-fiancee Harry, whose family owned a gold mine in Belingwe. He had often referred to the “thieving bastard miners” who helped themselves to the gold rich ore.

“If you go into a mine compound in the middle of the night and listen by each door, you’re likely to hear the grinding of mortar and pestle,” Harry would tell me. “Those are the guys who’ve managed to smuggle some of the ore out of the mine and they sit and grind it down and then sieve out the gold.”

I made my first visit to a gold mine on the outskirts of Bulawayo, on my own, just after midnight on a Wednesday shortly before Christmas 1977.

I pulled off the main road and drove a short way down a dirt track leading to the mine compound, in the BMW I had bought with the insurance payout from my accident.

I checked the cash in my purse: one hundred dollars. I got out of the car, softly shut the door and locked it, then picked my way down the track by the light of a half-moon.

I entered the compound by way of a bamboo gate secured to a post by a loop of wire. As I crossed the dusty courtyard towards the row of small concrete buildings roofed with corrugated iron, I was strangely calm. Even when an untethered goat darted out in front of me with an almost human mutter, I barely flinched.

I approached the first tin door and pressed my ear up against it. I could smell the familiar heady combination of wood smoke and soap, but there was not a sound from within. I moved down the row of simple, one-room homes, repeating the process. Nothing. Not a murmur.

I sat down on a cool cement step and waited. I realised it had been unrealistic of me to expect to be met by an orchestra of mortars and pestles.

But I wasn’t going to give up that easily. I waited. I dozed. Four hours later, my patience was rewarded. Moments after the first sounds of stirring from within one of the rooms, there came the unmistakable rasping of soft stone being ground to dust.

I rose stiffly to my feet. I hadn’t realised how cold it had become and I shivered as I came close to the door. The grinding continued, sounding for all the world like the gnawing of a large rat on wood. I rapped softly on the door. The sound stopped abruptly.

“Watichi?” came the voice of a man.

“Hullo,” I responded sharply. “Let me in.”

There was a scuffling sound, a pause, and then the door swung open. Framed in the doorway was an enormous, broad-shouldered black man. He wore overalls tied in at his waist, his muscular upper-body naked. By the light of a small kerosene lamp, I saw beyond him into the tiny room. Sitting up in a single bed in the corner was a wide-eyed young woman, her hair in braids, firm breasts visible. She was suckling an infant. In a cardboard box on the bare floor beside the bed slept a child, no more than a year old.

“What do you want?” boomed the man in front of me, more than a little resentment in his voice. But I noticed that his chest was heaving and there was a glimmer of fear in his eyes. Theft of gold guaranteed immediate dismissal and what’s more carried a hefty jail sentence. But this man needed both his job and his illicit income in order to survive and ultimately make a better life for his family. I could identify with that.

“May I come in?”

“What do you want?” He was gaining confidence. It was obvious that I was not the police, and that I was alone. He stepped forward menacingly and shut the door behind him. He must have been all of six feet tall, and he stared down at me, a minuscule five foot one.

I did not retreat even an inch. I met his stare with an equally insolent glare.

“Egoli,” I said simply. I made a gesture with one balled fist rolled back and forth on the palm of my other hand, in the charade’s action of a mortar and pestle. Then I smiled disarmingly.

The giant towering over me blinked, and suddenly his whole face was transformed by the most beautiful, beaming smile I had ever seen.

“Gold,” he boomed. “You would like to buy gold from me?”

“That’s right.” I was a little taken aback at the educated tone in his voice.

“What makes you think I’ve got any?”

“I heard-”

“What? You heard me scraping mud off my boots?”

“Are you saying you don’t have any gold?”

“Are you saying I do?”

“Let’s stop playing games,” I shot at him. I took fifty dollars from my purse and thrust it at him.

“What’s that for?”

“I want to buy some gold.”

“Who are you?”

“What does it matter?”

“Where I come from, it’s polite to introduce yourself before you try to do business.”

“How do you do,” I said sarcastically.

“How do you do,” he smiled. “My name is Fanuel.”

“Pleased to meet you,” my tone softened. I was beginning to like this man’s style. “My name is Hazel.”

“How is your family?” he asked mildly, studying his fingernails in the dark.

“Fine,” I answered, shaking my head. But I was beginning to understand the point he was making. “And how is your family?”

“My family is well.”

“Good. Can I buy some gold from you?”

“Yes, but I hope you brought more than fifty dollars,” Fanuel grinned.

“How much gold do you have?”

“How much do you want?”

“Show me,” I commanded, and he chuckled and disappeared into his room for a few moments. When he emerged, he was carrying a small leather pouch, a piece of white card and the kerosene lamp. He placed the lamp on the stoep, laid the white card down beside it, untied the string at the mouth of the pouch and turned it upside down. The contents of the bag spilled onto the card in a small, glowing, yellow heap.

I held my breath. It was beautiful. I had knelt down and was warming my hands over the kerosene lamp. When Fanuel sat back on his haunches, I reached for the card.

"Uh-uh," he chided me. "No touching. Gold dust sticks to your fingers."

"How much is there?" I asked, in awe.

He stood and went back into his room, returning after a moment with a small set of scales. He bent the card in the middle and carefully poured the gold into the little cup opposite the weights. Then he balanced it out.

"Two hundred dollars' worth," he said without a trace of compromise.

"Ha!" I spluttered. "No way!"

"Ja!" he asserted, brows furrowed.

"I may be a woman, Fanuel, but I'm not stupid."

He laughed out loud. "Indeed."

"Fifty dollars," I said.

"Hazel," he shook his head.

"Yes?"

"I may be black, but I'm not stupid."

Now it was my turn to laugh. With each passing moment I was beginning to see that this man who spent more than half his life underground, placing himself in mortal danger to retrieve this magical metal, had more in common with me than I could ever have imagined possible. My eyes, closed for so long, were beginning to open.

"I can go one hundred and fifty dollars, because I like you, Hazel," said Fanuel.

"And because I like you, Fanuel, I will go all the way up to seventy dollars, in cash, here, now."

"One twenty."

"Seventy five."

"One fifteen."

"Come on Fanuel. I only have ninety dollars on me."

He thought about it for a while.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll take a few ounces back."

"No!" I cried. The thought of having to leave any of it behind was too much to bear. "If we can't settle on all of it for ninety dollars, I'll just go home."

I began to stand up.

"Wait," he said. "I'm sure you have ten dollars more."

He had also stood up and was looking me directly in the eye, unblinking. It was as though he could see into my soul.

"Okay," I said softly. "But only because you have children."

"Ah, no," he shook his head. "Not that. It's because it's such a good deal, Hazel."

I smiled, handed him the hundred dollars and waited while he returned every last speck of gold dust to its pouch. He put it in my hand.

"Nice doing business with you, Hazel."

"And you, Fanuel."

"See you same time next week?"

"Maybe," I said, turning to leave.

"Oh, and Hazel," he called after me.

I turned to face him.

"Yes?"

"Have a merry Christmas."

*

SIX MONTHS LATER I DECIDED TO TAKE MY BIGGEST GAMBLE YET. I mortgaged my house, borrowed an outrageous sum of money and, adding it to the proceeds of my illegal gold deals, opened a 125-seat restaurant which I called the Copa Cabana.

I worked my fingers to the bone. I would get up at five o'clock in the morning in order to get to the market early to buy the best fresh vegetables, because we opened at noon for a la carte lunches. We also had a dance floor and a bar. I had some of my best times at the Copa Cabana.

What's more, it was as a result of the restaurant that I began making some of the most important contacts I would ever make, in terms of illegal emerald deals.

A couple of weeks after the launch of the place, I was walking past a couple of guys at the bar when one of them caught my attention with a sharp "Psst!"

I stopped and faced him, expecting some lewd remark as I was wearing a particularly low-cut skirt.

"Hey missus," he whispered conspiratorially. "Come and see this."

I sauntered over to him with the air of an owner being polite to her customers, but something about his manner had aroused my curiosity.

"Are you gentlemen enjoying yourselves?" I asked.

"Ja, but look at this," he handed me a matchbox. I started to open it.

"Not here!" he said hoarsely, "Take it to your office."

I left the men sitting at the bar, made my way to my office and shut the door behind me. I opened the matchbox and a cry of delight escaped my mouth.

There, embedded in cotton wool, were three of the most dazzling stones I had ever laid eyes on. They were a rich green hue that seemed to burn from within.

Of course, I knew these were emeralds. I knew they came from the government owned mines at Sandawana where some of the world's finest stones had been discovered. I knew being caught with such stones in one's possession was to invite a damning criminal record and a stretch behind bars. And I also knew their value.

While they were in the country, they would not fetch anywhere near their real value. But once they had been smuggled across the border into South Africa, where it was no longer illegal to have uncut emeralds without a licence because they were considered semiprecious rather than precious, their worth multiplied substantially.

But what had led these men to single me out for an approach? Outwardly, I was a respectable young war widow with a legitimate business. Why would two strangers take such a risk. There were only two possible answers. Either they somehow knew about my other activities, having spoken to a mutual acquaintance. Or this was a police sting, for much the same reason.

There was only one thing I could do. I closed the matchbox, left my office and returned to the bar.

"Well?" said the man.

"No thanks," I said, putting the match box down on the counter in front of him.

"What do you mean?" he appeared stunned. "Those are genuine, and they're excellent quality. Don't you even want to talk price?"

"No thanks. I run a restaurant, not a jewellers."

"Is it? That's not what we've heard."

“Really? Well, I don’t know who you’ve been talking to-”

“Fanuel.”

My heart leapt into my mouth. Now I was at a distinct disadvantage. If these were indeed undercover cops, and they had extracted from Fanuel information about our numerous deals, I was on extremely thin ice.

“Listen lady,” said the second man, speaking for the first time, “we’re not the fuzz.”

It was as though he had read my mind. He was younger than his partner, and had gorgeous blue eyes. I don’t know if it was intuition, or if it was just the fact that I was attracted to him, but I sensed that he was telling the truth. Not for the first, nor by any means the last time in my life, I decided to take the risk.

“How much do you want for them?”

“Now we’re cooking,” said the first man. He was unshaven, unkempt, not attractive at all, and I didn’t like him one bit. I walked around the other side of him and sat down beside the younger man, putting him between me and his scruffy friend.

“How much then?” I asked, gazing into those baby blues.

Ten minutes later we had struck a bargain, and the two men departed from my restaurant with a wad of cash, leaving me with my very first illegal emeralds. I couldn’t stop looking at them. They were like something out of a medieval myth. Fanuel was well and truly forgiven any indiscretions.

That was the first of literally hundreds of similar transactions I was to be involved with over the coming months and years. It proved to be my springboard into the very secret and very lucrative world of sanctions busters and smugglers. Many of the contacts I made during that period are still close friends and associates to this day, some twenty-five years later.

I set about establishing dozens of foolproof ways of getting the stones out of the country. I trusted no-one, as conversations with my ex, the prosecutor Brent, had revealed that nine busts out of ten for the police came as a result of information provided by informants. It made sense then to tell nobody - not even family - when I was planning to board a flight, drive my car, or hop on a train to South Africa. Unlike many of the principal dealers at the time, I did not entrust my stones or gold to “mules”. While it was true that such a system ensured that these runners carried most of the risk, it also meant that there was a greater likelihood of valuable wares going missing forever, or of someone being picked up and the whole hierarchy being rumbled.

I preferred to do it myself. That way I knew there would be no stupid and costly mistakes, and I was fully in control at all times.

Besides, the police were hardly likely to suspect a sweet young war widow of such an “unpatriotic” activity as smuggling. There was an added advantage in that most people remembered me from the tidal wave of media attention I had received after Anthony’s death, and continued to be tremendously sympathetic.

I began to develop increasingly more creative means of smuggling the merchandise across the border. I wore my hair in a beehive, a style very much in vogue in 1970’s Rhodesia. Large packets of emeralds nestled comfortably in the centre of the tightly tied hair.

Little Anthony proved to be an ideal hiding place. I would put a nappy on him, then conceal the bags of uncut stones - filled out with Vaseline in order to ensure he felt no discomfort - in a second nappy, which was then sealed in by his plastic pants.

I got hundreds of stones across the border into South Africa in this manner, and proceeded to build a network of contacts, mainly in Johannesburg, who would pay me in rands.

That was the added bonus. Because Rhodesia was an isolated economy, subjected to harsh sanctions by the outside world, foreign currency was a rare commodity.

So the second part of my deal was to sell the rands on the black market to Rhodesian businessmen, arranging to make deposits for them into South African bank accounts. They were then able to draw on these foreign exchange reserves to purchase desperately needed spare parts or raw materials required by the companies they owned in Rhodesia.

To a great extent, the Rhodesian authorities turned a blind eye to such sanctions-busting transactions, as they knew the economy could not possibly have survived without them.

By the mid-1970's, some ten years after Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence, the country was a model of self-reliance. Previously almost entirely dependent upon the importation of finished products, the country's manufacturing sector had evolved into a lean, shrewd, super-efficient machine that now produced everything from auto spares and kitchen appliances, to the weapons and ammunition requisite to the growing war effort.

During this period, my associates and I made obscene amounts of money.

I was careful, though, to ensure that much of it was ploughed back into legitimate business, in order to allay suspicions about the source of my growing wealth.

My restaurant, as such, underwent numerous expensive refurbishments and soon the Copa Cabana became one of the most popular and fashionable meeting places in the country.

It was where I met a very talented singer and entertainer by the name of Billy.

Billy owned a night-club and not long after being introduced to me he asked me about going into partnership with him. I quickly accepted, primarily because he had a track record of success and I could learn a lot from him. Incidentally, I experienced quite intense flashes of lust whenever I looked at him.

Between Billy's club and the Copa Cabana, we made a great deal of money and had loads of fun into the bargain.

I introduced ladies' nights and arranged striptease performances featuring both male and female strippers, many of whom I brought up from South Africa: Bulawayo was a small town populated by outwardly ultra conservative whites. As such, it was rare to find a local prepared to take off his or her clothes for money. Oddly enough, this conservatism tended to vanish quite rapidly after a few double Vodkas, so patrons of our night clubs were not too prudish to appreciate the many talents of our performers.

On ladies' night, men were only allowed in after eleven o'clock and would stand in a queue outside like cattle waiting to get in. A lot of the ladies' husbands were in the army, but there would be no shortage of guys like doctors and civil servants, or the guys who were on R&R, who would turn up looking for action... So the ladies, married and single alike, had no shortage of hot-blooded males on tap to keep them serviced.

As a nurse, I had once come across a medical paper on the subject of women's orgasms. It made references to a biological fact long acknowledged, privately, within the medical fraternity, that prolonged periods of orgasm deprivation were responsible for women having frequent fainting fits and bouts of hysteria.

As a result, doctors had been known to manually induce orgasms for patients who displayed chronic symptoms. Before long, special medical instruments were being

developed for this purpose. When these instruments finally made it to the shelves for purchase by members of the public, they were the precursors to the vast array of products now commonly referred to as vibrators.

My clubs had not been going long when I began to attract scandalised glares and snide, self-righteous remarks from the town's 'virtuous' women. They would periodically stop me in the street and berate me as a 'vixen', a 'brazen hussy', a 'Jezebel', and demand to know how I could sleep at night knowing I was providing a den of iniquity at which soldiers' wives could pick up men for their own 'dirty' pleasures.

My answer was simple.

"Ladies," I would say, "I'm only preventing fainting fits and hysteria."

One of the best strippers we ever had was this busty brunette named Helen who had impossibly long hair to go with her impossibly long legs. She worked with a muscle-bound dish of a guy, Carl, whose only flaw was that he was fanatically jealous about his partner and possessed of a murderous temper.

One day, when lunches were over and the restaurant was closed for the afternoon, I watched while they practised their routine. All of a sudden, Carl had lifted Helen off the floor by her hair and was swinging her around like a rag doll.

I thought, my God, this is an unusual routine. But I was quite enjoying it until he let go of her, quite deliberately, and stormed off.

Helen picked herself up off the floor and launched after him, screaming like a banshee.

It turned out she had been having an affair with a friend of his. The two of them were going at each other so viciously - they were breaking the place up - we had to call in the police.

But we sorted out the 'little' domestic and things went smoothly after that.

We had another stripper from Johannesburg by the name of Charlotte, who used to do an erotic dance routine with a live python.

Between shows, she kept it in a basket in the dressing rooms.

One night, Charlotte went to look for her python and the thing had escaped from its basket. So we had a club full of women and a giant serpent on the loose.

I knew if we made an announcement there would be pandemonium - there was standing room only in the club, it was chock-a-block.

So we started looking under the tables as discreetly as we could, but to no avail.

Shortly before closing time, one of the waiters was packing cases behind the bar and the next thing we heard an almighty screech and he was on top of the bar screaming: "Nyoka, nyoka!"

Needless to say, a rather disorderly evacuation ensued. The incident, however, had its benefits: thereafter, it became a tradition unique to both the Copa Cabana and Billy's club to announce last rounds not by simply ringing a bell, but by getting the barman up on the counter shouting "Nyoka, nyoka!". Inevitably, it became part of common parlance used by patrons of night clubs and pubs throughout the country that "Nyoka-nyoka time" was approaching.

In the meantime, I was enjoying a wonderful affair with Billy. He was proved to be a lover with tremendous experience and supernatural stamina to match. We tried everything, from head-over-heels in the kitchen to handstands in the swimming pool. Billy owned a mansion in an elite area aptly called Fortune's Gate - all the more reason to go steady with him.

There was just one problem. Billy had a girlfriend in the form of a stunningly beautiful Russian horsewoman named Olga. She and I had had a few mild run-ins in the past, but nothing as potentially fatal as what would ensue as a result of me moving in on Billy, who she was engaged to at the time.

Olga turned up at my house the one night and proceeded to chase Billy around the garden with a loaded shotgun. She had every intention of emptying the contents of its cartridges into his backside, but fortunately for Billy he was almost as good a sprinter as he was a lover and a singer. A man of many talents! He escaped with nothing but a bruised ego.

However, that was not to be the last of the near-death confrontations a la Olga.

Billy and I had been taking little trips to the South African coastal city of Durban in Natal to see his sister. On one occasion, we were at Bulawayo airport waiting for our flight when one of Billy's friends ran in and breathlessly warned us: "Run, Billy, run - Olga's after you with a gun!"

I ran through Customs and into the departures lounge just as she made an appearance. Billy tried to calm her down but ended up being pursued around the airport - Olga fired off four shots before she was arrested. Billy and I caught our plane anyway.

Olga eventually gave up the fight for Billy and found another boyfriend by the name of Dorian. He wasn't bad looking and was a leading member of a large charitable organisation, the Round Table.

As it turned out, Billy and I had been invited to a Round Table fancy dress function to raise funds for one local charity or another, the theme of which was 'witches and warlocks'.

But that day I'd had an argument with Billy and he had stormed off, yelling over his shoulder that he wouldn't be taking me to the party.

Not in the least bit deterred, I got into my slinky black outfit, did my face up and plastered myself with body glitter.

I was shown to my table - and who should I be sharing with but Viv and her new beau Dorian.

Well, naturally there was immediately friction between me and Olga.

She turned to Dorian and ordered him to arrange another table. Evidently not the subservient type, he dug his heels in and told her to sit down and stop making a scene.

Of course, Olga demanded then to be taken home, and Dorian was gentleman enough to comply.

But that didn't stop him coming back and spending the remainder of the evening with me. We left the party together, arm in arm, at three o'clock.

I had my maroon BMW, and he had a black BMW and we proceeded to race each-other up and down the road. Eventually, he led me back to his house and ushered me onto a slightly leaky waterbed where we consummated our new-found passion.

The glitter from my body was all over the pillows, the waterbed, Dorian's beard, his body, his hands...

At six o'clock in the morning I woke up, and the damp bed was spinning and I thought "Oh my God, I have to get out of here," so I got up and took off in my car.

I was barely in the door of my own house when I get this frantic phone call from Dorian.

"Haze, you'd better watch out - Viv's on her way over and she's going to kill you!"

"What? Why?"

“She came over just after you left... and she saw the trail of glitter you left behind... She’s got a gun Hazel.”

Surprise, surprise. Olga was the original Annie.

She had apparently taken a knife and slashed the waterbed, the curtains, the furniture, Dorian’s clothes and anything else that came within her reach.

Being quite fond of life, I ran down the road to Angela’s house and explained to her what had happened, so she put me up for two days. By that time Olga had calmed down and I was able to go home.

On my return, however, I was greeted by the sight of my beautiful car, my pride and joy, which had been vandalised - and it required no clever guesswork to figure out who was responsible: there was an enormous ‘O’ scratched into the middle of the bonnet.

A few days later and still smarting over the cost of having my car bonnet re-sprayed, I was invited to a show jumping event by the mother of a friend of mine. The poor lady was under the misguided impression that I was perfectly charming and demure, and had actually been lecturing her daughter that she should try to dress and behave more like me. Between events, I said I needed the toilet and my friend’s mum said she’d come with me. We went into the ladies and the next thing the door flew open - it was Olga.

She grabbed me by the throat and started to throttle me.

“How can you fucking take my fiancé and now you take my boyfriend, I’m going kill you, you bitch!”

I managed to prise her fingers from my throat and yelled back, “Hey, I’m not the one with the fucking problem - if your men keep leaving you for me, you must have the fucking problem!”

She went mad, slapping me in the face and screaming like a wild animal, and I slapped her back, and we were screaming and scratching and biting and punching and kicking each other on the toilet floor.

My friend’s mum left very quickly, and never again criticised her daughter’s behaviour.

Many, many years later, poor Olga ended up being murdered by her boyfriend - she was stabbed to death in her bed, and dumped down a mine shaft. I was sickened when I heard what happened. For all our running battles, I greatly admired Olga as a strong woman who learned how to manipulate men to her own ends, and who became a successful businesswoman in her own right.

But strong women always run the risk of enraging weak men - to the point where their delicate egos are so battered they strike back like the cowards they are... from behind. It’s happened to me enough times.

Anyway the abrupt end to my affair with Billy also featured some gunplay... A few months after my one night stand with Dorian, Billy and I went out to a club called La Boheme. Whilst there, I noticed Billy avariciously eyeing up another woman by the name of Cathy.

After dinner he took me home and dropped me off, saying he had an early start the next day so he couldn’t stay the night.

I waited until his car was out of sight before jumping into my own car and going back to the club. The doorman told me Billy had returned, and then left a few minutes later with Cathy.

It didn't take me long to find out where she lived, and I parked my car outside her flat and waited patiently until about four in the morning, when I saw Billy coming down the stairs.

I got to the mansion before him, and I was hiding behind a bush near the front door when he arrived.

I stepped out from behind the bush, levelled a pistol at Billy's face and pulled the trigger - but it was not his time. The pin in the gun was broken, so Billy's life was spared. He really is a very lucky man.

We had an unholy row, and he strenuously denied sleeping with Cathy. I stormed off home.

I returned to her flat the next morning, and she came to the door in her dressing gown.

"Hello Cathy," I said sweetly, "I'm Billy's fiancé."

"So?" she retorted.

"Look, Billy told me he slept here last night."

"Rubbish."

"Listen, he told me he slept here and that he lost one of his cufflinks in your bed."

The girl was so stupid she said: "I'll just go and look for it."

So I had caught Billy out very nicely.

I promptly put an announcement in the Bulawayo Chronicle to the effect that I was cancelling our engagement, humiliating him no end.

Billy buggered off to Salisbury with his tail between his legs, but he kept phoning me and hassling me.

In the meantime, I started seeing Brent again. Still, his parents continued to give me a hard time so our relationship was very much on and off.

During one of my many rifts with Brent, I met two Irishmen. Karen had bumped into them in town and discovered they were on their way to Victoria Falls and had not realised the next train was only on Sunday. As it was Friday, they had nowhere to stay for the weekend. So she put them in her car and brought them to me, without even bothering to gift wrap them first.

Of course, I offered John and Barry beds. John was, after all, a good looking man.

They moved into the spare room and were very grateful. I told them to make themselves at home for the evening, as I was preparing to go out on the town. They asked where I was going, and I told them to a disco. When they asked if they could tag along, I thought it might be fun so I said okay.

We went to one of my favourite night-clubs and danced until two o'clock in the morning. Barry was trying to hold my hand before the evening was out, but I only had eyes for John.

I usually get what I want. It wasn't long before I got my little claws into John and, instead of leaving on the Sunday, they only left nine months later!

I decided to take them touring all over Rhodesia. We started off in Victoria Falls where we had the best fun you can imagine, although - once again - I came very close to meeting my maker (on more than one occasion).

Because there were very few tourists in Victoria Falls at the time - independent Zambia just across the river was playing host to guerrilla fighters who would make raids into Rhodesian territory from time to time - the Casino Hotel was practically empty and I managed to negotiate an excellent rate on the President's suite.

Naturally, John and I took the best suite in the hotel and Barry had the room next door. We were joined by two good friends of mine from Bulawayo, Tony and David, who took rooms on the same floor.

The next day we made our way to the jetty from which the fabled “booze cruise” was launched. We had been forewarned to take an extra glass because you were only given one on the boat which you had to keep taking back to the bar for the all-you-can-drink cruise down the river. So we each made sure we were well armed with our own glasses when we boarded and, before anyone else had even boarded we had our places on the top deck - and a neat row of Vodka, lime and sodas in front of us. The tone for the water safari was now well and truly set...

I had a little bikini on with just a little wrap around the bottom and after a few drinks needed little encouragement to get up on the table and do a belly dance.

That broke the ice with everyone else on the cruise and before long a rip roaring party was on the go: much to the concern of the captain of the boat who claimed afterwards he had never had such a rowdy bunch of hooligans on any vessel he had ever sailed. I took that as a compliment.

Pretty soon the dares started to come out. The one which caught my imagination happened to be the most dangerous of them all - ‘walking the plank’.

Now, ordinarily, balancing on the handrail of a slow moving boat wouldn’t be a particularly daredevil thing to do - especially if one was a reasonably good swimmer, or at the very least wearing a life jacket.

But three factors made it rather risky business in my case.

I was neither a particularly good swimmer, nor was I wearing a life jacket.

I was plastered.

And the Zambezi River is full of crocs and hippos.

But I felt quite safe, as John had a firm grip on my hand as he walked alongside me.

But somehow, he got distracted - probably when Barry offered him another drink - and he momentarily released my hand. I took one step in the wrong direction and fell overboard.

I was too tipsy to panic, as well as the fact that I was a little ignorant of the dangers that lurked below the surface of those waters. Hence, I was giggling uncontrollably at the way I knew I must have looked, flapping about in the water like an eight-year-old; and at the alarmed expressions on the faces of the passengers and crew of the cruise boat as it swung in a wide arc around me.

Fortunately for me, there was a police patrol on duty who had seen the whole incident. Their speed boat was beside me in no time and they grabbed me with a hook around the back of my costume and, in a rather undignified fashion that made me giggle all the more, pulled me out of the water.

As they returned me to the jetty - evidently thinking it unwise to set me back on the booze cruise in my condition - the officers explained in no uncertain terms the danger I had placed myself in.

“You do realise that a medium sized croc can drag you under to its lair where you’ll be left to rot?”

“And did you know that the hippo - which is quite common in this river - is responsible for killing more men in Africa than any other wild animal: including lions and snakes?”

The lectures were well intentioned - but only had the effect of eliciting even more hysterical fits of laughing.

But it was infectious and, by the time they were helping me out of their boat, the boys in blue and I were great friends.

I waited for the cruise to return with John, Barry, Tony and David (who smuggled a drink off the boat for me) and we all clambered back into the coach for return to the hotel.

Barry was sitting on one side of me and John on the other and the next thing Barry, who has turned a strange shade of green, says to me: "Hazel, darlin' - I think I'm going to be-" At which point he leaned forward and threw up on the shoulder of the woman sitting in front of him.

Anyway when we got back to the hotel almost everyone from the coach - about thirty people in all - ended up in our suite and an almighty party soon took shape.

At about seven o'clock, all I could think of was bed, so I stumbled through into the inter leading bedroom where I collapsed on the double bed and was unconscious within seconds.

At about one o'clock in the morning I woke up and the whole room was in darkness. I tried to switch on a light but there was no power.

I tripped over a chair and ended up sprawled in a heap near the windows. I pulled myself up and drew the curtains back.

The sight which met my eyes sent a shiver down my spine.

The other side of the Falls was on fire. Behind the spray, visible by the firelight, flitted army helicopters, their searchlights sweeping the rain forests below.

Instinctively, I got back down on the floor and crawled on my hands and knees to the door of the room.

There was no-one about and a deathly silence was on the place. Everything was in darkness. I bumped my head on a table before managing to find the door which led to the passage. Still nobody.

I felt my way along, knowing that the elevators would not be working so I'd have to find the stairs. But I was so completely disoriented, I was taking all the wrong turns and it seemed I was just going around in circles.

Just as I was giving up hope I was suddenly blinded by the white beam from a powerful flashlight. When my eyes adjusted, I was staring down the barrel of a rifle, behind which was a giant in battle fatigues, his face blackened with grease paint.

"Hullo," I said uncertainly.

"Jesus, lady, what are you doing here?"

The soldier helped me to my feet and propelled me down the passage, explaining as we went that, while I was comatose on my bed - for several hours - the hotel had come under mortar fire from the guerilla fighters across the river. Everyone had been evacuated to the basement - our party was obviously so inebriated they hadn't even noticed my absence (after all, you would have to be stupendously drunk not to notice my absence).

Whoever had designed the President's suite had obviously not imagined that one day it would be on the side of the hotel most vulnerable to unfriendly fire from neighbouring Zambia - as my camouflaged rescuer explained to me, I had been left in the most dangerous place imaginable.

When I was ushered into the basement, still only clad in my damp bikini and wrap, I was greeted by the sight of dozens of hotel guests in various states of repose, evidently quite miserable, including a rather embarrassed John who's responsibility it had been, after all, to see that I was okay. All was forgiven, though, when he gallantly took off his shirt and wrapped it lovingly around me.

The mood in the bunkers changed quite rapidly when I discovered a store of wine and cheese. Before long, our party resumed where we had left off and continued until dawn when the power was restored and the hotel was once again declared safe.

From Victoria Falls we went on to the Lowveldt, to my married hometown of Chiredzi. I believe it was quite therapeutic, as I was able to add some happy memories to a town I had left in grief.

It was here that John asked me to marry him. I said I'd have to think about it.

My predicament was that Billy, my philandering business partner and one-time lover, had come back to me in Bulawayo during the time that I was seeing John and had also asked me to marry him.

I had left him dangling, but then he went and bought the most divine diamond ring for me and I was gradually being swayed. He and I had also been staying back after the club closed, on a regular basis, and making love on the podium - an incredibly erotic experience! I had to admit, Billy was one hell of a lover, and he was good looking, witty and successful to boot.

I didn't want to say no out of hand to either of my suitors and stand the risk of regretting it later. But it was also not in my character to put off a decision. So I decided to set each man a practical test before rejecting either one of them. That also meant that I would be able to enjoy both their considerable attentions for a little while longer.

The morning after John popped the question, I told him I would have to visit him when he returned to Ireland to see whether or not we would remain compatible on his turf.

As for Billy, I told him he would have to move in with me as soon as my "house guests" had vacated, so that I could gauge our compatibility in much the same way.

Neither man knew about the other's romantic interest.

John and Barry were due to fly out to Mauritius before heading back to Ireland - nine months overdue.

I flew to Johannesburg with them, as I had a new package of emeralds I needed to deliver, and I bade farewell to them there. The idea was that I would make arrangements to visit them in Ireland within the month and spend a couple of weeks living with John. As it turned out, I was not to see John for a great deal longer than just a few weeks...

On my first day in Johannesburg, the emerald deal safely done, I treated myself to a shopping excursion in the city.

My first stop was a greeting card shop, where I was looking for a bon voyage postcard to send off to the boys' hotel in Mauritius, when who should walk into the shop but my ex-conquest Dorian and his crazy girlfriend Olga.

Olga, thankfully, didn't see me, but Dorian did. He came sneaking over.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered dramatically.

"I'm buying a card."

"No... you know what I mean. Where are you staying?"

"At the Landross Hotel."

"I'm at the Holiday Inn."

"Olga?"

"She's going into hospital for a boob job. I have to go. Phone me at six."

At six forty-five I made the call and Dorian told me he had dropped Olga off at the hospital and would I go out to dinner with him.

We went to a place called the Fisherman's Grotto, a fantastic seafood restaurant with the most fabulous selection of wine.

Dorian and I got stuck into the red wine and ended up back at my suite in the Landross Hotel. Dorian spent the night and made passionate love to me. But he was being just a little too passionate - he was leaving love bites all over me, in the most indiscreet places.

"Dorian, what are you doing - stop that!" I was squealing.

But he kept on doing it. When I woke up in the morning I had dozens of hickeys all over me, from neck to toe.

"Dorian," I shook him awake angrily.

"Morning my darling," he smiled mischievously at me.

"Don't you morning-my-darling me. What the hell were you thinking of last night?"

"Pardon me?"

"Look at me - what am I going to tell Billy when I get back to Bulawayo?"

Dorian climbed out of bed, pulled on his trousers, buttoned his shirt, slipped into his shoes and headed for the door.

"Hey!" I shouted after him. As he opened the door, he turned and looked me straight in the eye.

"Hazel," he grinned.

"What?" I was beginning to lose my temper.

"That's for the glitter."

When the bastard was gone, I lifted the phone and placed a call to Billy.

"Listen," I told him, "I can't come home just yet because I have to stay on here and do some business."

So I lingered in Johannesburg for four days longer than I had to, just waiting for the love bites to go away.

But those marks simply wouldn't go away.

When I arrived back in Bulawayo I got off the plane and was met by an amorous Billy.

"Listen," I said when we got home, "I fell down the steps at Jan Smuts airport, so I'm a little bruised and sore - can we take a rain check on making love tonight?"

Billy believed me - but I had to make sure he didn't see my naked body in any sort of light for a few more weeks.

In the meantime, I met the most beautiful man on earth - his name was Bernard.

He was to become my best friend, but I gradually found myself more and more sexually attracted to him. I'm quite sure much of the allure was to do with the fact that he was happily married and therefore both forbidden fruit and a challenge.

Hard as I tried, I never did have an affair with Bernard. We came fairly close - actually ending up on a hotel bed together, but both of us ended up laughing uncontrollably at the very thought, like a pair of little children.

There were too many factors standing in the way of our platonic relationship becoming any more than just that. Not only was Bernard married to a beautiful and loving wife, but he was also very Jewish and I was but a Gentile, and a widowed one at that.

But I think the biggest stumbling block was our intellectual love affair. Any physical interaction may have destroyed our unique ability to communicate.

Still to this day Bernard and I are the best of pals and have never made love.

I eventually met his wife and his wonderful family and today I can pick up the phone to them at any time and from anywhere in the world.

Bernard introduced me to a lot of his super wealthy friends and a door to a fascinating new world was opened to me.

It was a world of delightful decadence, of wild parties, recreational drugs, 'swinging' and open orgies...

The first party I attended was in the disarmingly upper class area of Burnside. Imported liquor and an array of recreational drugs were on offer, set out on a glass trestle between a crystal clear swimming pool and a giant Jacuzzi. It was November and oppressively hot, even at the traditional sun downer hour of six o'clock.

Many of the 'beautiful' people I knew as regular patrons of my clubs were there, as well as suitably anonymous visitors from South Africa and abroad. You could smell the money. It was like an aphrodisiac.

By nine o'clock, guests had already started disrobing for a skinny dip under the stars. I didn't hesitate to join in, and the Jacuzzi became an erotic sampling arena where perfect strangers caressed each other not only in couples but in groups of three, four, five... I became entwined in the gentle intimacy of a young husband and wife from London, for the very first time experiencing the indescribably sensual touch of a woman.

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BETWEEN THOSE NEW-FOUND PLEASURES OF THE FLESH I WAS also becoming more adept at spotting new ways of making large sums of money by both illegal and legitimate means. Apart from my burgeoning emerald smuggling and black market currency deals, I was raking in sinful profits from selling smuggled luxury commodities at wildly inflated prices and using the availability of hard cash to my advantage in buying and selling cars, industrial equipment, jewellery... anything, in fact, that would render a quick and generous return.

But I was also becoming more mindful of the fact that my increased activity and high profile risked attracting the unwanted attention of the authorities.

There were two things I needed to achieve in order to protect myself, and by extension my children, from the threat of any criminal conviction.

One, I would need to make contacts within the police for the express purpose of alerting me to any impending raids.

Two, I would need to do something to deflect the suspicions of law enforcement agents.

There was only one thing for it. In early 1977, I signed up as a police reservist.

Because of the manpower shortage, any volunteer was welcomed with open arms, but the red carpet was practically rolled out for me because of my husband's supreme sacrifice and my consequent celebrity status as the pregnant war widow.

I underwent all the training to which any new recruit would be subjected: gruelling physical education, use of firearms and marksmanship, unarmed combat, survival techniques, arrest procedures, the law pertaining to arrest, first aid, forensic science, investigations, documentation... Training that has saved my bacon in more ways than one over the years and that continues to serve me well to this day.

But joining the police reserves did more than just teach me how to defend myself from those outside the law as well as from the law itself... it opened my eyes in another important way that has had an enormous impact on my life, particularly in recent years.

It showed me that in the Rhodesian conflict there were two sides to the story. My husband had been killed as a result of the war against advancing African nationalism, there was no

escaping that fact. As his widow, it was only natural that initially I harboured deep feelings of hatred and resentment toward the ‘terrorists’ I believed were indirectly responsible for his death.

But now I began to see how the black population lived, and that they did, after all, have legitimate grievances. Terrible injustices were being perpetrated, despite the Government’s sunny propaganda to the contrary.

As a suburban housewife, I had been protected from the disturbing images to which I now became privy.

Even though I was far more realistic about the politics of the country than your average white woman in 1970’s Rhodesia - thanks to my chosen profession - I had still been spared the grim truth of the toll taken on the black majority by decades of economic deprivation and social humiliation.

Seeing what I saw, I can say hand on heart that if I’d been black I would have probably picked up a gun and joined those who were, indirectly at least, responsible for the death of my own husband...

I’m not only referring to active persecution, although I did witness a good few such incidents; I’m talking about the endless poverty trap, the exploitation, the inability of parents to educate their children, the consistently conveyed message that if you were black, you were inferior, the perpetual erosion of a man’s dignity.

The most poignant and heart-rending result of this suffering and despair became evident to me on my very first assignment.

I was told only that I was to accompany another officer on a routine visit to the Matopos district, an area characterised by mile upon mile of granite outcrops and awe-inspiring balancing rocks, the place where master colonialist Cecil John Rhodes had chosen to be buried on the crest of an especially remarkable stone hill aptly named World’s View.

As we negotiated the winding strip-road in an open-backed grey police Land Rover, surrounded by the most wondrous scenery, my companion, a burly man by the name of Frank, turned to me and smiled grimly.

“Hazel, I’m afraid this routine recce isn’t so routine.”

“What do you mean?”

“You might see some pretty nasty things.”

“Like what?” I was beginning to lose patience. If you have something to tell me, then tell me. There’s nothing I find more irritating than someone who beats about the bush.

“You’ll see.”

He pulled over, checked my weapon and then his own - once again succeeding in annoying me intensely.

“Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath.

“What? Frank, what the fuck-”

“Relax, Hazel. Didn’t you see him?”

“See who?”

“Over there.” He pointed into the dense bush, beyond the tall yellow grass on the verge.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Can you smell him, then?”

I raised my chin and breathed in through my nose. It was a mistake. I began to gag. It was the most disgusting stench I had ever experienced, or ever will.

Then I saw it. The unmistakable figure of a man suspended by the neck from a Mopani tree. The cadaver hung absolutely motionless, as if cast in stone, despite the warm breeze that blew our way.

Neither of us spoke as we picked our way through the long grass to the spot where the poor man had taken his own life. I held my breath, and when I glanced across at Frank I saw he was doing the same.

As we approached, there was a high-pitched squealing, followed by a frantic scurrying. Frank and I had our FN rifles to our shoulders in a heartbeat but neither of us loosed off a round: Both of us realised that there would be more danger posed by signalling our presence to any potential 'unfriendlies' in the area than by what was evidently just some form of startled wildlife.

We advanced with extreme caution.

"Oh Jesus," moaned Frank, pulling up abruptly.

Simultaneously, I saw it as well. I shut my eyes and turned my head for a brief moment, then forced myself to look again. I was relieved that Frank was so absorbed by the horrifying sight that he hadn't noticed my fleeting display of weakness.

"Fucking wild pigs," he said through clenched teeth.

They had devoured the rotten flesh that had been the man's feet and ankles.

With a supreme effort, we advanced slowly. Saliva filled my mouth. I fought off the urge to turn away and throw up.

When we were close enough to make out the features of the dead man, once again, we both halted in our tracks. There was no face...

"What the—" Frank started, and just then a cloud of flies rose up from the corpse's head, in a single, ominously humming mass, revealing what was left of the man's countenance.

Maggots crawled in his gaping mouth and in the weeping sockets where his eyes had once been.

The wire coat hanger the poor unfortunate had used in place of a rope had torn through his throat, so his head was only attached to his body by spinal cord the width of an index finger.

Neither of us dared speak. We stood rooted to the spot for what seemed like an age. Frank finally broke the silence with a soft moan.

"I can't do this."

He turned and walked away. I followed him, gratefully. We stood at the Land Rover, facing the other way, sharing a cigarette. Frank was so pale his freckles were showing.

"We can't just leave him there," I said finally.

"Why not. Nothing worse can happen to the poor bastard."

"I know. But we can't just leave him there."

"What do you suggest we do then? Pull... that... that thing down and scrape it off the ground? Jesus..."

I glanced back. It was still there. I bit my nails.

"Okay," I said after a long while.

"Okay what?"

"You get in the truck."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to drive it underneath... him. Then I'll cut him down."

Frank thought about it for a while, then, without argument, he handed me his Swiss Army knife and climbed back behind the wheel of the Land Rover.

I gritted my teeth, turned and strode purposefully back to the place of death. I averted my gaze from the spectacle and began to climb the tree as Frank dutifully reversed the vehicle through the long grass, positioning it under the putrid corpse.

I selected a suitable tool from the Swiss Army knife and dug the blade in under the thick coat-hanger wire which had cut into the bark. I could hold my breath no longer and I heaved a lung-full of warm, stinking air. A wave of nausea gripped me for a moment, then I shut my eyes and jerked the blades of the cutting tool together. The wire snapped and the branch swung upwards as the terrible thing it had supported fell away, landing on the back of the truck with a sickening thud.

We drove back through Matopos in silence. Frank glanced at me every so often. I knew he wanted to apologise for being so weak, for being a coward, for being only human.

“Frank, please pull over.”

“Sure,” he skidded to a halt. I ran from the side of the road and ducked behind a tree. I leaned my back against it, closed my eyes and wept.

*

MY MONTHS IN THE POLICE RESERVES ALSO, HOWEVER, YIELDED their fair share of laughs.

Once we were manning a roadblock where vehicles would be searched for arms or explosives. Whilst vigilant, we were generally quite relaxed as guerrilla fighters were not known to make open attacks in this particular area as they would have little chance of evading retribution from the air in a follow-up operation.

So it was that I was chatting away to seven lovely guys in uniform when a lorry came careening around the corner and bearing down on us at full speed.

“Get the fucking spikes down!” roared the senior officer and it was done just in time. All four tyres on the lorry burst and it skidded off the road and went nose-first into the ditch. We quickly surrounded it, all weapons trained on the cab.

None of us were prepared for the sight that greeted us next.

An old man - he actually turned out to be an 81-year-old granddad - threw open the driver-side door and staggered onto the road. His trousers were around his ankles, his little penis was standing to attention, and he still held in one hand a crumpled pornographic magazine, open to the centre spread.

The old pervert stood and stared at us, dazed and reeking of cheap liquor.

Finally he spoke, or rather, slurred.

“Whaza you lookin’ a?”

We cracked up. I have never seen anything so hilarious in all my life. I don’t think any of us had, or ever will. Even now, just thinking about it, I have to laugh.

He was taken in for the night. In the meantime, we discovered a veritable treasure trove of pornographic material in the back of the lorry.

“Dirty old man,” muttered one of my companions as he flipped through one of the more explicit magazines, pausing for just a little too long to gaze at an image of a particularly pretty girl giving head to a muscular stud.

It got me thinking.

It wasn’t long before I was smuggling container-loads of hard core magazines, mainly of Eastern European origin (let’s face it - no-one actually buys these magazines for the articles!) - and the odd Dutch blue movie on 35mm film (video technology wasn’t readily available).

I had a ready market of under-the-counter buyers at my clubs. Within just three months of my encounter with the octogenarian wanker I was doing brisk trade and garnering an extremely tidy profit, thank you very much.

That wasn't the only benefit I derived from being in the police. My primary reason for joining had been to make contacts and to use what inside information I could to protect my interests and the interests of my growing list of associates. The wisdom of this policy was conclusively proved before long.

When a new consignment of magazines arrived, I would invite all of my top buyers around to the apartment of one of my 'importers', a guy by the name of Sean, for a private viewing. Part of the evening's entertainment was a showing of the latest blue movie.

On one occasion, I had been called into the station as unrostered relief for one of the regular charge office police men whose wife had unexpectedly gone into labour. That night I had arranged for one of my private viewing parties at Sean's place, and we were expecting a mixed crowd of about twenty clients, men and women.

I called Sean and told him I wouldn't be able to make it until late, but he was to go ahead and 'entertain' my guests.

I had barely replaced the receiver when I overheard something that made my blood run cold.

The O/C was chatting to two constables over steaming cups of tea as they pored over a map of the city.

"It's the apartment on the alley side but its three floors up, so there's no need to worry about any of them escaping that way. It's a straightforward job - just kick down the front door and lead them all out. According to our source there should be quite a haul of contraband... really hard core Russian stuff on paper as well as the fuck-flicks..."

I didn't need to hear another word. It was obvious that there was going to be a raid on Sean's place. It was a disaster.

I left the charge office as discreetly as I could, found an empty office and placed a call to Sean.

"Tell everyone to get out, and clear everything out - you have about fifteen minutes."

"What's going on-"

"Just do as I fucking say!"

When the raid squad burst through the door of the apartment, all they found was a very pious-looking Sean sitting in an armchair - reading the Bible!

I also used my position in the police many times to enhance my emerald deals - I was able to do favours for some very powerful people which stood me in good stead both at the time and in later years.

Working for the police was a good lesson, a hard lesson - I was with them for three years in all. But it was also a lot of fun - and I learned a lot of valuable things about the way the law operates, and also techniques in detective work which I use to this day.

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EVEN THOUGH I WAS CAREFUL, AND I WAS USING MY CONTACTS and my information from the police, it would have been virtually impossible not to attract unwanted official attention.

I got on fine with the guys in the police, even though I'm sure many of them did suspect me of involvement in activities south of the law.

It was Special Branch I had to watch out for. And it was these hard-nosed bastards who came close to rumbling my entire operation.

They had evidently been watching me for some time without my knowledge, but must have been frustrated by the intricate procedures I always insisted on putting in place before doing any sort of criminal deal... suddenly, without warning, they started to surface and make themselves known to me. They were trying to scare me into making a mistake.

A pair of them would frequently saunter into one of my clubs, or into the hotel I had now bought with Billy. Seedy men in badly fitting tweed jackets and two-tone shoes, looking more like Chicago mobsters than law enforcement officers.

"Howzit, Mrs Green Eyes," they would greet me with sleazy smirks, a decidedly non-intellectual reference to my emerald deals.

"Good evening gentlemen," I would reply coolly, not masking my distaste.

"Ja, howzit, have you got any... green stuff for us?"

The SB were not known for their subtle interrogation techniques.

It would have been easy to underestimate these unpleasant little men - but it would also have been dangerous and irresponsible.

They succeeded in making our lives very difficult. Once, they introduced new airport controls just for my benefit, and I was forced to dump my merchandise in the toilets. I am still horrified at the thought.

So we had to get more and more creative about how to smuggle the stuff. We started getting them out in car tyres and in toothpaste tubes and coke bottles and talcum powder boxes and in sealed cans and jars of cream.

I had absolutely no guilt complex about what I was doing. As far as I was concerned - and I will argue this until my dying day - I was doing no wrong.

For one thing, this country, Rhodesia, had deprived me of my loving husband, the father of my children, our provider.

The war widow's pension I was being paid would have forced me to gradually forfeit everything I owned. It would have meant that I would end up working my fingers to the bone for some son of a bitch for the rest of my life, meekly waiting for the day when I would be given a mantel-clock as a retirement gift.

It would have meant that my children would have to attend Government schools where the certificates they got at the end of it wouldn't - in my opinion - have been worth the paper they were printed on.

Most significantly, the writing was on the wall for Rhodesia even as Ian Douglas Smith stood up to the Empire and declared his rebel state in 1965.

Any realist with half a brain could see that there was no way a handful of whites could hope to hold out against ten million blacks - not counting the independent neighbouring states sympathetic to the cause of African Nationalism - and indeed against the entire world, East and West.

Because foreign exchange was such a rare commodity, all Rhodesians knew that when it eventually came to yielding to the inevitable winds of change, we would be lucky to get the minimum promised thousand pounds per family in order to emigrate to less hostile shores.

Fancy homes and fancy cars would overnight become of no value. In the great white exodus that had to come, we would all be left with a suitcase and a photo album of memories and heartache at having to bid farewell to God's Own Country, but on such

meagre assets you cannot be expected to build a whole new life just across the border in South Africa, much less on the other side of the world.

Any sensible, responsible adult could only but take it on themselves to find some way of paving the way for a more secure future. If that meant breaking the law, so be it. The system taught you to be corrupt.

I was just better at being corrupt than most.

I had reached the stage where I was well-connected enough in my own right to undertake some of the functions I had initially left to middlemen in South Africa. In this way I was able to dramatically improve my profit margins on each of my emerald deals, commensurate with the risks I was now taking as a 'known suspect'.

Effectively, this meant going further up the chain - and cutting deals with those closer to the end buyers - or even the end-buyers themselves.

Naturally, this meant I was no longer confined to doing deals in South Africa. Almost overnight, I became an international emerald trader.

I began to sell stones in London, to the Jewish and Asian buyers in Hatton Garden. This inevitably led to further deals in India itself, and in Israel and the Middle East.

I also began to establish markets all over Europe - principally Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany. I opened the first of many overseas accounts, for myself and for clients.

As was only natural, I was unable to avoid being double-crossed on more than one occasion.

On one deal, I was badly burned because I had made the mistake of trusting my partners, a couple of Portuguese guys with whom I had been previously involved in a number of small to medium transactions.

They approached me with 'the mother of all deals' and persuaded me to invest a hundred thousand dollars in their 'parcel'. That was a small fortune in those days, at the time equivalent to a hundred thousand pounds - by today's standards several hundred thousand.

I in turn convinced a few of my close associates to add to the kitty. I handed over a cool three hundred and fifty thousand, trusting my good Portuguese friends implicitly. After all, I had sat at their dinner tables, bounced their children on my knee, met their wives, shared my body with them...

To this day we've never seen them again - it was a huge blow, but that was the chance you had to take.

But each time I was stung I learned a valuable lesson. Like when I was just starting out, I gladly left a parcel with a potential buyer because I trusted him, and when I came back the cream of the parcel was gone. You only do that kind of thing once. It taught me to trust no-one. I had to learn extremely quickly in order to survive because I was a woman alone with two children. And survive I did.

*

FOR RHODESIA BY MID-1979 THE WRITING WAS VERY LEGIBLY ON the wall - in blood. It was all coming to an end. I had seen both sides of the story and couldn't stomach it any longer. As far as I could determine, both sides were at fault, both had been responsible for pointless brutality and I wanted nothing more to do with it. I had no allegiance to any country - my only care was for my children. So I began to make the necessary preparations for getting out.

Just before I left Rhodesia in the early months of 1980, I called up my best friend Angela.
“I’ve sold the house, the clubs, everything.”

“My God, Hazel, I’m sorry.”

Angela knew that I must have lost a lot on the sales. Property and business values had plummeted the closer we came to the first general elections that could only result in Marxist majority rule.

“I’m coming to stay with you for a few days.”

“That’s fine - I can’t wait to see you!”

“I’m leaving the country, Angela.”

She was devastated, but understood it was the right thing to do.

Somehow Special Branch got wind of the fact that I was getting out. But once again my contacts in the police proved invaluable. One of my friends tipped me off and I took an earlier flight than the one they thought I was going on - instead of the 5.15pm flight, Hayley, Anthony and I were on the 10.15 am flight bound for Johannesburg.

When Angela got home from the airport she found about twenty policemen in her home and going through her belongings.

That night I boarded a plane at Jan Smuts airport in Johannesburg... bound for Belfast, Northern Ireland.

*

I WAS TO LIVE IN ULSTER FOR NEARLY A YEAR.

When I arrived I immediately contacted my two friends, J&B (John and Barry).

Within 24-hours I had resumed intimate relations with John, who still, after all this time, regarded our engagement in Chiredzi to be intact.

But John and I had terrible fights - he thought that I’d be content to become a second class citizen, stay at home and look after the children and let him go out and be a good man and breadwinner.

Of course, after the lifestyle and the freedom I had enjoyed, this was just not on. I was far too independent. I asked him where he was getting all his money from and all he would say was: “Don’t worry, my parents are very wealthy and one day when they are gone I will inherit a fortune and you’ll never have to worry about money.”

I hated the thought of living off his parents, so I moved back in with my mom, who had returned to Northern Ireland shortly before me. My dad had remained behind in Bulawayo to wrap things up.

But John continued to woo me and I finally agreed to marry him.

We organised a church and I set about planning a wonderful wedding.

But at the last minute I decided I couldn’t go through with it. It was just two days before the wedding day and hundreds of invitations had already gone out.

I told my mother.

“Are you mad, Hazel?” she was horrified.

“Just help me pack my suitcases.”

I packed everything into four suitcases, booked seats for the kids and I from Aldergrove to London and that night we were on a six o’clock flight back to Johannesburg.

When I arrived the next morning and got off the plane, I stood in arrivals with my four suitcases and two exhausted little children and realised I had nowhere to go.

Of course, I could have made contact with one of my many 'business associates' and they would have no doubt despatched a car to collect me and insisted I stayed in their home.

But I did not want them to see me this way. I make a point of never revealing a weakness to anyone, particularly not those with whom I may one day have to negotiate an important deal.

As bad luck would have it, it was tourist season and, to make matters worse, the Rand International Show had just begun, so I couldn't get a room in a decent hotel. All that was available was a few single bedrooms in motels on the wrong side of town.

The Virgin Mary I am not, so I got on a pay phone at the airport, called an estate agent I knew and arranged to view a penthouse that was renting for the outrageous sum of a thousand rand a month.

This would have been okay a year earlier when I was relatively flush despite having lost so much on Rhodesia's demise - but I had been somewhat over-extravagant whilst living in Belfast and had succeeded in emptying my overseas bank accounts.

I don't know why I did it. I guess it was because for the first time in years I actually had the time to stop and look at things in shop windows - clothes, shoes, jewellery... After the constant international wheeling and dealing in-between running two successful night clubs and an hotel and the chaotic social life I had led in Rhodesia, suddenly I was thrust into the cold, grey vacuum that was post-70's Belfast and I simply lost it.

When all was said and done, I walked into that penthouse on the right side of Johannesburg with a little over fifteen hundred rand in my pocket.

But I thought: "Don't worry, everything will work out okay."

I had decided to try living on the right side of the law for a change. The prospect of wheeling and dealing for a living had suddenly - for the time being, at least - seemed too much to bear. I was actually excited about the idea of getting a normal nine-to-five job.

I immediately set about looking for one. I hired a car. I looked for schools for the children.

I found a good school for Hayley, who was now eight years old, and enrolled little Anthony, now five, in a play school.

By now, John had extracted from my mother my whereabouts and he started to call me incessantly. He wanted me to come home, he had forgiven me for leaving him standing at the altar, he wouldn't pressure me any more, he would let me start my own business. But I was beyond him now.

I had made contact with my ex-partner Billy, and with my other ex-fiancé Brent. Billy was coming to live in South Africa, and Brent wanted to come and visit me in Johannesburg. So now, once again, I was in a real dilemma.

All of this was swirling about in my head when I got home one evening from my job-hunting. As I got to the door of my apartment, Hayley in tow and Anthony asleep in my arms, I could hear the phone ringing. I took my time, thinking it was probably one of my stubborn suitors.

But I was wrong. It was my faithful friend Angela calling from Bulawayo.

"Angela! My God, it's good to hear your voice!" I squealed with delight.

"Hazel," she said, unusually solemn, "who is in the apartment with you?"

"No-one - just me and the kids."

"Look," she continued, "the police will be coming to your door soon-"

"Oh shit... hang on, don't worry, it's okay - I don't have anything here. I'm going legit, Angela-"

"No Hazel. It's not that. Please don't get alarmed... do you have any friends there?"

"Why... yes, I do." I had recently bumped into a couple who had been good friends of mine in Rhodesia, Tamara and Roger. "What's going on, Angela?"

"Please Haze, just give me their number."

Her tone told me to take this seriously. I gave her the number.

"Darling," she whispered, "phone me when the police get there, okay?"

As she said that there was a knock on the door. A large policeman and a policewoman were standing there.

"Sorry, Miss, are you Hazel Crane?"

"Yes."

"Are you the daughter of Archibald Proudfoot Magee?"

"Yes."

"Can we come in, please Miss?"

"Certainly."

I showed them into the living room. They did not sit down. I noticed that the woman officer was avoiding any eye contact with me. It was her partner who delivered the news.

"There has been a very tragic accident. Your father has been in a head on collision. We want you to fly to Bulawayo to identify the body."

That was how I was told of my father's death.

I was shattered. I didn't know what to do. I became hysterical, screaming and performing.

I couldn't control it. The woman officer kept her distance, eyes averted. The policeman tried to calm me down by patting me on the shoulder.

He asked for my mom's telephone number, but I couldn't remember it, I couldn't remember anything.

In the meantime Angela had phoned Tamara, and Roger rushed straight over to the apartment. He took over then and was very good.

"Hazel, you can't stay here at the apartment. I'll help you pack a case and then you're coming home with me. We'll put you on a plane in the morning."

I did as I was told. After I'd had Hayley and Anthony, I had retained a medical problem common to both my pregnancies - the slightest shock made me haemorrhage heavily. That night I soaked the bed sheets in Tamara's spare room.

Roger had found my address book and called my mother and Karen (who had also emigrated to Northern Ireland with her family just before Zimbabwe's independence), and he arranged to get them and Michael on a plane to Zimbabwe.

By that stage my youngest sister had also arrived in South Africa and was living in Durban with her husband. I phoned her to give her the news. She wasn't able to fly with me but would follow me up the next day.

The following morning Tamara and Roger put me and Anthony on a plane to Bulawayo. They kept Hayley with them as their daughter was the same age as Hayley and they were already best friends.

When I arrived in Bulawayo I was met by my dad's good friends. They took us to their apartment where they put us up because my dad had already sold the house and he had been staying in a hotel.

We went to my dad's room at the hotel. We found in his clothing a little bit of gold and a few emeralds which I knew I could sell for my mother. There were no insurance policies:

it transpired that my dad had cashed them all in and, together with the money from the house, he had given everything to a 'friend' to take overseas. But it never reached its intended destination and the 'friend' denied it.

I arranged the funeral on my own. My father's funeral Mass was held at the Catholic Cathedral of St Mary's.

The Cathedral was so packed there was not even standing room - it spilled out onto the road outside. My father was a hugely popular man, because of the karate lessons he gave, his involvement in Alcoholics Anonymous, St John's Ambulance Service, with the rugby, with his fishing, with the railways... he was an all round sociable guy and everyone loved him. Someone said to me years later it was one of the biggest funerals Bulawayo had seen, and my father wasn't even involved in politics (maybe that's why!).

Now the decision had to be made for my mother because she didn't know what she was going to do. She stayed on in Bulawayo for a week and we helped her sort out all the legal papers and collect my dad's ashes.

I left my mom with Karen in Bulawayo. She and Michael, now a full-blown teenager, were to fly down to me in Johannesburg the following week when Karen returned to Ireland.

When I got home to my apartment I was shocked to discover that the locks had been changed. I had paid my rent for the next month before I went to Bulawayo, so I had no idea what the problem could be.

I went to the apartment supervisor and he told me they had, inexplicably, thought I wasn't coming back so they'd rented out my flat to someone else and had packed all my belongings and put them into a storeroom under the building! I was stunned, but there was nothing I could do about it as the new tenants were not about to move out.

I made arrangements to stay with friends while I looked for somewhere new to stay, but I only had a few days because my mom was due to come down and join me. So I ran around Johannesburg and ultimately found an apartment in prosperous Killarney, in a building called the Mediterranean that they were still busy building. I fell in love with the apartment the moment I laid eyes on it, even though the carpets hadn't even gone down yet. It was a three-bedroomed, two bathroomed affair and I knew I would be comfortable here for the moment.

The owner's name was Leslie, and he seemed to take quite a fancy to me. I took advantage of the situation.

"Les, do you think I could move in before they finish the building?"

"Of course you can," he grinned. "In that case, I'll even give you the choice of which carpets you want."

So I went out and I picked the most expensive long-haired carpets, absolutely decadent, but Les was paying so I went for it.

I went out and splashed out on some new furniture and bought a second hand car and moved into the flat.

On the day that my mom and Michael were due to arrive from Bulawayo I was able to move into the apartment. I met them at the airport and brought them back to my new home.

Within hours, disaster struck.

We unloaded my mom's luggage and got it up to the apartment and I said I had to go down to the electricity department to sign the forms to have the power turned on. My mom said she just wanted to take a quick bath first, and I said okay.

So she went into the first bathroom, put the plug in and turned on the taps. No water came out. So she put a plug in the sink and turned on the taps. Nothing again.

She tried the second bathroom, putting a plug in the bath and in the sink and turning on the taps. Still nothing. She came out and told me there was no water. I suggested she try the kitchen just to see if it was a general failure.

So my mom duly went into the kitchen, put the plug in and turned on the taps. They were bone dry.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm sure they're just working on the pipes and you can have a bath when we get back."

So off we went to the electricity department, where it took a full four hours standing in queues, filling out forms, changing queues, filling out more forms, before we were able to come home again.

The fire brigade was outside our building. The west and north sides of the building had been turned into waterfalls.

It transpired that the firemen had been forced to break down the door of my apartment - after we'd left, the water had come on and everything had overflowed... it was on the balcony down below us and cascading into the street.

Needless to say, I was no longer popular with Landlord Les. The expensive carpets weren't insured and so I had to replace them at my own expense. My brand new furniture was saturated. I was furious with my mother. To this day she has not been able to explain her reasoning for putting the plugs into all those baths and sinks. Probably because there is no explanation.

Before long, I suggested to my mother that she return to Northern Ireland as she had a sister there. I told her she could leave Michael with me to be educated in South Africa, as I knew she just didn't feel up to it. So I took on the responsibility of my 16-year-old brother - who had grown into a proper little terrorist.

I managed to get him into a decent school, at the same time moving Hayley out of Rhodine and into Parktown Convent, which was more convenient to our new home. By contrast, I got Anthony into a nursery school which was also closer to the apartment.

The day after I put my mom on the plane back to Belfast, I went out and got myself a job. I had gone into a place called Churchill Personnel Company, and explained what I did and my qualifications - omitting any reference to international emerald smuggling, sanctions busting, purveying pornography, owning striptease joints...

"Would you be interested in working for us then?"

"You mean the employment agency?"

"Yes. As a consultant."

I took to it like a duck to water. Within a month I had been promoted to what was called an accounts executive, dealing with the clients rather than the job seekers. And within two months I was heading up the Braamfontein division of the company.

It was a position I had negotiated with them after I proposed a lucrative new system of placements, which entailed setting up a department specialising in senior positions: I would personally conduct the interviews and put forward five candidates for every top position which became available.

This included aggressive head-hunting for which I offered to take full responsibility. One could earn very generous commissions for each placement, and I began to get a lot of placements - outstripping my male colleagues by as much as a hundred percent each month.

One of my clients was a company which is now one of the largest insurance companies in South Africa. It's very old school - you must have the right qualifications and the right colour tie - and women don't generally wear ties...

I was having trouble with them. For some reason, none of the elite candidates I'd been putting forward for senior vacancies were being selected. The man in charge wouldn't return my calls. So one morning I resolved to see him even if he didn't want to see me.

I walked straight past the reception and directly into his personal assistant's office.

"I'm here to see Alan," I declared with authority.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid you can't see him."

I sat down.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave," she said, standing up.

"No I won't," I shot back. "I won't leave until I see your boss. A cup of tea would be nice while I wait."

"I beg your-"

"I said a cup of tea would be nice. White, no sugar."

"Now listen here-"

The adjoining door opened and a rather handsome man poked his head around it to see what all the commotion was about.

"Ah... Alan!" I stood up and strode across to him, extending my hand.

"I'm sorry..?"

"Hazel Crane. I must speak to you."

"Well... I can give you ten minutes..."

I followed him into his office and did not emerge for over two hours.

We absolutely hit it off from the word go. I told him all about my work and my ambitions, and he told me about the insurance schemes he was developing. I began to pick holes in some of his ideas, and far from being offended, he asked for my advice.

Within fifteen minutes I had hit upon a novel idea that had escaped an entire industry of experienced insurance men until that moment.

"What about starting a group scheme package for top blue-chip companies? You could sell them at an enormous discount because a single scheme would be so much cheaper to establish and manage..."

Alan loved the idea.

"It's ingenious... Tell me, can you speak Afrikaans?"

"Of course I can praat de taal," I lied. They were the only words I knew in the harsh, guttural language of the Dutch descendants who controlled the country.

"How would you like to work for us?"

"Can you afford me?"

"What do you want?"

And so for the remainder of our session, we hammered out a preliminary contract of employment that effectively doubled my salary and gave me a company car. When I

walked out of his office past his smouldering assistant, I smiled sweetly at her and said ominously: "I'll be back."

So I went to work for Alan. I came onto a floor where there were only men. I was handed the group schemes on a platter.

I launched into it with a vengeance and after my first full week out the switchboards were jammed with inquiries. Alan called me into his office and asked me the most stupid question.

"For God's sake, Hazel, how many boyfriends do you have phoning you?"

I nearly fainted - I couldn't believe that a businessman could be that stupid. But I was only beginning to learn that even in the world of high finance, legitimate business, there was no shortage of stupid men.

I went out doing presentations all over the country - from Durban to Cape Town to Port Elizabeth to East London - I looked after all the group schemes single-handedly, prepared and delivered my own presentations. I had my name and all my contact numbers - even my home number - on all the brochures.

I was having a fantastic time, meeting lots of delicious men - and bedding them. I had affairs with men named Karl and Graham and Jacques, and I was being wine and dined just about every night. I met and befriended chairmen and directors of big companies. I was making a lot of valuable contacts.

But I was also working really hard - I was supposed to be at work by eight o'clock but I would always be there by seven - I would drop my children off at school and still be in work an hour early every single day. At one o'clock I'd leave to pick up my kids and take them to an after-school creche and then pick them up at five and take them home to the maid, but go straight back to work often until nine or ten at night.

Hayley and Anthony were a doddle. Michael, on the other hand, was most definitely not. It was hard enough that I had two small children, a demanding job and barely enough money on which to survive (the commissions hadn't started coming in yet), but I had an energetic, charismatic, testosterone-pumped teenager from hell to contend with. I have never been one to allow circumstances to intimidate me, or to get me down, but the incident that followed came very close to driving me over the edge.

One evening, I went out for a meal with one of my many admirers. My beau's car was barely out of sight when Michael and his new found friends decided to take my little Chevrolet Berlina out for a spin, without my permission.

Michael was behind the wheel when they collided with another vehicle, not only writing off my pride and joy but also effecting thousands of rands worth of damage to the third party. Michael had tried to run away, but they caught up with him. The police dropped him home but told him they would be back to speak to me, his legal guardian.

Before I got home from my dinner date, Michael confided his crime to a friend of mine, Graham.

"How am I going to tell Hazel?" he asked, genuinely (and justifiably) terrified.

"It will be okay," reassured Graham, displaying an unimaginable degree of naiveté.

"Michael, you can't run away from problems. You have to confront them."

"But I want to run away," sobbed my little brother, who had more experience in such matters. He was perfectly and painfully aware of my murderous temper.

"You mustn't run away," reiterated Graham.

I bade farewell to my dinner date at the door, and came in, looking forward to a warm bath before bed as I had another early start the next day. Michael was standing in the

hallway, staring at his shoes. Graham stood behind him, an uncertain half-smile on his face.

"Hi Hazel," he said with forced enthusiasm.

"What's wrong?" I shot back.

"Michael has something to tell you."

Michael tried to back off, but Graham had him firmly by the shoulders.

"Well?" I asked, hanging up my coat.

"Um..."

"Tell her Michael. Don't worry," murmured Graham.

"Tell me what?"

Michael took a deep breath and then blurted out the news.

I stood still for a good ten seconds, taking it in. My car, a tangled, twisted wreck. Someone else's car – the same. My little bastard of a sibling responsible. Insurance invalid. I did a mental calculation. It was going to cost me about R20,000. It was an enormous blow.

"Fuck!" I exploded.

Graham let go of Michael's shoulders when he saw the venomous rage in my eyes. Michael bolted into my bedroom. I went after him.

"Now Hazel," gasped Graham, "Hazel, what are you going to do?"

I knew exactly what I was going to do. I was going to kill the brat. I grabbed a riding crop from my cupboard and advanced on Michael who was cowering in the corner. I lifted it, and brought it down with force on the arm he brought up in self defence. I was screaming at him now, obscenities, curses, gibberish, screaming and gasping for breath and screaming some more, and the crop went up and came down, up and down, and then Graham was on me from behind, trying in vain to restrain me. I lost the crop, and Michael succeeded in ducking out from under the blows I was raining on him. Graham managed to spin me around, so I turned my attentions on him, punching him in the face, breaking his nose. I broke free from him, snatched up a wooden clothes hanger and broke it over Graham's head. He valiantly kept himself between a hastily retreating Michael and me, and managed to shout in a voice broken with pain:

"Run, Michael! Run for your life!"

Michael needed no second bidding. He was gone, and didn't come home for a week.

Not long after this little incident, I went to collect Michael's report from his school and they said they were sorry, they had no-one by the name of Michael Magee registered at the school. I said no, no, there must be some mistake, and they said there was no mistake, Michael Magee had not been to school for months.

It turned out that Michael was walking into the school in the morning when I dropped him off, and walking straight out the back of the school. So I took him out of the private school I had been paying good money to and put him into a smaller school and there he proceeded to do very well - under the iron fist of a headmaster who believed in creative and frequent use of corporal punishment.

Michael also gave me lots of trouble because of the girlfriends he used to bring home. I bought him a 50cc Honda motorcycle to keep him quiet and happy.

One day Michael told me the bike was stolen, I still think to this day it was either buried in the bush because of something he had done, or that he sold it for the money. He never got another bike from me.

By this time Karen and Henry had left Ireland and were living in Botswana. I decided to send Michael to them because I just couldn't handle him on my own any more. I love my little brother dearly, but I have to say I breathed a sigh of relief when I got him off my hands and was left with my two little angels once again!

In the meantime I'd met another guy who I was going out with: Tommy fell madly in love with me and lent me his gold Jaguar because he was getting divorced and he had gone off to Mauritius to have a well earned emotional holiday.

After work on my first day in possession of the lovely car, I just barely tipped the bumper off another car in the parking lot: when I got out to inspect it for damage - fortunately there was none - I didn't realise that by opening the driver-side door while the engine was running I had triggered a sophisticated delayed anti-hijack system.

Outside it was pouring with rain but I was lovely and cosy in my executive car. I drove into the downpour and joined the building rush-hour traffic.

As I turned into the busiest street in downtown Johannesburg, the car cut out. Nothing I did would start it again. Drivers behind me were hooting, flashing their lights and beginning to lose their tempers - not a good thing in a country of mad people bristling with personal handguns. In desperation, I got out of the car into the pouring rain, wearing nothing but a white dress - then, as now, I never wore knickers or a bra...

So there I was standing in the pouring rain with the bonnet up and with this now-soaking and completely transparent dress clinging to me - I might as well have been naked, there was nothing left to the imagination - black triangle and boobs showing as plain as day.

The next thing another, blue Jag pulls up and this guy rolls down his window and says: "Can I help you lady?"

"Please... my car has stopped," I said lamely.

He got out and pushed my disabled car to the side of the road.

"Hi. My name's Patrick."

"Mine's Hazel. Thanks for stopping to help."

"That's okay. I don't think she's going anywhere. Look, you can't leave her here overnight or you'll come back in the morning and have no tyres... there's a garage around the corner, you get in and steer while I push."

So my knight in shining armour pushed me all the way to the service station where we left the car, and he gave me a lift home.

"By the way," he said as he pulled into a parking bay beneath my apartment block. "It wasn't the car that stopped me... it was the body."

"Is that so?" I smiled. "Now that's a surprise."

"Listen... I'll pick you up in the morning and I'll get a Jag mechanic I know to meet us at the garage..."

"Great. Thanks Patrick," I blew him a kiss and dashed into the foyer and out of the rain. When I turned around, I saw that he had sat and watched me go.

The next morning he picked me up as promised and on the way asked me what I did for a living.

"I'm in insurance."

"You're kidding! So am I. I have an insurance brokerage. What type of insurance do you handle?"

I told him about my short term group schemes.

"Please, Hazel, we have to talk. How about lunch on Monday?"

We had barely sat down to lunch when Patrick was offering me a job.

"It will be on commission only, Hazel, but I'll double the commissions you're getting and give you all my life leads."

I liked him and I liked the concept of being completely autonomous, so I readily accepted his deal.

I gave in a months notice and, despite the fact that Alan put up a fight to keep me, went to work for Patrick.

But it was evident after the first few weeks that things weren't going to work out. The biggest factor was Patrick's failure to give me the life leads he had promised.

Meanwhile, I had broken up with gold-Jag Tommy because he had threatened to kill himself when he discovered I had started going out on dates with Graham. The moment he mentioned suicide I told him to go ahead and do it and stop talking about it - I can't stand that kind of weakness in a man.

So I was seeing Graham, who was a lovely guy. I was also seeing another guy from Bulawayo, Karl, and Billy and Brent had both come back into my life and had both gone out of it again. Brent had gone back to Bulawayo and met another girl and was engaged to be married, so he was definitely out of my life.

Billy pushed off to Durban and I had decided to ditch Karl because he was younger than me and I was back to going out with Graham.

Working relations between Patrick and I had started to crumble. I had run into an old acquaintance from Bulawayo, a guy by the name of Paul and he announced his interest in me both on a romantic level and as a business partner. In one of the deals he was working on he introduced me to John, who was the owner of a very successful shipping company. John proceeded to fall madly in love with me and we got engaged... which Paul was somewhat upset about. And I also had to break the news to Graham.

John bought me a Mercedes Benz, and insisted I leave Patrick and go to work for him, which I did.

While I was engaged to John I went to see my gynaecologist because I had been haemorrhaging more than usual. He delivered some shocking news.

"Hazel, I know you're only thirty-one... but I've detected some cancer cells in your womb and I think we're going to have to do a hysterectomy."

"No!" I refused immediately. "You're wrong."

I lasted another six months before my condition worsened and I knew that I had no option but to concede to the operation.

Just as they had given me the first anaesthetic injection, the phone in my private room rang and the nurse handed it to me. I was beginning to drift a little when I heard the voice of a guy named Beau I had known in Bulawayo years before.

"Hi Hazel - I've just got into town and I bumped into someone who knows you and said you were in hospital for an op' - can I come and see you?"

"Wonderful," I said, and then I was wheeled off to theatre.

When I came around I was back in my room and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the biggest bouquet of flowers you've ever seen. And Beau is sitting at the edge of my bed holding my hand. And my fiancé John is at the other side of my bed and he wants to know who this man is!

Beau came to see me every day in the clinic and so when I was discharged I started a little scene with him because I was beginning to think that John was a bit too old for me in any case.

Shortly after I dropped John my affair with Beau also ended and I went back to Graham, who my kids called Gravy because they couldn't pronounce his name properly. I had managed to buy a townhouse at upmarket St John's Wood and Graham moved in with me. I settled down with him for a little while, but I started to get itchy feet again.

Part of it, I think, was that I wasn't comfortable with the idea of settling down. But it was also that Belfast John had been persistently calling me for months and had gradually worn me down - we rekindled our relationship and I started taking weekend trips overseas: I would jump on a plane on a Friday night to arrive in England on the Saturday morning, John would fly across to meet me at a hotel in London and we'd make love all weekend and I would fly back on the Sunday night and come straight from the airport on the Monday morning and into work and no-one was any the wiser - this went on for about seven months.

In the meantime I had started work for another large insurance firm and started group schemes with them.

After a while I decided to change and I moved over onto life insurance. I knew there was a lot of money in it, but I was still getting a salary and not commissions, so I made an appointment to discuss it with the MD.

"Do you think that I could go onto commission?" I asked, fully expecting that the conversation would be over in a few minutes and that it would be simply a formality.

He burst out laughing.

"Mrs Crane, if I was to pay you on commission with the amount of business you bring us in, you'd be earning a higher salary than me."

"And your point is?"

"My point is that... well, the answer is no."

"Fine," I said, standing up. "You've talked me into it."

"Talked you into what?"

"Going into competition with you. If I can bring in enough business to pay you a fat salary, then I might as well bring it in to pay me a fat salary. Good day."

So I left the company in 1988, with a grand total of R1,037 in the bank, and I opened a company called Response Brokers. It's still going to this day.

I moved into offices in Willow Grove where I met a Jewish attorney, dear little Ross, who was fantastic - and I started seeing him as I had dropped Graham (again).

Ross was a great guy but an unbelievable gambler - it was like an illness. He introduced me to the horse racing and I have to admit I could see how it could become addictive.

Ross had a fabulous brain and a wonderful personality, and I was actually beginning to fall in love with him when he turned around and said to me: "You know Hazel, my parents are so religious that I could never marry a Gentile - not even one that is reformed Jewish."

And so I knew that there was no future for Ross and I, but we continued to see each other for a while all the same.

One Saturday Ross and I had won it big at the races and we went celebrating at a club called Prima Donna.

I noticed a guy who was standing and watching me for much of the evening. Eventually, when Ross went off to the gents, he made his approach.

"You are a fantastic dancer. Can I dance with you?"

“Look,” I said coolly, “I’m here with company, don’t bother me.”

A little later he sidled up to me at the bar.

“Listen, I have to dance with you - come on, you and I could go places-”

I shot back: “Yes we are going places - but certainly not together.”

“You are beautiful,” he ignored the remark, “And I want to meet you.”

I had to admire his persistence, and we eventually got to talking. He introduced himself as Alex. He asked for my business card and said he would give me a call.

Sure enough, first thing on the Monday morning I got a phone call from Alex.

“I want to take you for supper.”

“No,” I said flatly.

He sent me flowers and phoned me every morning for the next four days. Eventually I agreed to go to lunch with him.

I was pleasantly surprised. He proved to be wonderful company. He had a friend with him, a guy by the name of Jimmy who I immediately took a liking to but Alex wouldn’t let me get anywhere close to him. Jimmy was going through a divorce with his wife and Alex was staying in his townhouse - which Alex told me was HIS house and I believed him.

Alex and I started dating seriously. He began to really put the pressure on. In the end, he proposed to me, gave me a diamond ring and I accepted.

But Alex wouldn’t come to live with me because I had children and he claimed to be from the old school that dictated we had to be married before he could move in.

So we arranged the wedding for the 9th of January. I organised it very quickly and we had 120 guests at a place called Villa Borgesa. We were married by a woman preacher - I don’t actually know to this day if she even had a licence to marry, so I’m not a hundred per cent convinced that it was a legitimate wedding in the first place!

In any case we said our vows and exchanged the rings - he supplied the gold and I supplied the diamonds.

In the early days of Response Brokers I was working my fingers to the bone. I would get up at four o’clock in the morning, study whatever data I had managed to beg, borrow or steal (literally) on target customers until seven o’clock, at which time I’d drop the kids off at their respective schools and get out on the road. I knocked on doors, demanded, cajoled, conned my way into meetings... then I’d race off and collect the kids and sit at home until midnight collating my new information and putting together detailed quotations.

My client list grew in leaps and bounds. I refused to take no for an answer. Once, I sat in a particularly stubborn target’s outer office for five hours until he agreed to hear me out. Within twenty minutes I had his signature on a contract.

But the commissions I was paid by the big insurance companies didn’t start arriving for the first three months. Cash flow was impossible. I was getting squeezed into a corner by my bank manager.

“Hazel, I’m sorry, but rules are rules. You’ve already breached your overdraft facility and I can’t extend it any further. If you don’t start making regular deposits I’m afraid we’ll have a problem...”

Unlike many Western countries, South Africa didn’t have facilities to assist new entrepreneurs with start-up capital or even advice. What’s more, women were considered a risk simply - as far as I could tell - because they didn’t have a penis.

One Neanderthal civil servant actually said to me: “Why are you trying to run a business, *tannie*? You should be at home baking *kooksusters* and shouting at the *kaffirs*, hey?” Once again, the system compelled me to become corrupt. Three weeks after I registered my little company, I picked up the telephone and placed a call that I had been avoiding since my return to Africa.

“Hello, Zorba?”

“Who’s that... Hazel?” came the familiar rich Greek tones.

“Hi Zorba.”

“But, Hazel, where have you been?”

“Abroad.”

“Doing some deals, yes?”

“Lots of deals, Zorba, so many deals.”

“It’s so good to hear you again... when can we meet and have a few drinks and talk business? I’ve got one on the go just now that’s right up your street. Tonight. Can we meet tonight?”

So I met Zorba and two of his partners, and we had drinks and talked business. And just like that I was back in the smuggling game as if I’d never been out of it.

Zorba was delighted to hear that I was in the insurance business. He had a few ideas about how we could make a lot of money.

“Zorba, I’m not about to start getting into insurance fraud.”

“Not fraud, Hazel, why do you want to use such words?”

“Okay, scams then.”

“Ah, Hazel, you want to upset me. Not scams. Just some creative accounting. You know.”

“Yes, I know. But the answer is still no. My business stays clean. I just want to make some spare cash to keep it going through a rough patch.”

“You want to do some diamond deals?”

“Exactly.”

“But Hazel, that’s illegal.”

“Very funny, Zorba, I know it is.”

“So you want to do some illegal diamond deals so you can make some quick cash so you can put it into your nice, new, clean business.”

I looked him directly in the eye and made no answer.

“Hmm,” he pantomimed. “Nice clean business... dirty cash. Dirty cash... nice clean business...”

“Okay, okay, I get your point. But I still won’t help you with your little frauds, scams, tricks, jobs, thefts-”

“Ha! You wound me!” But his lovely, olive face creased into a broad grin.

Very soon I had re-established contact with all my old ‘business’ associates including my Israelis, my Italians, my Portuguese, my Germans and my Indians.

It required the barest minimum of networking before I found myself involved in half a dozen illegal diamond deals.

To explain, dealing in uncut diamonds is as serious a criminal offence under South African law as dealing in emeralds was in Rhodesia. This is a precious national resource that is jealously guarded by the powers that be.

Black market dealers are seen as the cause of thefts from both State-owned and public mining concerns (such as the colossus De Beers). The prevailing logic is that miners,

sorters and processors would not steal diamonds if they didn't have someone to sell them to.

Traditional diamond mining areas like Kimberley literally teem with underworld diamond dealers... and beady-eyed government agents on the look out for underworld diamond dealers.

Such is the perceived threat to this national treasure that the South African authorities set up a dedicated task force. So, much the same as European countries would have fraud squads, drug squads and anti-terrorist squads, South Africa has its very own specialised diamond squad whose sole purpose is to "bring to justice" Illicit Diamond Buyers (IDBs). D-Men, we sometimes called them.

Being caught in possession of rough diamonds without a permit would more than likely land you a hefty fine as well as a stretch in jail. The financial penalty is one thing, but the prospect of even one night in a South African jail was, to say the very least, not an enjoyable thought. For this reason I, like my associates, went to the most extreme measures possible to avoid detection.

Although I had initially had my reservations about getting back into the game, almost immediately I felt at home and at ease in this trade at which I had been so successful before. It was as if I had been born to it.

So there I was, with my own business, a highly profitable sideline in stones and this 'lovely' guy who I had married. Everything seemed just perfect.

Happy now he had a marriage certificate in his hand and with it a legitimate right to live under the same roof as me, Alex duly moved into my townhouse.

Shortly afterwards, I sold it and we moved into a rented apartment while I looked for a house. I had made a tidy profit on the sale of the townhouse and I was now determined to find a home in an elite suburb of Johannesburg.

Eventually I found the house in Abbotsford, the one in which I still live today – not far from what was to become the Johannesburg residence of Nelson Mandela, in Haughton.

The house was very run down but the moment I laid eyes on it I pictured what I could make of it, and the picture was magnificent.

The woman who was living in the house had got a divorce and this was part of her settlement, and she sold it to me at an excellent price because it was too big for her and she didn't have the money to fix it up.

Alex didn't want to buy the house because he was terrified of committing himself to something that was too much for him - but I knew how much money I was making, so I took the money from my townhouse and put it down as a deposit on this house.

But it still wasn't enough because I was a woman on my own and the South African undervaluation of women pervaded everything, so I was forced to put the house in both my name and Alex's.

I don't know what happened, but almost the minute Alex moved in he changed. For the first time, he began displaying absolutely terrifying mood swings. I could neither comprehend nor predict them.

This was partially the reasoning behind my decision to send Anthony, who was now 13, away to boarding school. I had, in any case, been considering it for some time as I knew from the track record of some of these elite private boarding schools that they turned out the best academic results.

I picked the very best boarding school in the country.

Even though I knew it was the best thing for Anthony, the thought of sending him away was breaking my heart. As it got closer to the day on which he was due to depart, I became more inwardly upset. I had given up trying to enlist any sort of emotional support from my husband, as he would simply shrug his shoulders, pull a face, mutter something like: "Maybe they'll beat some manners into the spoiled little shit."

And so the day arrived. I had managed to extract a promise from Alex that he would accompany us on the long drive to the boarding school, as I did not want to make the return journey on my own, knowing how distraught I would be upon saying goodbye to my only son.

But that morning, Alex deliberately picked a fight with me, and then refused to leave the house. He would not even say cheerio to Anthony.

I got in the car and I drove for five hours with my son. When we arrived, we checked into a hotel and I took Anthony in to his new school the next morning.

I drove home on the highway at 120 miles an hour with the tears streaming down my face. I was both upset and angry. I knew when I got home that my 'happy' life with Alex was over because he hadn't been there to support me.

But it couldn't just end like that, there were complications. Of course, there was the house, which was in both our names even though I had paid the bulk of it with my own money already, and was the one earning the money to keep up the payments on it.

There was also the fact that I had made the mistake of bringing Alex into the business, Response Brokers. He had just enough involvement to permanently destabilise the company simply by insulting a few key clients. I wasn't about to let that happen after all the work I had put in. My company was doing very well - we had opened seven offices in Willow Grove and I was making a lot of money, selling a lot of insurance.

Alex became very jealous of my success. He didn't know what to do - he was shuffling papers from one end of the desk to the other. I was the one keeping the phone ringing. I started wondering what the hell he was there for, because if I needed to have a good fuck, believe me I knew I could go out and get it any time I wanted.

Looking back, it is clear to me now why we had such problems, Alex and I. He was such a weak man, a coward. I, on the other hand, have never been either weak or afraid. I was too headstrong for him. He needed a woman who would cow-tow to his every command, bow and scrape. I was not about to subserviate myself to any man.

One day things went too far. I'll never forget it and I'll tell you exactly how it went.

I was out with a woman friend of mine and we stopped in at a restaurant that belonged to Jimmy, Alex's best friend. We'd been there some time when Alex arrived with a few of his friends. They were drinking very heavily.

When I left the restaurant and returned to the office, Alex and Jimmy followed me.

Jimmy made a casual remark that would lead to one of the most violent episodes in our marriage.

"You have a very beautiful wife."

Alex shot a glance at me. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye.

"Look," I said, "I'm going home now."

As soon as I got home I had a bath and got into bed. I knew it would be better if I pretended I was asleep when Alex got in, because it was evident that he was in the mood for a fight.

I had barely put my head on the pillow when Alex staggered in. Without warning he jumped on the bed, pinning my arms under the blankets.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

He didn’t answer me. He simply commenced punching me in the face.

When I tried to struggle out of the bed, he grabbed me by my hair, dragged me from the bed to the floor and started punching me like a punch bag.

Then he hauled me onto the balcony. By this time I was only half conscious. He lifted me up and tried to throw me over the balcony. I fought back, weakly.

My husband changed his mind and dragged me by my hair from the balcony to the landing. As I tried to grab the gate at the top of the stairs that he was intent on throwing me down, my thumb got caught in the lock of the gate when he slammed it shut. The mechanism sheared through flesh and bone, so my thumb was hanging on by a thread.

There was so much blood that Alex took fright. He literally skipped down the stairs and fled the house.

I woke up Hayley. She wrapped my thumb in a towel and phoned for an ambulance. I was taken to Johannesburg Central Hospital.

I was in a bad way. When the anaesthetist eventually arrived, he had to administer the anaesthetic under my arm because it was literally the only place on my body that was not lacerated or bruised.

I was rushed to theatre and the doctor was saying to me: “I’m sorry, you’re going to lose your thumb.”

I remember pleading with him, even in my drowsy state. “Please don’t let me lose my thumb.”

They called in a plastic surgeon who managed to reconstruct my thumb.

As soon as I was out of intensive care I called for the police. I had the most humiliating experience of my life because they had to come in and examine me from head to toe.

I told them that I wanted an order to get Alex out of my house. They were very good, and wasted no time in arranging it.

When I got out of hospital I went to my lawyer and he advised me to go ahead with the divorce as quickly as possible, as I now had firm grounds for one.

But Alex dug his heels in and in the end I had no option but to settle with him, pay him out.

I stalled for as long as I could because I was raising the money to buy him out so that I didn’t have to sell the house - the house I had secured and paid for with my own money through my own hard work, every penny of it.

Alex finally agreed to half of the furniture, which I gave him, and R120 000, which I paid him in cash. I raised some of the money through my diamond deals and the balance by taking a loan out on the house.

Ironically, as a result of one of the diamond deals I set up to make the extra money I needed, I was to meet the man who would make me forget all my troubles with Alex.

I met Shai.

*

HE CAME TO MY HOUSE WITH TWO OTHER ISRAELI DIAMOND dealers, introduced to me by a woman named Sue.

They sat down in my bar and got down to business right away. I listened to the principal speaker, but was unable to take my eyes off the dark, smouldering young man who sat directly opposite me. His achingly beautiful blue eyes held my gaze without a hint of self-consciousness. A subtle smile played on his lips. In those first few moments, both of us knew that we would be together. It was preordained. Even if we had wanted to, it would have been impossible to walk away from what was destined to be. I knew instinctively that we would spend some precious time together, but that it would end in tragedy. I have no idea how I knew, but I did, as God is my witness.

“... blue diamonds in particular, but we will look at any good quality stones you may have. Hazel?”

“Yes, I’m listening,” with a supreme effort, I dragged my gaze away from Shai.

“We can pay top dollar, but you can’t show us any shit. If we feel our time is being wasted, we go elsewhere, is that understood.”

I stood up.

“My friend,” I said coolly. “If you think for one minute that I would have any shit as you like to call it in my possession, with the reputation I have in the diamond world, then it would be better if you took yourself and your business elsewhere.”

I was getting going nicely when I made the mistake of glancing at Shai. He was smiling. There was mischief in his eyes. I knew I had found trouble. I sat down, the wind taken from my sails.

“Please, I am sorry if I offended you, Hazel. Yes you have a very good reputation. Can we do business please?” the spokesman was saying.

“We can do business. Just you don’t give me any shit,” I muttered in broken Hebrew.

Shai exploded with laughter. It was then that I suspected he couldn’t speak a word of English.

“Hello,” I said, leaning forward and extending my hand to him, although we had already been introduced. The others exchanged quizzical glances.

“Hello,” said Shai politely, taking my hand in a firm grip.

“Do you speak English?”

“Do you speak English?” he said, smiling broadly.

Great, I thought. I’m going to have to educate this one.

We did the diamond deal and it was a success. They got three exquisite blue diamonds and I got enough to make my mortgage payment and top up the Alex fund.

The Israelis came round to my place to celebrate and we ate, drank and danced until late. When they finally said their goodbyes and departed for their hotel, Shai hung back. He looked at me with those unblinking, intelligent, sexy eyes. I shut the door and leaned back against it.

“Would you like to stay the night?” I asked softly.

He nodded. He did not need to speak English to understand exactly what I was saying.

Shai remained in South Africa after his friends had left for Israel. He moved into my home with just a single pillow case containing a spare set of jeans, three pairs of underwear, some socks and four T-shirts.

Despite my limited Hebrew and his non-existent English, we were able to communicate more than adequately on the things that really mattered. For several weeks I gave him lessons in my tongue and he gave me lessons in his...

But Shai was no fool. In fact, he was the most shrewd individual I had ever met. He very quickly learned to speak English, at the same time giving me invaluable tips with Hebrew, a language vital to have some knowledge of in my line of work.

Shai told me that he came from a very wealthy family in Israel and that he had a mansion there. I didn't really believe him, but then it would not have mattered to me whether he was a pauper or a prince. I was falling in love.

Still, there were things about which I was very self conscious. One of these was the fact that Shai Avissar was much younger than me. Although he carried himself with a lot of maturity, it was something that concerned me. I introduced him to my friends as my driver.

I was also concerned about the fact that he was so very Jewish. I was a converted gentile but nothing could change the fact that I was not born Jewish. How could a relationship between us work long term when such a fundamental difference existed?

But Shai dismissed any significance in age or creed. He told me that he loved me. That he would always be with me. How I wanted to believe him...

We began to work very closely together. I found that Shai had an uncanny ability to read people, and a tremendous skill for negotiation. He knew when to bluff, when to walk out, when to concede. He was very much a kindred spirit to me in that sense.

We spent a lot of time together in Kimberley, the diamond deal capital of the world. Together we established an impressive network of black contacts. Some of them had the most ingenious methods of smuggling the diamonds out of the mines. Many of them had had as many as six of their back teeth pulled out to make room for the stones: they would actually press a diamond into the cavity where a tooth had been, and then prise it out when they were ready to do the deal.

It was evident that these smugglers had their own highly organised network on the mines, and that security personnel collaborated with them for a share of the spoils. In at least one case, it was clear that senior managers on one of the mines were actively involved in fleecing their company of some of the best stones to come out of the ground.

We were shrewd enough to use money that belonged to other diamond dealers at the outset, so that we carried little of the risk. Some deals were good and some were bad - but most of them rendered a good profit.

Once we got our hands on a genuine 44 carat sparkler - it was the most fantastic stone. We got it to Belgium and decided that with this one we were going to see it through to its final form, cut and polished, and take advantage of the much higher value it would assume than if we let it go as a rough diamond.

We got it onto the cutting wheel and it simply exploded before our eyes. If we hadn't been there it would have been very hard to believe, but we were and I saw it with my own eyes. It was a tragedy, but it was a risk we knew we were taking, and we had no option but to cut our losses and come home.

We had to be cash buyers in the diamond market because we were buying illegally. And we had to have vast sums at our disposal, usually in foreign currency because many of the vendors refused to take rands. Part of the logic behind this policy was that diamond squad agents were not generally given access to large sums of forex for their sting operations, so demanding US dollars from a buyer was one way of weeding out the undercover cops. It was nerve-wracking business in the beginning, because there were times when we were travelling around with upwards of one and two million US dollars in cold, hard cash.

We made sure that we looked after everyone associated with us. Any couriers or buyers operating within our growing network could be sure that if they ever fell into a trap and were arrested, bail would be just a phone call away. We sourced most of our buyers and couriers from outside the country, so once they were bailed we ensured that they were repatriated and never set foot on South African soil again.

In the meantime my insurance brokerage was continuing to grow. I was now not only arranging insurance deals, I was also negotiating stocks and shares, marketing commodities, introducing both domestic and international companies for a fee, wheeling and dealing.

But the diamond buying and smuggling was rapidly beginning to take up more and more of my time.

Organised crime, as its name suggests, requires a great deal of organising. Fortunately, organisational skills have always been a forte of mine. At one stage we had a courier or a buyer in the air somewhere in the world at any given moment on every single day of the week. It was my job to track their movements and co-ordinate meetings and pickups as well as taking care of the general administrative duties like booking flights and hotel rooms, and right down to finer details such as making dinner reservations at restaurants on the other side of the world, quite often for people I had never met personally nor ever would.

But I didn't stop at making phone calls. I did not shirk the dirtier business of getting out and physically buying stones, particularly when it came to the larger transactions - which incidentally carried the most risk.

Shai and I would often be up at two in the morning, out on the road in the dark, driving out of Johannesburg and into the bush. There were times when we were gambling with our lives, entering remote districts and meeting strangers in the dead of night, exchanging hard cash for stones. In the rural areas around Kimberley there was no electricity or telecommunications - the local villagers, driven to despair by dreadful poverty, constantly stole the overhead wires for the copper.

Both Shai and I carried weapons: pistols hidden on our persons, sawn-off shotguns beneath the seats of the vehicle...

We put the diamonds through Israel, Belgium, the USA. We were smuggling like crazy, sometimes ourselves, sometimes through our couriers.

On occasion we would meet buyers, mainly Belgians and Israelis, in Johannesburg and take them to the purchase areas around Kimberley and Mafeking, and now we began to venture even further afield, to the diamond-rich hunting grounds of South West Africa, Zambia, Angola and the treacherous Democratic Republic of the Congo.

We would hire small aircraft from within the organised crime world. We had many close calls.

One of the incidents in which Shai and I thought we were done for was when I had to meet a contact at a place called Lamberts Bay.

I had been in Durban doing business and I had to fly to Cape Town to meet up with Shai. The plan was that we would fly together to Lamberts Bay where we were to meet a new contact, do the deal with a group of Israeli buyers who would also be waiting there for us, and then return together to Johannesburg.

We took off at dawn from an unauthorised landing strip on a farm just outside Cape Town.

I looked over at Shai. His eyes were closed, his teeth were clenched, and there was perspiration on his brow despite the chill of the altitude.

"Are you okay?" I asked, although I knew what was wrong. Shai had a pathological fear of flying.

"Fine," he gasped, eyes still tightly shut.

I caressed his arm reassuringly, but in that instant, even before there was the slightest indication that anything was wrong, I knew that our lives were in danger.

I had barely begun to consider the intuition when the seat belt light came on, accompanied by an incessant beeping.

I got up and strode forward to the cockpit.

"Do we have a slight problem?" I asked the pilot calmly.

"Yes, I'm afraid we do," he said over his shoulder. "I'm afraid I can't get the wheels down. They're jammed. I'm circling the airstrip, and we don't have a whole lot of fuel left."

I realised Shai was standing behind me.

"What's the problem?" he cried, eyes wide with terror.

"Shai, it's okay, go and sit down and leave this to me," I said softly.

"No, no, what's the problem? What's the fucking problem?" I could see that the panic was rising in him, threatening to drive him over the edge.

"Shai, sit down," I commanded, raising my voice over his.

"No, fucking-"

"Sit down or this plane will crash."

He returned to his seat, hyperventilating.

"Okay," I turned to the pilot. "What do we do about this?"

"We have to fix it. I could attempt to do an emergency landing without them but this airstrip isn't the best and there's not a fire engine or ambulance for miles..."

"Right. So fix it."

"I'm going to try. I need to put the plane on auto pilot while I go back there."

"Oh no," I shook my head. "You're not getting out of that seat. What has to be done?"

"There's a little box between the seats halfway back. The seal needs to be broken so we can wind the wheels down manually."

"I'll do it," I said.

He pointed out the box to me and I set to work trying to break the seal. But I didn't have the strength for it.

Shai could contain himself no longer.

"What is the fucking problem?" he yelled.

"Shai, I can't break this ope-"

Before I could finish the sentence Shai had leapt from his seat and smashed his fist into the top of the box, cracking it open and at the same time crushing my finger and snapping off one of my nails. I was bleeding, but grateful anyway.

"Well done. Now wind this lever."

Shai needed no second bidding. In record time, the wheels were down and locked into place.

We landed safely. But the Israelis and the new contact we were to meet were not there.

We waited on the deserted airstrip for an hour but there was no sign of anybody. There was nothing there, no car, no phone, nothing. It was beginning to get unbearably hot.

"Damn it," I said at last, "I'm not sitting around here any more. Let's take a walk."

The pilot, who was the only one who had been here before, nodded.

“Ja, okay - there’s a few houses down the road. Maybe we can use a phone.”

We walked out of the field through a wooden gate and onto a gravel road. At the end of the road was a row of little houses, one beside the other, five of them altogether. It was the most bizarre sight - miles and miles of open space, and these five houses grouped so closely together.

I walked up and knocked on the door of the first one, and an old woman opened the door after a time.

“Ja?” she said in a friendly way.

“Excuse me, tannie, we are here to meet some people and I need to use your telephone.”

“Oh, the people that were here before?”

“Yes,” I said. It could not have been anyone else in this godforsaken place.

“Oh, they also used the telephone.”

“Well,” I said, sensing something, “Could I also use your phone?”

“Ja, of course.”

So I went straight over, lifted it up and hit the re-dial button. A man answered.

“Detective Van der-.”

I put the phone down. The diamond squad. Idiots. How could they be so careless? Thank God they were.

I turned to the old woman.

“Is there a hotel around here?” I asked hopefully, expecting to be laughed at.

“Ja - if you walk about five hundred metres down the road, turn to the right and you’ll see the hotel on the left hand side of the road.”

“Baie dankie,” I said, and led Shai and the pilot back out onto the road.

“What is it Hazel?” Shai asked.

“We’ll talk about it later.” Now I had stopped even trusting the pilot.

Half an hour later we were sitting in the bar at the Lamberts Bay Hotel. I waited for the pilot to disappear into the gents.

“Shai, listen to me very carefully: It’s a trap.”

“A police trap?”

“Yes. We’re right in the middle of it. That number the contact dialled was to the diamond squad. We have to get out of this. If the Israelis and the contact arrive, don’t make a price, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever you do, don’t talk diamonds and money together. And speak to your Israeli friends in Hebrew - tell them they are in a trap but to act normal. Don’t let the contact guess what you are saying. If the contact tries to talk business, don’t get drawn into discussing diamonds. Do you understand?”

“Of course I understand,” he smiled. “I speak very good English.”

But I could see he was nervous.

The pilot was just sitting down at our table when the two Israeli buyers walked in with the contact - a big, fat, ugly man with long hair in ringlets. I had met him once before, in Johannesburg. He had introduced himself as Dick Whittington.

“Hazel!” said Dick expansively, “Howzit?”

“Fine,” I smiled thinly. “Sorry we were delayed. We had trouble with the plane.”

“That’s okay - you’re here now.”

They joined our table. Shai immediately struck up a conversation with the Israelis, in Hebrew as instructed. He was masterful, laughing and clapping them on the shoulders as he told them of the trap.

"Okay, so Hazel, I've just taken the guys to a farmhouse near here to see the man with the diamonds. He wasn't there yet, and we thought we'd find you here. Finish your drink and we'll all go back there together," said Dick.

"No, I want to check in first and freshen up," I said easily.

"Oh. Well I'll go with Shai and the others and then come back for you in an hour, how's that?"

"No, I think we should all go together."

"We have to go soon because I don't want to miss this oke," Dick said firmly.

"I'm sure it will be."

"No, it won't be okay. If we don't go now, there could be problems," he said menacingly.

I looked at Shai. He nodded, unsmilingly.

"Okay then," I conceded. "You lot go on ahead and then you can come back for me."

I needed the time to myself to consider a way out. I knew Shai would be cautious.

"Fine." Dick Whittington stood up.

"All of you must come back to collect me," I said to Shai.

"That's okay," shot Dick, "They can wait at the farmhouse when I come to collect you."

"No," now it was my turn to be firm. "You bring them back with you and we'll all go together."

Dick hesitated, then reluctantly accepted the condition.

When they left, I turned to the pilot.

"Refuel the plane," I told him. "You are flying back tonight at six. You'll only have three passengers. I'll be staying behind."

When he had left, I found a pay phone and made a call to a trusted colleague in Johannesburg.

"Zorba," I told him, "I'm in a spot of trouble."

"What's going on Hazel?"

I explained the situation to him.

"What's this contact's name?"

"Dick Whittington, as in the book."

"Jusses, Hazel, I know the guy. He's a bloody informer."

"How do I get out of this?"

"Play him along. Don't talk figures and don't let the word diamond pass through your lips. Stall for time and say you need to think it over back in Joburg, or that you need to get more money. Make up a code word for diamonds, so if he's wearing a wire all they'll hear you talking about buying is oranges or apples or something. He'll just think it's your jargon and accept it."

"Good idea, Zorba. Thanks my darling."

"You're welcome. Call me and let me know if you need anything."

"Okay."

I had time to check in, have a quick shower and get back to the bar before Dick and the others returned.

"Hi!" called Dick as he strode across the floor.

"Hi, Dick. I need to talk to my friends."

"Sure," he said. But he made no move to give us any privacy. I launched into broken Hebrew, under my breath so even that would not be picked up by any hidden microphones.

"I hope you all acted excited."

"Yes," said Shai. "They were very good."

"Good. And no-one mentioned a price?"

"No. We met the main supplier and arranged to see him tomorrow morning again. We won't be going back today."

"You won't be seeing him at all. Leave the rest to me."

I turned to Dick who was waiting expectantly. I could see that he had been frustrated by the language barrier.

"Right. It's decided. My guys are going back to Joburg to collect the money, but I'll stay here with you tonight so you can be sure they'll be back. Then we can go ahead and talk about buying the shoes."

"The what?"

"You know..."

"Oh, ja, the shoes. Lekker."

As there was a little time left to kill, I thought it would be a good idea to play out the little charade as much as possible, and I suggested that all of us take a walk down to the nearby bay to see the crayfishing boats.

When we got there, I got talking to one of the boat owners.

"What a wonderful life you have," I said to him.

"Thanks," he grinned.

"I would love to go out on the boat with you, just to see what it's like. Can we dive with you? What do you think, Dick, tomorrow morning?"

"Ja, okay," he brightened.

We arranged to meet the fisherman at five o'clock the next morning, and returned to the hotel.

While Dick checked in, Shai accompanied me to my room.

"All right," I said as soon as we were alone. "You need to get the Israelis back to Joburg and then immediately put them on a flight out of South Africa. I'll make my own way back to Joburg and I'll see you at the house."

Shai reluctantly agreed. He knew that I had more experience in these matters, and my tone told him I was not about to compromise.

Shai and the Israelis went off with the pilot, leaving me with just a small suitcase, some cash and a treacherous informer as a dinner companion.

That night, Dick and I dined on fresh crayfish. It was divine, but culinary pleasure was not the only reason I had selected it from the menu.

At about ten o'clock, I said I wanted to get to bed. Dick said he would wake me at about half past four so we could be ready to get down to meet the fishing boat for our little crayfish diving excursion. We said our goodnights.

I waited until midnight, then slipped a note under Dick's door.

"Dear Dick, Please don't wake me up in the morning as I don't think the crayfish agreed with me and I have an upset stomach. Please see the man at the boats and tell him that we won't make it and I'll see you at breakfast at nine o'clock."

In the dead of night, evoking memories of my early days escaping from the nursing dormitory, I clambered out of the hotel bedroom window, my little suitcase slung over my shoulder, stepped onto a wall and jumped down into an alleyway.

I walked through the dusty little one-horse town: there wasn't even a tar road. As I turned a corner and lost sight of the hotel, I pulled up short. Sitting on the pavement ahead of me were four Cape coloureds. They were drinking cheap liquor from the bottle. The street was otherwise deserted.

I steeled myself and approached them.

"Howzit, tannie," one of them greeted me with a toothless grin.

"Hi guys," I said.

"Hey, are you running away from the hotel without paying your bill?" toothless one ventured. The others burst out laughing. I sensed that there was no danger here.

"Can you tell me how I find my way to the highway?"

My plan was to hitchhike to Cape Town and jump on the first flight out of there to Johannesburg which left at about six or seven in the morning. By the time Dick Whittington came looking for me I would be at home in Johannesburg.

"Come, we'll go with you," said no-teeth, struggling to his feet and staggering slightly. I took a step backwards, more due to the blast of alcohol-breath than to any concern for my personal safety.

"That's okay, just give me directions and I'll find it."

"But it's dangerous for a lady to be walking alone at night like this," he said, genuinely concerned.

"Thanks, but I can look after myself. Look," I produced a R50 note and proffered it.

"Take this. Just tell me which way to go. I'm in a hurry."

He took the note and flashed it at the others with his trademark grin. "Check, breakfast!" His mates applauded.

"Okay, just keep going this way, when you get to a junction turn right, then left and you'll see a slip road that brings you onto the Cape Town highway. Just before it, there's a twenty-four-hour garage. If you want to hitchhike you should stand there - at least there's some light and you'll be safe."

"Thanks - bye now," I smiled and walked on.

"We'll watch you as far as we can see you, just to make sure you don't get mugged," he called after me.

It was bizarre. None of my friends would believe me when I recounted how four drunken Cape coloureds had watched my back in the middle of the night in Lamberts Bay.

Drunk he may have been, but toothless wonder's directions were spot on. As I found the garage a clapped out old truck with an open back full of fresh vegetables pulled in. It was being driven by an old timer who only spoke Afrikaans.

"Goie more, meneer," I said politely as he stepped out and started to pump diesel.

"Goie more, mevrou," he replied. "What are you doing out at this time of the night?"

"I need to get to Johannesburg," I said melodramatically. "There's been an accident in the family and I have to get to Cape Town to catch a plane, but my car has broken down."

"I'm very sorry to hear it, mevrou."

"I'm going to have to hitchhike to Cape Town," I said, and then I began to cry. I had read the old man right.

"Ag, meisie, please don't cry. You can't hitch hike to Cape Town, it's too dangerous, a young girl like you on your own. Get in the truck."

I needed no second bidding. I jumped into the front of the truck, put my little case on the floor between my feet and sank down as far as I could go in the seat.

“It will be a long drive,” said the old man when he returned from paying for his fuel. “My truck is older than me, and I’m no youngster. But I will take you to Cape Town airport.”

I thanked him profusely as he started the pattering engine and we pulled slowly out of the service station, up the slip road and onto the highway.

We were travelling at about forty miles an hour. I was grateful for the ride, but at the same time frustrated with the progress we were making - at times I felt as though it would be quicker if I got out and pushed the truck all the way to Cape Town. I kept imagining that I could hear sirens in the distance, and I envisioned SAP trucks in hot pursuit.

The journey took two-and-a-half hours but my old rescuer eventually delivered me safely to local departures at Cape Town airport. I thanked him and offered him a hundred rand.

“No thank you,” he said, shaking his head and looking rather cross.

“But you must - for your petrol!” I insisted.

“I didn’t use any petrol,” he said. Then he smiled, waved and drove away. I do not know his name or where he lives, but God bless that kind old man.

I ran into the airport, bought my ticket to Johannesburg, and was on the first flight out of Cape Town.

When I arrived at Jan Smuts, I called Shai and asked him to pick me up. When he arrived, we went directly to the Towers Hotel and I placed a call to Dick Whittington at the Lamberts Bay Hotel.

“Hi Dick.”

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Now, Dick, that’s no way to speak to a lady. I’m sorry I had to leave without letting you know, but I got an urgent call very early and I found out those Israeli guys didn’t have any money. I need to see you, because I’ve got some other guys here, so bring the shoes and come back to Johannesburg.”

So Dick came back and he met me at five o’clock that afternoon at the Towers Hotel and he was absolutely fuming. He seemed particularly annoyed that he had been forced to settle my hotel bill at Lamberts Bay.

Shai and I played him and everyone else for another two days and meanwhile made sure the Israelis were back in Israel. Needless to say, we never did a deal with Dick Whittington again.

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A SHORT TIME LATER WE BROUGHT THE ISRAELIS OUT AGAIN TO do another deal with one of our more established and trusted diamond contacts who’s name was Andrew.

Andrew had told us that he had seen a magnificent stone weighing in at 98 carats. We went to look at this stone which turned out to be everything Andrew had said it was, and the Israelis were more than happy with it.

The deal was to be closed in Kimberley. I agreed to invest one third of the finance, which was a total of R750,000.

We hired a small aircraft and flew down to Kimberley.

When we arrived they left us at the hotel and Andrew went off with the vendors and two bodyguards we had arranged. I took him to one side before they disappeared and made it

quite clear to him that he was not to part with the briefcase full of cash before he had the stone in his hands.

Shai and I waited at the hotel with the pilot. There had only been one room available, so we shared it, Shai and I on the one bed and the pilot on the other.

We waited. And we waited. Eventually, at five o'clock the next morning, the two bodyguards knocked on our door.

"Where's Andrew?" I said, the calm in my tone at odds with the panic rising in me.

"Did he not come here?" one of them said.

"What do you fucking mean?" Shai brushed past me and grabbed the unfortunate man by the throat.

"He went into the mine with the other guys. They said we must wait at the entrance because they didn't want too many inside."

"We tried to argue," the other muscleman blurted. "But Andrew said it was okay and told us to shut up and wait for him. We waited all night."

There was nothing we could do. We returned to Johannesburg. Twelve hours later, Andrew appeared on my doorstep.

"Where," I said, gritting my teeth and controlling the urge to beat him senseless, "the fuck have you been?"

"I got arrested, Hazel," he said, looking at his shoes. "It was a trap."

"A trap. A trap," I said the words over and over. No matter how many times I said them, they made no sense.

"Those bastards took everything, the money the diamond, they even took my gat (gun)."

"The money is gone?" I sat down. I felt strangely calm.

"The money, the diamond, everything. Even my gat. And it was a bloody good gat," he risked glancing up at me now.

I stared him directly in the eye. He looked down again.

"Get out, Andy. I need to think."

He stood up, hesitated as though he was going to say something else, thought better of it and quickly left.

Of course, this was neither the first time nor would it be the last that I was stung. It was an occupational hazard. I had been careless, though. I could have, and should have, taken more precautions. Of course there was always the risk that the police would be behind any deal. I had made a lot of powerful enemies in the diamond squad after the embarrassing collapse of their last attempt to entrap me. There was no way I could have exposed myself or Shai to the risk of direct contact with low-end dealers so soon after the Whittington incident. But I should have been more cautious all the same.

Sure, I had known and trusted Andrew for years. But was anyone truly trustworthy, forever? In my experience, the answer to that question was an unequivocal and resounding 'no'.

There was no way I could be sure... yet. It was entirely plausible that members of the police, known to be rife with corruption, had conspired with the diamond vendors to relieve us of our money. Discreet enquiries revealed that no formal investigation had been authorised, no record of arrests existed and no dockets had been opened. But then a team of corrupt officers were unlikely to have handed over to their superiors three quarters of a million rand in cash and a diamond valued at more than twice that sum on the black market, and potentially a whole lot more in its cut and polished form on the engagement ring of a Hollywood star.

All that I could do was bide my time until someone made a slip up, and some shred of information filtered its way through the system and back to me. It could take weeks, months and even years, but I knew that one day I would know exactly what had transpired in that deserted mine in Kimberley. I was not wrong.

In the meantime, though, was the problem of the Israeli partners. They were incensed. At first they wanted to board the first available flight back to Israel at the first mention of the police.

But their backers in Jerusalem obviously smelt a rat. Communications between us broke down rapidly, and I sensed impending peril.

Four days after the deal fell through, I came home to find three armed Israelis unknown to me in my home.

They had managed to get into my yard, knocked at the front door and been let in by the maid.

Shai was at home at the time.

When I got home, I walked in and saw Shai sitting at the head of the dining table, his hands on his head. Upon entering the room, I came face to face with three very well dressed, swarthy men. They were sitting at the far end of the table. In front of them, on the place mats, lay automatic weapons.

"Who the hell are you?" I snapped, instantly incensed at this invasion of my privacy. The concept of danger did not enter the equation. These strangers were in my home without my permission, and I was livid.

"Hazel," Shai said quietly. "Sit down."

"I will not fucking sit down. Who the fuck are these fucking clowns? What the fuck is this all about? Get those fucking guns off my table. Get out of my fucking house."

"Lady, you better do as your friend tells you," the obvious leader of the trio said evenly. His accent was distinctly Israeli, and I knew now what this was all about.

"I won't sit down, you have no right to tell me to sit down in my own home, get fucking out, get fucking out!"

He stood up. He was about six foot three. He picked up his weapon and began to advance on me.

"What, are you going to fucking shoot me? Do you want me to get my gun and fucking shoot you, or do you want me to press my panic alarm and have the police here in five minutes?"

I was surprised at myself, even in that moment. I felt no fear, only rage, outrage.

My reaction and the look in my eye halted the man in his tracks. A second man got up from the table and began to walk towards me now. I turned my fury in him.

"Fucking get out of my home before I see to it that all of you are buried alive with no testicles."

The leader turned to his men and raised his hand. Then, without another word, they walked past me and left my house.

I never saw them again.

Two months later I received a snippet of information that proved beyond doubt Andrew was guilty of complicity in the double crossing.

We had kept him close to us specifically so that he would not disappear. I had repeatedly told him I had no suspicions that he was in any way responsible for the loss of the money,

and that I harboured no bad feelings towards him. I even brought him in on one or two small deals from which he walked away with a tidy little profit each time.

“Don’t worry about that other one, Andy,” I reassured him. “These things happen. It’s no big deal.”

And he would laugh, all too easily, and say: “I know Hazel, R250,000 is just school fees to you!”

Eventually I set up another deal for one and a quarter million rand. I convinced Andy that it was a fail-safe arrangement, which it was. He readily agreed to come in on the deal, putting up one third of the money.

The profit was to be split three ways - one third for the third party, and the remainder to be split between Andrew and me. It went like clockwork. Andrew came to collect his share of the money, a cool R600,000.

“There,” I said, counting out his earnings. “That’s three hundred thousand.”

“That’s only half,” he grinned uneasily.

“No, that’s your change.”

“My change? From what?”

“Well, after you paid my school fees, that’s what’s left over.”

He knew better than to argue. It had taken me months to get my money back, but I had done it in the end - with a smile.

*

ANY LUCRATIVE ILLEGAL ACTIVITY CARRIES ITS RISKS, ANYWHERE in the world.

But South has the added danger of having a routine gun culture. I say routine, because it is not uncommon for a young mother to be in possession of as many as three or four personal weapons. In fact, you tend to be more than a little surprised if one of your friends tells you they *don’t* carry a gun of some description. No-one even bats an eyelid when the petite lady in a business suit at the next table takes a revolver out of her handbag so she can find her lipstick.

We tended to associate with people who carried up to three weapons on their persons. So it was only a matter of time before we saw some gunplay.

Shai had gone into a deal with a guy by the name of Gavin. They travelled to Kimberley together. To this day I have no idea what happened there. All Shai would say was that the deal had gone wrong.

It was evident, though, that he had done something to upset this Gavin somewhat.

One lazy Sunday morning shortly after Shai’s return from Kimberley, I was at home on my own, up on the balcony outside my bedroom. I was sitting on a garden chair, an air gun resting on my knees.

This is how I spend many Sunday mornings after breakfast.

A pigeon lands in a tree in the garden, I raise the little rifle to my shoulder, take aim and – pop – blow the little bastard away.

I cannot abide by these vermin that choose my magnificent home on which to defecate. I’ve had the outside painted countless times in the ten years that I have resided at my mansion in exclusive Abbotsford, close to the residence of President Nelson Mandela.

For those animal rights activists who will no doubt be up in arms over this admission, I would like to reassure you all that your feathered friends do not suffer. I am a crack shot,

having been trained in marksmanship by some of the finest riflemen in the world, represented in the now defunct British South Africa Police in Rhodesia.

But this particular Sunday was different. While I was aiming at pestilent bird life, someone was... well, aiming at me.

Or, at least, at my home.

I was just taking aim when a burst of gunfire rent the air.

There was the sound of smashing glass followed by the squeal of tires. I ran indoors and bounded down the stairs and out the front door.

They had shot up the front of my house - and my prize possession, my BMW - with a 12-gauge shotgun.

We had to get rid of the BMW. I managed to sell it, even riddled with little holes. The no-fuss sale was a testament to the nonchalance with which South Africans regard their way of life.

"Here's the car," I said as I showed the buyer into the garage.

"Ja, I know this model well. This is where they tried to kill you? I've got a friend who can cover these. What's the mileage?"

And I still have pellets from the shotgun lodged in the outside walls of my home. We had them covered up with plaster.

Not long after this incident, Shai and I had another scare. We had gone down to Kimberley together, to a mine where we had a late-night rendezvous arranged.

But it turned out to be another police trap. They had cordoned off all the roads leading out of the mine complex. We had to lie in the veldt for eight hours, until just before dawn when they finally gave up and dismantled the barriers. We were frozen to the core: both of us actually suffered the symptoms of hypothermia for three days after we got home.

Despite all the precautions we took, there were always dealers just that little bit more slick than we were, guys who knew how to read a situation and play the game better than anyone. Even if these characters did cost us a lot of money in bogus deals, I had to admire their expertise. On one occasion, we studied what looked like first grade diamonds by candlelight. When we got back to Johannesburg, the stones turned out to be make-believe.

We lost money on that deal but on plenty of other deals we made more than enough to make up for it. Someone likened it to roulette, but that's not an accurate description. You lose and you win in roulette, but if you keep playing long enough you cannot fail but to lose everything. The diamond business was the reverse. If you kept at it long enough, and kept enough deals in play, you could not lose. At the end of the day, you may lose a battle here or there but you always won the war - provided you weren't caught.

That prospect had begun to seem like a remote possibility. But one sunny day in 1994 the geniuses in the diamond squad finally made a breakthrough that would put me under the glare of the spotlight. And that would put an end, once and for all, to my direct involvement in diamond smuggling.

I have had a long and quite interesting association with the diamond squad, the official 'secret police' of the illicit gold and diamond bureau of South Africa.

We've been in lots of scrapes and near misses. They tried for years, unsuccessfully, to catch me in the act of either buying diamonds or smuggling them. They initiated several traps and sting operations that failed dismally. On a number of occasions I was forewarned, and actually went along in disguise to the designated rendezvous, often in

public places, so that I could see the agents being employed, and memorise their features for future reference.

What the diamond squad bosses could not have been aware of was the fact that I had privately ‘befriended’ some of their most trusted agents. I had also sponsored one or two top members of the South African Police who wished to make the move up to the diamond squad. When they eventually made the grade, with my assistance, they were in my debt. And it remained in their interests to ensure that I was not ‘brought to justice’ in a manner that might compel me to name too many names.

South Africa, like any third world country, operates at all levels in this manner. Bribery is a way of life. Just as people in Europe accept that they must be prepared to wait in a queue when they go to renew their road tax, so people in Africa accept that at one time or another they must pay a bribe to a petty official in order to achieve a given goal. This applies not only to those involved in organised crime, but also to the ordinary man in the street.

But the problem with such a system is that there is always the chance that someone else will be able to pay that little bit extra in order to purchase the favour of a civil servant or a police officer over your own ‘gestures’. And if you step on too many toes, especially in the organised crime world, there is always the possibility that a rival will pay over the odds to have you taken out of commission.

This can be done in many ways. Of course, there is the common, vulgar method of paying as little as R500, about fifty pounds sterling, to a street assassin who will despatch the target with a bullet, a blade, or a well-timed shove under a bus.

Or there is the rather more genteel method of bringing the competition to the attention of the law enforcers and either seeing them put behind bars or simply put under enough heat to ensure they are no longer a threat in the game.

Shai and I must have offended someone with a good deal of disposable cash to ensure a sting operation against us that was so covert none of my highly placed contacts within the diamond squad and SAP were aware of it... or alternatively, that was so generously funded that my “eyes and ears” were sufficiently satisfied to guarantee their silence.

There was, of course, another and perhaps more likely possibility: that I was not the primary target of the sting, and I just happened to get caught up in a web that was spun for my increasingly wayward lover, Shai.

This hypothesis would seem to make the most sense. Shai had been gradually taking on more and more of the front-line responsibilities in visiting Kimberley, striking deals with the usual vendors... and establishing relations with new players.

And therein lay the genesis of all the troubles that would lie ahead of us.

These new contacts with whom Shai was getting involved proved more seedy and conniving and murderous than any with whom I would have been associated in my many years in the game. I did not meet the majority of them, partly by choice and partly because Shai kept them far from me - either because he knew I would disapprove, or because he was protecting me from the pack of hyenas he himself knew he was running with.

But Shai was not as experienced in these matters as I. While he was an exceptionally intelligent and shrewd man, he sometimes allowed himself to get carried away on the tide of greed without paying attention to the treacherous undercurrents inherent in the murky waters in which we swam.

It was one of Shai's new contacts who arranged "the mother of all deals", which was to take place at the Southern Sun hotel in Cape Town.

The more ensnared Shai became in the deal, the more nervous he got. Eventually, he confided his concerns in me.

"This is a big one, Hazel. Bigger than anything I've been in before. There are a lot of people involved and I'm having trouble keeping all the pieces together. But I want to do this deal. I really want to do this deal."

He seemed defiant and vulnerable all at the same time. I was more in love with him in that moment than ever.

"Can I get involved with it?" I asked. I knew it would offend his ego if I intimated in any way that I was coming to his rescue, so the only way to help him without making it appear so was to ask his permission to become a part of the deal.

He brightened immediately.

"Yes, of course, if that's what you want, of course you can get involved... we'll all make a lot of money together..."

So he arranged to introduce me to the middle man. We met at a hotel in downtown Johannesburg. I didn't like the man from the very first moment.

The meeting was brief. As soon as I got home, I started making calls to check him out. It transpired that he had been involved in a few small deals with some of our other associates, and that these had all gone according to plan. His story that he was a diver at Port Nolus also checked out - I telephoned his home and a little girl answered. I asked her if her daddy was home and she said that, no, he had gone out on the boat. Afterwards I was to recall that moment and marvel at the lengths to which the agents had gone in order to successfully execute the subterfuge: even their children were primed for questions.

Still, I harboured deep-seated suspicions. At the last minute, I told Shai I thought it was best if he remained in Johannesburg as back-up, and let me travel to Cape Town on my own. Reluctantly, he agreed. I made contact with a trusted associate in Cape Town and arranged for him to be available to me at the Cape Sun Hotel, in the event that any merchandise changed hands.

The first evidence that there was something going on came when I boarded the plane at Jan Smuts.

The place was crawling with diamond squad officials. I was close enough to one of them to overhear a remark he made to one of the customs officials... in which the name Shai Avissar was plainly audible. I would have been astonished at how casual and careless these so-called "top cops" were on that occasion, had I not already known how downright incompetent they were capable of being.

No-one recognised me - or if they did, they didn't let on. A possible factor in this was that I was travelling on a passport that bore one of my married names.

I travelled in seat number 1A and the only luggage I had was a small valise, which I took on as hand luggage. It was the afternoon of September 16, 1991.

My associate collected me at Cape Town airport and drove me directly to the Cape Sun. I booked into a room on the 28th floor, freshened up and went downstairs.

Within minutes of arriving in the foyer, I spotted the contact, the "Port Nolus diver".

I marched over to him.

"Hi," I said curtly. "Let's go do this deal."

"Where's Shai?"

"Never mind. Let's go."

I gave him no time to alert anyone else. We went directly up to my suite and he quickly produced the diamonds. I stood by the window and studied them. There were eight stones. They were of the very highest grade, absolutely superb specimens. My heart pounded, but my voice remained neutral.

"I think these are bluff. I'll have to have them checked."

Before he could utter a word, I swept past him with the diamonds and left him standing, slack-jawed, in my suite.

Of course, he wasn't supposed to have let me out of his sight. But he was a particularly stupid individual, even by the standards of the organisation he belonged to.

I took the elevator to the ground floor. In my handbag was a bag of precious stones worth, by my best guestimate, four or five hundred thousand rand. I had not parted with a single coin, and I had possession of what would turn out to be some of the State's best stones. I was remarkably calm, even a little detached, under the circumstances.

I stepped out of the elevator when it reached the ground floor and strode across to a little bookstore just off the main foyer. I looked neither left nor right as I did so. It could only have taken me fifteen or twenty seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime.

I stopped at a row of Mills and Boon paperbacks. My associate was soon at my side. I passed the bag of diamonds to him and lifted the briefcase he left on the floor at my feet. No words were exchanged in the encounter. He left the building. I bought a magazine and left the shop.

At that point, I too could have left the hotel, hired a small aircraft and returned to Johannesburg without paying a penny for the diamonds. The thought did cross my mind. But no matter how little I trusted the man in my room, a deal was a deal. I knew the price he was asking for those magnificent stones - R80,000 - was but a fraction of their real value. Either he was even more stupid than I believed him to be, or he had some reason to want quick cash. Either way, I was not about to double-cross a player I knew very little about. My life is worth considerably more than eighty grand.

I returned to my room. The 'diver' was sitting on the bed, white as a ghost, when I swept back into the room. He leapt to his feet and grinned a wide-eyed, insane sort of grin. It was as if he had not been expecting to see me again. His relief was palpable.

"You got the money?" he blurted, actually drooling.

I handed him the briefcase. He dumped it on the bed, opened it and began counting the four neat piles of money. The fact that he did not instantly realise just by looking at it that the case contained just R40,000 - half the agreed amount - made my heart stop for an instant. If this were truly a seasoned dealer, he would not need to count the money. Something was up.

"That's forty thousand. Half now, half when you come to see me in Joburg," I said easily.

"What!"

He was on his feet again. He stood awkwardly beside the bed, one hand in his pocket, the other on the lid of the briefcase, his legs twisted at a silly angle. He had gone literally slack-jawed with shock. His beady, pale blue eyes darted from my face to the briefcase to the door and back to my face. There was genuine terror in those eyes.

"B-Bull. Bullshit," he stammered unconvincingly. His voice was like that of a frightened little girl.

"There's no negotiations," I said, shrugging. "What, do you think I'm stupid or something? I'm very experienced in these kinds of deals."

“What do you mea-”

“I never bring all the money. Nobody does, for fuck sakes. It’s insurance.”

“But the stones... I gave you all the-”

“Yes, I know, thank you very much, the stones are gone now. So take your money and we’ll arrange to meet in Joburg later in the week for the balance, okay, if my valuer says they are worth it.”

“The stones are gone?” He sat down on the bed.

“Don’t get comfortable, I have other appointments. Now do as I say or I can make life difficult for you. What’s wrong with you - are you not a professional or something?”

He seemed to regain a little of his composure, briefly.

“I am a professional.”

He stood up, snapped the briefcase shut and walked to the door. I followed him and opened it for him. He passed through it, as though in a trance. He turned to face me on the other side. There was a pleading expression on his face. For a moment, I thought he might actually burst into tears. I shut the door without another word.

I placed a call to Shai in Johannesburg from the bedside phone. As he answered, there was loud banging on the hotel room door.

“Hold on, Shai,” I told him, and placed the receiver on the pillow.

I crossed the floor and opened the door.

They burst in on me. Three cops at a time, seven altogether, all clutching hands and side arms brandished and handcuffs flying - it was pandemonium. I was thrown back on the bed. Instinctively, I grabbed the phone and yelled into it.

“Look out - I’m in trouble!” and then I slammed it down. The bastards were on top of me now, pinning me down. I fought them and was slapped around. I made a grab for my phone contacts book - which was brimming with information, fortunately in code. It was snatched from me and then they had the handcuffs on me and I was dragged off the bed by my hair and flung onto a couch.

One of them was going through my handbag.

“Hey!” I shot at him, my breath still heaving. “You’re not allowed to do that by law. You have to have a policewoman here if you’re going to search my bag or me.”

I bit my tongue as soon as the words were out. He grinned wickedly and got on the radio, putting in a request for a female officer to come up. From the malicious glint in his eye, it did not require much of an imagination to guess what he had in mind.

I caught a glimpse of the agent with whom I had negotiated the deal, the so-called Port Nolus diver. He had a shell-shocked look on his face. He was in trouble, and he knew it. I later learned that his code name was L. It was appropriate. L for Loser, with a capital L.

Two more cops suddenly swept into the room, dragging between them a man I had never seen before. He was wide-eyed with terror. His tie had been yanked so tight in the scuffle that his face was bright red. He was thrown down on his knees at my feet, hands cuffed behind his back. He looked up at me and tears began to stream down his face at the sheer shock of it all.

One of the policemen gave him a shove.

“This one was next door. He must be an accomplice.”

“No!” the man gave out a strangled little cry. He was shoved again.

“He was just coming out of the room with this briefcase,” said the second cop.

“What’s inside?” demanded the officer who appeared to be in charge.

They threw the case down on my now very tousled bed - it looked like I had just had rather rough and lovely sex which, more's the pity, could not be further from the truth - and flicked it open.

Nothing but colour brochures depicting various furniture ranges, and a couple of swatch samples. Poor bastard salesman.

"Where are the diamonds?" demanded a particularly brain-dead officer.

"Please," the supplicant before me begged, staring into my eyes. "Please lady, I don't know what you did, but please, oh Jesus, please, tell them I'm not with you!"

He was weeping openly now, sobbing pitifully.

I said: "I don't know you. I am so sorry you have to go through this. Don't worry, everything will be okay."

Before long they let him go, and I imagined him scampering away like a rabbit freed from a trap, hopping away up the hill and only turning when it got to the top, momentarily, just to make sure it wasn't being pursued.

The policewoman arrived. They left me alone with her, shutting the door behind them, smirking as they went.

After the humiliation of the full body search, they returned. The room was turned upside down. They were losing their sense of humour and becoming a little rough with me. I was hustled out of the room, still in handcuffs, onto the elevator. I was paraded around the foyer. Everyone stopped, everyone stared.

I demanded to be allowed to make a phone call. The officers of the law laughed at me. But there was a raw edge to their laughter. I sensed their growing fear. They had fucked up, big time, and they knew it. With each passing moment, the prospects of recovering some of the most valuable State diamonds were fading, fading... Heads would roll.

I was shoved into the back of a grey police truck and raced to the diamond squad offices. They interrogated me, took a statement, becoming more frustrated and panicked all the while.

"Where are the diamonds?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Where are the diamonds?"

"I'm just a businesswoman. I sell insurance."

"WHERE ARE THE DIAMONDS?"

They took me back to the hotel and paraded me around some more, perhaps thinking the humiliation would make me fold. I smiled and winked at the stunned onlookers.

Eventually the officer in charge said under his breath: "You are going to learn the hard way, lady. Now we are putting you in jail."

They took me to Clarendon Square police station. As they took off my rings they said, "Nice diamonds". They took off my necklace and said, "Nice diamonds". They took my watch and my earrings ("Nice diamonds").

I caught the eye of a Cape coloured policewoman who was noting each item down in a large register. She drew her lips back in a sympathetic half-smile, shrugging her shoulders a little as if to apologise for the immaturity of her male colleagues. It was a comforting gesture.

They took my shoes and my belt. They emptied my purse onto the counter. There was US\$4,500 in cash, and some rands.

"Why do you have so much foreign currency?"

"To pay my hotel bills."

"Expensive rooms," remarked one dryly.

They tried to make me sign a statement but I refused, and they took me downstairs to the cells.

"Ja," said one thick prick, "You're going to go in a cell now and you're going to find out the reality of life."

Now it was three in the morning, I was a mess - short skirt, no shoes, make up all over the place, I was exhausted - and they push me into this women's cell.

There were five other women in there. They lay on bunks, shielding their eyes from the glare of the lights which were thrown on moments before I was ushered in. From what I could make out, there were four black women and one white. It was the white woman, a venomous snarl contorting her countenance, who worried me. The black women gave me a cursory inspection before, sensibly, turning over and going back to sleep.

"Over there," the guard pointed needlessly to the one remaining bunk in the corner. It comprised a solid block of wood painted white, with a thin, plastic covered mattress. A single blanket was folded at the foot of it.

"Can I have a pillow?" I muttered.

"What?"

"A pillow."

The guard and his companion looked at each other, laughed uproariously, eliciting a spate of annoyed tut-tuts from the women trying to get some sleep, and then they trudged out and slammed the door. I stood rooted to the spot. The lights went out.

I felt my way to my bed and sat down on the edge. I wondered where Shai was. I wondered if he knew where I was. I wondered if the white woman a few feet from me in the dark was still staring at me with those murderous eyes. I wondered if she would try to rape me in the night. I imagined her gnarled and bony fingers on my body, and my flesh crawled.

Then I took control. I closed my eyes and visualised Shai driving through the night to get to me, on the cell phone to high-powered solicitors, calling in favours from political and police bosses; I visualised the mad woman approaching me in the dark, and then me grabbing her by the throat, crushing her larynx so she choked on her own blood... And I visualised the lights coming on, the cell door being thrown open...

As I imagined it, so it happened. The lights went on, the bolt was drawn back, the door opened. The sympathetic Cape coloured policewoman I had seen upstairs was beckoning to me to follow her out.

"Come," she said. She locked the cell door and led me down the corridor. She stopped at a cell at the end of it and showed me in. It was empty but for a single bed.

"You can stay here, you'll be the only one, on your own." Her lovely, lilting accent almost reminded me of Ireland.

"Thank you," I said, meaning it.

"I'm going to close the door, but I'm not going to lock the door."

"Thank you," I said again, a little woodenly. I was so shattered I felt dizzy. All the same, I could not bring myself to lie down on the bed. It was as if to do so would be conceding defeat.

Ten minutes later, the kind policewoman returned.

"Look," she said, "There's nobody out there. You may as well come through and have a cup of coffee with me."

And so I followed her through to the shabby little office next door to my cell, and I sat down on the wooden bench at the wooden table and had a cup of coffee with the woman who was supposed to be my jailer.

My lawyer arrived at four thirty in the morning.

After the brief message I had shouted into the phone at the hotel, Shai had realised I was in a police trap. The fact that I said I was in trouble told him the law was involved.

He alerted my lawyer immediately and put him on a Lear jet to Cape Town.

At seven o'clock they drove me back to the diamond squad offices. I was freezing cold, partly because the temperatures had dropped overnight and partly because I was emotionally and physically exhausted. Shai had caught the six o'clock plane and he arrived at 7:30. I sent him immediately to go and buy me a jumper, which he did.

By the time he returned, the cops had lost their patience with me again. Shai walked in and handed me my jumper, and the next moment he was being arrested as an accomplice.

"Hey," I yelled, "are you stupid? He was in Johannesburg until this morning."

"We are not so stupid. This one was part of the whole deal - unless you give us the diamonds."

I shook my head. "I too am not so stupid."

Both of us were charged. We were rushed into court. I was released on R50,000 bail and Shai on R20,000. We walked free within half an hour of the ruling.

It was the most religious day of the year - Yom Kippur - and we had to rest from 12 o'clock. So it was only the next day that we were able to get on a plane back home to Johannesburg.

*

AND SO THE COURT CASE BEGAN. AND IT WENT ON FOR TWO AND a half years.

I was charged initially in the Regional Court in Cape Town with contravening section 20 (read with various other sections) of the Diamonds Act 56 of 1986, for wrongfully purchasing eight unpolished diamonds with a total weight of 40.46 carats and valued at R101,335.

I had to stifle my laughter. The bastards were so embarrassed at having lost prize stones worth more than five times that amount that they had actually deliberately undervalued them for the purposes of my prosecution. It was hilarious. They must have been furious, but there was nothing they could do about it.

(Here I must point out for the benefit of any Tax Department officials that I made not one cent of profit on the deal. In fact, I made a loss, and they should be grateful I did not apply for a rebate).

While (quite rightly) Shai got off, I was convicted of the offence and sentenced to a fine of R50,000 or two years' imprisonment and a further 18 months imprisonment conditionally suspended for five years.

But, in addition, the judge made a compensatory order against me, in the sum of R101,335.

I was incensed. I had no qualms whatsoever about paying the R50,000 fine. After all, on top of the R40,000 I had already paid, it was not much more than the original asking price for the diamonds.

But now they were trying to accuse me of having stolen the diamonds.

I was adamant when I instructed my lawyers. There was no way they were going to get away with calling me a thief. Diamond dealer, okay, there was no shame in that. But I had not double crossed the dealer - it was he who had double crossed me. I had paid him the first half of the agreed sum, and had had every intention of paying him the balance once my valuer had confirmed the grades of the stones. The only reason the second half had not been paid, thereby making it a perfectly honest (albeit illegal) transaction, was because the trap had been sprung. I had not stolen the diamonds, and I refused to admit that I had by compensating the State for them.

So we appealed. On February 3, 1994 the appeal came up before the Cape Provincial Division, and all the State witnesses turned out to spin their yarn. I watched the sitting judge and sensed his incredulity at the incompetence of the "elite" police officers behind the sting.

As usual, my character judgement was spot on. He finally gave his judgement.

He announced: "First, as to the unsatisfactory features of the State's evidence, there are undoubtedly a number of these. For example, the piece of paper on which the appellant allegedly wrote her telephone numbers and which she allegedly handed to L on 4 September 1991, was not produced as an exhibit when he testified initially. It was produced and handed in as an exhibit by Captain R only after an adjournment of the trial.

"Then there is the fact that the diamonds used in the trap have disappeared. They were not found in the possession of the appellant, or at all. Had they been found in her possession, the case against her would have been considerably stronger. However, the disappearance is explicable, to my mind, in the light of the way in which the trap appears to have been put into operation by the South African police, which is most charitably described as ham handed.

"The appellant was permitted by L to leave the hotel room alone with the diamonds in her possession before he had received a cent for them. He had no idea where she was going with them, or how long she was going to stay away or, indeed, whether he would ever see her again.

"He even knew at that stage already that she must have had an accomplice unknown to him in the vicinity, outside the room, who was going to take the diamonds to Johannesburg to be valued.

"The Cape Sun is a large building; it has, according to evidence, some 29 or 30 floors. People come and go into and out of it and along its corridors all the time in large numbers. How Sgt L thought he would ever recover the diamonds or their value if the appellant did not return, is beyond me.

"It is also strange that L appears to have made no effort to ascertain who the person was to whom the appellant handed the diamonds or from whom she had received the money. He did not attempt to follow the appellant or even to open the bedroom door and look out into the corridor to see who was there.

"Nor do Captain R or the other members of the Diamond Branch seem to have exerted themselves greatly subsequent to this in order to attempt to identify the appellant's accomplice, for example, by following up information contained in the hotel's record of the various telephone calls made by the appellant on that day. This record contains the local telephone numbers of all persons whom she telephoned before the trap was sprung. Yet in his evidence, R was unable to comment on any of these parties.

“Captain R, the officer in charge of the operation, who was waiting in the lobby of the hotel, would not have known whom to apprehend leaving the hotel with the diamonds, even if L had succeeded in giving the alarm signal electronically as planned because, at least according to R’s evidence, those waiting in the lobby had not even been furnished with a description of the suspect who was being trapped, and R had never met the appellant or Avissar.

“Moreover, although the specific function of Captain R and his colleagues, Warrant Officer M and Sgt D, was supposedly to observe what happened when L entered the hotel, they seem to have observed next to nothing. R merely saw L arrive and walk past them but did not take the trouble to observe whom he met and spoke to thereafter, although on L’s evidence R and the other members of the police were in such a position that they would have been able to observe him had they taken the trouble to look in the right direction.

“Captain R did not even see L go to the lift with the appellant, so that he would not have had any idea whom to arrest, even had he received an alarm signal from L.

“Sgt D and Warrant Officer M were not called as witnesses. From this it can probably be inferred, at best for the State, that they observed no more of the events which took place in the hotel lobby and coffee bar than Captain R did.

“Warrant Officer S, who says that he did see L speak to the appellant and get into the lift with her, did not take the trouble to observe at what floor the lift stopped, so not even he knew to what part of the hotel L and the appellant had gone. His powers of observation seem to me to have been so poor that he was even unaware of the movements and whereabouts of Captain R and his companion, Warrant Officer D, in the lobby of the hotel. Whether he would have been of much use in identifying and pointing out to his colleagues a fleeing suspect, is greatly to be doubted. He himself and Captain R testified that that was in any event not his function. He was there merely as back-up for L in dealing with the suspect if the occasion should arise.

“Then, as I have said, the listening device failed to work. The police also did not take the trouble to couple it up to a tape recorder, although one was available.

“This is not all. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, shortly after disappearing with the diamonds, the appellant reappeared with the briefcase containing the R40,000 and handed it over to L. He says that the arrangement with the appellant was that he would thereafter stay with her in the room, keeping her as a kind of hostage until the diamonds had been flown to Johannesburg and valued there and the balance of the purchase price, if a deal was struck, had been paid, or the diamonds had been returned to him if a deal was not struck. The appellant’s person was to serve as security for the payment of the balance of the purchase price or the return of the gems, depending on the outcome of the negotiations. Yet, notwithstanding this arrangement, L immediately left the appellant alone in the room and went off to look for his colleagues. After he had left the room there was again nothing to prevent the appellant from disappearing forever.

“The trap was, from the police point of view, a comedy of errors. It is not at all surprising to me that the diamonds have disappeared without a trace. To my mind, their disappearance is attributable to and satisfactorily explained by the amateurish way in which the trap was carried out.”

However (and to his credit) the judge said he could not believe my defence that the police had concocted the whole story and that I had never been involved in a diamond deal of any nature. He was particularly scathing of Sgt L, my 'Port Nalus diver'.

"That he would have tailored his evidence in this regard is, I suppose, possible, but I find it difficult to ascribe such ingenuity and deviousness to a man who is capable of permitting a person suspected of illicit diamond buying to walk alone and unaccompanied out of her hotel room with the State diamonds in her possession worth more than R100,000, and that before he had received any payment for them. Such naiveté is not reconcilable with a fabrication of such elaborate evidence."

On the basis of his belief that the police involved in my case were too incompetent to have made it all up, the judge upheld my original conviction and fine.

But as for the order to pay compensation to the State for the missing diamonds, he pointed out that I had neither been charged with nor convicted of theft of diamonds - only with illegal diamond buying.

The result was that the order to compensate was overturned, and I walked away from it all with a R50,000 slap on the wrists, a substantial legal bill, and a lesson in how not to go about doing a diamond deal.

After my experience in the dock I stopped dealing in diamonds - I started concentrating on the commodities business which was doing very well. I made a conscious decision to stick to legitimate deals. Shai continued to handle the illegal business: He was the one who travelled and he did all the diamond deals after that.

Once the Government changed and the apartheid system was lifted, I never touched illegal diamonds again. I have a licence for rough diamonds and only do legitimate business now. Honest.

*

I MET WINNIE MADIKIZELA-MANDELA AS A RESULT OF JOINING the ANC Women's League. It was long before Nelson was released from his 27-year incarceration, but the writing was already clearly on the wall. South Africa, the last bastion of white supremacy, the final destination of the winds of change, would be independent.

Everyone makes a big deal of the enormous differences between Winnie and I. They say they can't understand how we could be just good friends when our backgrounds contrast so starkly.

My first husband was killed as a direct result of the Rhodesian war against African nationalists. Winnie is the very product of African nationalism. Her husband was imprisoned for it. She suffered years of oppression for it.

I gave time in service to the fight against African nationalism - my years with the BSAP qualified me as an active participant. Winnie is renowned for her high profile and controversial outbursts - "matches and tyres..."* - in her fight against minority rule.

(* Refers to the practise of tying a suspected government collaborator to a car tyre doused in fuel and setting it alight - called 'necklacing'.)

I spent my early married life pampered by a successful husband - I was a spoiled suburban housewife with a lovely home, my own car, servants...

Winnie spent her early married life watching her husband being dragged away from a squalid township home by the security police - she lay awake at night waiting for the

door to be kicked in. Just five years after they were married, he was sentenced to 27 years in prison. While he was away, Winnie suffered humiliation on humiliation. She was constantly harassed by the security police. Attempts were made on her life. She was detained without trial. She was tortured. She was banished from Soweto, where her people were, and forced to live in Brandford in the Free State.

So people - well, the Press, mostly - say we are a curious couple.

But what they never seem to take into account are the many similarities.

I had to raise my two children on my own after Anthony was killed. Winnie had to raise her two children on her own after Nelson was imprisoned. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson himself wrote: "The wife of a freedom fighter is often like a widow, even when the husband is not in prison."

I suddenly found myself reliant only on myself. I learned what it meant to be down to your last penny. At least once, I considered suicide. But I had to go on, for my children. Winnie too had to find the strength not to go to pieces. She not only had to make sure she could feed her children, but she also had to make certain that Nelson was not forgotten. There were times when she was so filled with despair she didn't think she could go on. Yet she did, time and again.

Both of us have seen the courtroom from the dock - Winnie for her politics, me for mine (money is my only ideology, I've made no secret of that fact).

Winnie is a great believer in women's liberation. I believe most men are inferior to women, in so many important ways (but they do have their uses).

Both of us are strong women. I respect her for what she has achieved in life, and she respects me. This mutual admiration is the cornerstone of our lasting relationship.

But when we get together it's more than just two powerful women holding court. We have so much fun. We laugh with each other. We have the same naughty sense of humour. We talk for hours on end, and are sorry when we have to say goodbye. Winnie never bitches. She has a knack for uplifting discourse.

And we comfort each other, as only a woman knows how. When we are going through any sort of crisis, big or small, words cannot describe the value we place in each other's support. I have picked up the phone on the other side of the world and called Winnie at her Orlando West home at three in the morning - and she has talked to me until dawn.

I don't give a damn what the sceptics say - I love Winnie, and she loves me (how could she not!). The sceptics don't speak from knowledge or experience, they speak from ignorance. They watch from a distance and concoct sinister scenarios in their narrow little minds. They say the only reason a white businesswoman (and "convicted diamond dealer") could have any interest in the Mother of the Nation is for influence in bureaucratic circles and the financial gain that brings. And they say the only reason Winnie could have any reason to fraternise with a successful businessperson is to collect bribes for political favours.

Bullshit.

Winnie and I don't see the black or the white in our friendship. We don't see the money or the titles. We are genuinely good friends. I'll say it again.

We are genuinely good friends.

It's a rare thing, being able to find someone who is almost always on the same wavelength as you. Someone you can trust to be there when you need a shoulder to cry

on. And believe me, we have cried on each other's shoulders often enough. Sometimes because we were laughing so much.

It's such a rare thing, in fact, that despite the cruel attacks on us, the barbed comments in the gossip columns, the snipes, the sneers, the innuendo - neither of us is prepared to let it go. We've been through too much together to sacrifice what we have simply to ease the righteous indignation of a handful of miserable and envious critics.

Stuff them.

Anything Winnie has done for me, anyone would do for a true friend. And anything I have given to Winnie, anyone would give to a friend in need.

The media went into a feeding frenzy when it "emerged" that I had "purchased" a luxury home in Cape Town so Winnie had somewhere to stay during parliamentary sittings.

WINNIEGATE! they screamed.

Packs of paparazzi skulked outside my gate, snapping like hyenas, racing around after me as if I was Princess Di, for God's sake! I actually stopped to talk to a couple of them, to tell them this was silly, there was no big scoop here, I had simply bought the home so a good friend didn't have to spend her money on lonely hotel rooms, so she could at least entertain friends from time to time... I don't know why I bothered. The hacks and snappers simply snarled and yapped and hacked and snapped - surprise, surprise. They made a meal of the fact that this "CONVICTED DIAMOND DEALER" had "BOUGHT A MANSION" for the "DEPUTY MINISTER".

Oh, get over it. We're friends. We didn't rendezvous under a bridge at midnight wearing cloaks and concealing daggers and saying, "I'll buy you a house if you get me this government contract or that government contract."

Sorry, lads, but it just didn't happen that way. Winnie was telling me how she hated going to Cape Town and staying in hotels. A little while later, I was chatting to Shai about the prospect of investing some cash in real estate - and the two thoughts merged. Why not buy a house in Cape Town as an investment, and let Winnie stay there when she needed to. It killed two birds with one stone - make a GREAT INVESTMENT and help out a GOOD FRIEND.

Nothing sinister. Sorry again, no great revelations there. Scandal over, okay?

This seems as good a place as any to make my next point, one which should be made and which should, in fact, have been made by the same media who pounce from the shadows every time there appears to be an opportunity to say something nasty about Winnie.

They should be asking WHY it is that Winnie, Mama Wetu, the Mother of the Nation, the mother of Nelson's children, a woman who sacrificed her life for the struggle... WHY does she have to rely on gifts from friends?

That's the real scandal.

Winnie should never have to worry about where her next meal is coming from. Isn't that the way the story is supposed to end? The heroine suffers dreadful abuse and untold horrors before finally winning the day and living happily ever after. The audience applauds and goes home feeling that happy glow that comes with the knowledge that adversity is followed by reward.

Well, that's the Cinderella tale. Winnie's has been more like the Joan of Arc tale. She suffered the dreadful abuse and the untold horrors and she won the day - but then she went on to be burned at the stake for her troubles.

At least Joan of Arc's demise took only as long as it took for the smoke to finally asphyxiate her.

Winnie is burning, and burning, and burning, and burning...

Once, Shai and I went to visit Winnie at her Orlando West home.

It's a lovely house in the midst of the people Winnie calls her own, her family, her children. These are the people for whom Winnie sacrificed her youth, her marriage, her right to watch her children grow up, uninterrupted.

We were shown into the lounge. Winnie was busy somewhere else in the house, so we sat down to wait.

Shai was thirsty. He got up and went through to the kitchen to get something to drink. He opened Winnie's fridge, and was shocked to find that it was empty.

That was the last straw.

When Winnie was banished to Brandford, she lived in abject misery throughout the late seventies and early eighties. But she did not simply sit and wallow in self pity. She went out as a social worker, often getting up when it was still dark and working through the day, only returning home when it was dark once more. She spent all her time helping the black people in the town, fighting malnutrition, looking after new-born babies and even delivering a few along the way.

Now here she was, separated from the man she had loved for 33 years, vilified by the Press, and abandoned by many she had called friends because they were now "on Nelson's side"... and she had no food in her house.

I hugged her and told her not to be embarrassed. Then Shai and I went out and found a supermarket, and we filled her fridge and her pantry.

Occasionally I have bought essential groceries for Winnie. Nothing extravagant - only the simple things that everyone should have in their kitchen.

Much less than my friend deserves.

Once it was Winnie's birthday and Shai and I went round to pay a visit. When we got there, Winnie's two beautiful daughters, Zindzi and Zenani, were cooking in the kitchen. There wasn't enough for the dozens of well-wishers who were expected. Winnie was beside herself. Without a word, Shai went out and came back with one hundred hamburgers and five hundred cans of Coke.

Nelson and Winnie separated in April 1992. They went on to get a divorce in March 1996. Between those two tragic milestones was the greatest moment of Nelson's political career - his inauguration as the first black president of South Africa, on May 10 1994.

Even though Winnie was not invited to participate - it would be Zenani who accompanied her father on stage, while Winnie and Zindzi watched from the crowd - it was inconceivable that she should not have something special to wear on the occasion. It was, after all, something she had worked and struggled and fought all her life to see.

I commissioned my personal designer, Spero Villioti, to create an original, gold and black lace outfit for Winnie. She looked absolutely radiant in it. I brushed a tear from her eye when she wore it for the first time, knowing that this was small consolation for all the hurt she was feeling.

Contrary to what many people believe, Winnie is not the Imelda Marcos of South Africa. She does not possess a wardrobe full of designer clothes, nor racks of expensive shoes, nor vaults full of valuable jewellery. Most of her clothes are off the peg. The Villioti outfit has not only been worn once, to the inauguration, but many times, to many different social functions. Winnie is not one of these stuck up social gadflies who thinks,

“Oh my God, I can’t be seen twice in the same dress”. She wears it because it was a gift from a dear friend.

She wore it to the M-Net Film Awards - and afterwards to the surprise party I threw for her 58th birthday. She toasted our friendship as she cut the cake: “Hazel and I have learnt how to run away from the system. She with her diamonds and I fighting the system.”

There were gasps from the members of the Press present. They frantically scribbled every word. Was Winnie condoning my illegal diamond deals? Was she comparing a criminal activity to the liberation struggle?

Please, oh please.

All she was saying was that she and I were kindred spirits - women who dared to venture out of the kitchen, to peek out from behind the living room curtains, to open the door and step into the big bad world dominated by big bad men. We were survivors. We had faced different dilemmas and we tackled them differently - but we had one important thing in common: We tackled them. We didn’t just slink away and hide in a corner. We walked out into the open and closed the door behind us. There was no going back, so we didn’t even glance over our shoulders.

I had the good fortune to meet another strong woman, through Winnie, who similarly beat the odds.

I had, of course, heard of Oprah Winfrey, but I had never seen any of her shows. I don’t tend to watch a lot of television and when I do it’s generally the odd daytime soap, like Days of Our Lives, or it’s a DVD movie.

So when Winnie invited Shai and I to see Oprah, I misunderstood and thought she meant we were to meet the cast of an opera.

It’s not as ridiculous as it sounds. It happened like this. I was at home when Winnie called. She was in quite a state.

“Hazel, you have to help me - I have a serious problem because I have some people coming in and we need to arrange a very urgent dinner tonight at my home... the Oprah people are coming in, and I have a Women’s League meeting this afternoon and - oh, help!”

So as soon as I had assured Winnie that I would be around to help out, I got in touch with some of the best caterers in the business, arranged for bar stocks to be delivered, extra glassware, fresh flowers, waiting staff and so on. I had all the right people in line, and had plenty of time to set everything up - Winnie had said the opera people had gone on a safari and they would be there that night.

I rushed out to her house, which they call “Parliament” in Soweto. Winnie was still in her Womens’ League meeting, and I was busy setting up the conference room with the caterers and in walk these people.

“Hi everybody,” said the strikingly beautiful woman at the head of the group in a sexy American drawl.

I turned around and said, “Hello, how are you?”

“Fine, but so hot because we’ve been on safari. I would just looove a drink.”

But Shai, who was generally quite aggressive and not particularly up on social skills, said abruptly: “We are very busy at the moment.”

I said: “Shai, please pour the lady a drink, I’ve just got to run upstairs quickly for something - what would you like?”

“I’ll have a Vodka and orange, thank you.”

I went off upstairs and when I came down the little group of arrivals had moved into the other lounge. When I walked in the beautiful woman introduced herself and the others.

"Hi, I'm Oprah, this is my husband Steadman, this is Diana Robinson, this is-" and so on. It still didn't click. Like I said, I had never seen her show, so I didn't even know what she looked like. At that stage, I certainly had no idea what a legend she was in America and around the world.

"You know," said Oprah taking a sip from the glass Shai had just handed her unsmilingly, "the Vodka and orange in this country tastes real strange."

I said: "Let me have a taste."

Shai, who didn't know alcohol because he didn't drink alcohol, had put Ouzo and orange in her glass, so I took it away and poured her another drink.

That night, as we sat down at the table, Winnie sat down at the head of the table, I sat at her left hand side, Oprah sat next to me and Steadman sat two away from Winnie.

Oprah turned around and said to me: "By the way, I took a tour around Soweto and I really find the people here need to have more upliftment."

I started debating the issue with her and after a few moments - in a civilised fashion - we were getting stuck into each other. The next thing I felt this kicking on my shin. It was Winnie. I leaned in close to her and she whispered in my ear.

"Hazel, don't debate with Oprah Winfrey! She's only one of the cleverest and well-known TV talk show hosts in America."

I was stunned, but only for a moment. I was thoroughly enjoying the debate, and I sensed that Oprah was too.

"Let me finish, Winnie!"

And so we continued for a good while longer and in the end Oprah said she liked my spirit.

"When you come to America, Hazel, I want to see you there - on my show."

And that's how I met Oprah Winfrey. It was a lovely experience, she's a wonderful person and Steadman is a marvellous man... oh, and Diana Robinson is also a nice girl.

Apart from Oprah, I've met some pretty powerful and well-known figures in my time.

Naturally, I have met Nelson Mandela - and liked him. It is such a tragedy that his and Winnie's marriage didn't work in the end. There was a time when they loved each other so very much, more than anyone could imagine. And, as anyone who has ever experienced the magical glow of that first, true love will tell you, it is inconceivable that Nelson and Winnie don't still dream of each other at night, or don't still feel the profound jab of heartache when they hear a particular song, or look at a photograph from their youth.

Yes, Nelson is a great, great man. A great statesman and a great man. He is loved by all, and justifiably.

And yes, Winnie has made her mistakes. She is the first to admit that.

But I'd like to pose a question to Winnie-detractors.

What would have happened if it had been Winnie who was jailed for twenty-seven years, and Nelson who had been banished to a wilderness township where the poor literally had to scavenge on garbage heaps for scraps of food, to raise two children on his own, constantly harassed by jackbooted secret police, imprisoned and kept in solitary confinement for 491 days, humiliated at every turn...

Winnie led an exemplary life under these conditions, year in, year out. Gradually, she became tired. She began to rely on the help of others. People she trusted. People she had no reason not to trust. People who let her down in the end.

Would Nelson himself not have been just as prone to making mistakes on the outside? Would anyone, even a saint, not have suffered bouts of weakness?

As Nelson himself says in his autobiography: "... I am convinced that my wife's life while I was in prison was more difficult than mine..."

I believe that no-one had the more difficult life. Both Nelson and Winnie suffered the same, in their own way. Neither deserves to be vilified. Leave it alone now.

Through Winnie as well as through my own dealings, I have met many other great names in South Africa's political history: President Thabo Mbeki, Tokyo Sexwale, the late Peter Mokaba, Geoff Radebe, Tito Mboweni, Patricia Pilau... the list is too long to complete. I've also met Robert Mugabe, Kenneth Kaunda, Yasser Arafat, Colonel Muammer Gadaffi, President Fidel Castro, Imelda Marcos (and Corazon Aquino after her), Benazir Bhutto... and many more.

One of the more interesting encounters I've had was with Lucas Mangope when he was in power in the homeland of Boputhatswana, in early 1994.

Mr Mangope was resisting reincorporation into South Africa prior to the first free elections. Nelson Mandela had attempted on numerous occasions to persuade Mr Mangope before the 12 February deadline for registration of all parties, but to no avail.

I was, in fact, listening to a bulletin on the subject when my phone rang. It was my personal line, only known to those very close or very important to me.

"Mrs Crane? Is that Mrs Hazel Crane?" came the voice of a man, a voice I did not recognise.

"Who wants to know?"

"Mrs Crane, I am calling on behalf of Lucas Mangope, President of Boputhatswana."

"I see. How may I help you?"

"We would like to visit you to discuss a matter of national importance. Can you make yourself available in the morning?"

"I'm sure I can," I said, intrigued.

"Very good. We know where you live. Two of our ministers will call on you at around ten o'clock."

And sure enough, they were there promptly the following morning. I showed them into my Japanese lounge and after a few moments of small talk about the weather and how lovely my home was, they told me why they had come.

"We have heard that you are a very good friend of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela."

"Correct."

"In fact, that you are her closest friend and most trusted advisor."

"Winnie has many friends."

"Indeed. And many followers. But you are a special friend to her, are you not?"

"Yes."

"May we speak frankly?"

"Of course."

"Our country is on the brink of war. One spark, and it will ignite. We are concerned for ourselves, for our people and for our leader."

"Mr Mangope."

“Mr Mangope.”

“What is it you want from me?”

“We are holding a special council in Boputhatswana. A secret council. Mr Mangope will be there. We need you to persuade Mrs Madikizela-Mandela to come to this meeting, to discuss a way forward.”

“What has Winnie to do with all of this?”

“Winnie is a powerful woman. A powerful political voice. And she is a highly influential member of the ANC.”

I considered the proposition for a moment. I have never been politically active. My interest in politics extends only as far as it needs to - who is in power, how can I profit from it. My participation in movements such as the ANC Women’s League has only resulted from my interest in women’s rights, and in part due to my close friendship with Winnie.

I rationalised what was being asked. I was simply being requested to broker a meeting between two parties. This was no different to what I did all the time as part of my business - putting foreign investors in touch with local business people, for a fee.

No different, apart from the fact that no fee had been offered.

But I looked into the eyes of the two government ministers opposite me. They were genuinely concerned. This meeting, I could gauge, was a last ditch effort. The future of a nation of people hung in the balance. If I could help in any small way, I would call it my good deed for the year. And, more importantly, if I didn’t profit now, there was always the chance that I could make something of these contacts at a later date. Contacts, I have learned time and again, should never be underestimated.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Barely three days later, at seven thirty in the morning, Winnie and I were at Jan Smuts airport boarding a magnificent Lear jet sent for us by Lucas Mangope.

I was the only white in the group of eight being flown in for the talks.

When we landed at a military base just inside Boputhatswana we were met with red carpet treatment and transferred to two enormous military helicopters.

Winnie and I went in one with the guard Winnie had insisted on taking along for security, while the others went in the other one.

The flight took just over ten minutes, and then we descended into jungle terrain to the secret location where the talks were being held.

It was not what I had been expecting at all. I had imagined a concrete bunker bristling with guns and offering only the most rudimentary of facilities - a table, a few chairs...

The reality was very different. When we arrived we were shown into a sumptuous, air-conditioned lodge fitted out like a five star hotel.

We had tea before being escorted into a conference centre where we were introduced to Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and his aides.

Mr Mugabe shook first Winnie’s hand and then mine. It was a surreal moment, facing the man who my first husband had died fighting against. But I was instantly taken with him.

Mr Mugabe said he would like to speak to Winnie, and that he would like me to be present. I accompanied them into a private conference room but did not participate in the discussion.

When they had finished talking Mr Mugabe said should he wish to get in contact with Winnie again, he would come through me, as he recognised me as her mediator. I said that would be fine and we left.

The remainder of our stay in the secret hideaway in the jungles of Boputhatswana was spent chatting to various dignitaries and officials. Winnie limited her discussions to political issues. I limited mine to business. Many of the contacts I made on that day have proved immensely useful to me since then.

When we returned to Johannesburg, I was asked to host a meeting in my own home, between Lucas Mangope, Winnie, Tokyo Sexwale, Peter Mokaba and several others, thirteen in all. They held these high level talks around the enormous glass-topped table in my garden. Scheduled only to last an hour, the meeting went on for five.

I don't know to this day what was discussed at that meeting, but it was evidently too little, too late.

The people of the homeland of Boputhatswana finally spoke, breaking the political deadlock. There were mass riots on the streets of Mafikeng. Mr Mangope made the mistake of calling on his white, right wing allies for military help, which only incensed his people even more. It was not long before his own soldiers deserted him, and he was ousted in a coup in early March.

So my political brokerage hadn't worked out quite as well as it could have, but I had done my best and, as I've said, my business did not suffer as a result.

In fact my business of brokering commercial partnerships was prospering no end.

One of the companies I helped to get established in South Africa was Planet Hollywood which was a great buzz because I had the opportunity to meet the stars (and they got to meet me!)

There was Wesley Snipes, Jean Claude Van Damme, Whitney Houston, Bryan Adams, the Three Sopranos, the Three Tenors, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, Naomi Campbell, Iman, David Bowie, Boyz 2 Men...

When we had Miss World in South Africa I met many more celebrities, such as Faye Dunaway (who just adored my diamonds and emeralds), and the wonderful singer Helmut Lotte.

While I was living this glamorous life, Shai was starting to do some very dodgy deals. He met some Nigerians and some people from Cameroon. I don't know what went down in most of those deals but I know that he was travelling and coming back with lots of money - I mean suitcases and suitcases of money. And he was spending it like it was his last day on earth.

I kept asking him how the diamond deals were doing and he would just say: "Yes, not too bad..."

Many months later I discovered that some of the deals Shai had been involved in had earned him many powerful enemies. One of the shakedowns in which he was involved with the Nigerian mob was what is commonly referred to in the trade as 'wishy-washy'.

This entails showing a gullible businessman with more money than sense a suitcase full of what looks like jet-black bank notes.

You then explain that they are real Nigerian bank notes coated in a special paint - really just Vaseline and iodine - in order to smuggle them out of Nigeria. You then take a couple

of the notes and wash them off in a bath full of 'magic chemical'. When the black 'paint' comes off, a genuine bank note is revealed.

The gullible businessman is now eager to buy the suitcase full of 'cash' and the 'magic chemical' for a fraction of their 'real' worth. The only problem is that the rest of the 'notes' are really just pieces of black paper. And, of course, the magic chemical is what it always was - water.

South African businessmen reportedly parted with R5 million through these 'black dollar' scams (not all down to Shai, but he would have had his fair share).

But that was no longer my department, it was Shai's department, and I only really took an interest if there was something that needed to be done that only I could do... I was more interested in my committees and my community work - I was doing a lot of work for the upliftment of the impoverished black people in South Africa (one of my proudest achievements has been the sponsoring of a young black student who did not have the means to pursue a higher education. I paid for his tuition throughout high school and university - and he recently graduated with a degree in medicine).

On one of my trips overseas to see my daughter in 1997, my whole world turned upside down.

I was in London when Shai phoned me early one evening. Shai would phone me several times a day whenever I was away, sometimes spending a thousand rand on a single mobile conversation.

"Hello Hazel, when are you coming home?"

"A week, Shai, give me another week."

"Oh I miss you lots and lots. I will call you again before bed time, okay?"

"Okay, Shai."

"Okay... I love you baby."

I went cold, instantly. "What? What did you call me?"

But Shai just hung up. He had heard the question, but he still hung up.

I replaced the receiver and sat down.

"What's wrong, mom?" Hayley asked me. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'll tell you what's wrong. Shai is having an affair."

I was on a flight home the next morning. I had told Hayley that when Shai called she was to tell him I would be in meetings in London all day and that I'd call him when I was free.

I spent the trip home turning recent events over in my head. Shai had been spending more and more time at the gym, followed by visits to a masseuse. I hadn't thought anything of it at the time - I'd simply assumed he needed a good massage to take away the aches and pains in his muscles after each work out. But my very keen intuition now told me there was something going on between him and his little masseuse. My sixth sense is very seldom wrong.

I had arranged for my driver to meet me at the airport and he drove me straight home. The maid and I unpacked my bags and then I sat down to wait for Shai.

Barely an hour after I arrived, the phone rang. I answered it.

"Hello," said the woman on the other end. "Is that Mrs Crane?"

"Who's calling?"

"This is Elaine, calling from the estate agency."

"Yes?"

"I've got the valuation on your home for Mr Crane."

"What valuation?"

"The one Mr Crane asked for."

I recovered very quickly. "Yes, please send them around."

When the papers came my worst fears were confirmed. Shai had been valuing not only the house and the property but all the contents of the house. It could mean only one thing. When Shai came home that night he was very surprised to see me, but was a good enough actor to conceal his panic. Not clever enough, though, to realise I could hear him when he slipped away downstairs to make a phone call.

"I'm sorry," he was whispering. "I can't see you tonight - my wife is in town."

Of course I wasn't his wife, but he always called me that. I waited until he had left the room and I re-dialled the number, and it was the number of the gym. So I knew it was somebody there but I didn't know who because Shai's call had been transferred from the main switchboard. I had a pretty good idea anyway.

The next day I phoned my lawyer and asked him what my position was.

"We've lived together for eight years - where does this leave me legally?"

"Look Hazel, its very simple: They'll say he is your common law husband because you've cohabited for so long. He's entitled to fifty percent of everything."

Well, I'd worked too hard and too long for this. I thought for a few moments. And then it came to me, and I had to smile at my own true evil genius.

Shai had always wanted to marry me. I would make his dream come true. I began to devise a plan.

So that night we went to bed and after we'd made the most wonderful, passionate love, I said: "Shai do you still want to marry me?"

"Of course I want to marry you! You know I love you."

"In that case," I purred, "let's get married."

He was so excited he didn't even suspect a thing when I said all he would need to do would be to sign an antenuptial agreement. He asked me to arrange it. The next morning he went out and bought me another ring.

I went to Gordon, my solicitor, and asked him how long it would take him to draw up the agreement. He said a day.

I phoned Winnie and explained my situation to her and she was shocked and horrified to think that Shai would even dream of having an affair. I asked her to be a witness at my wedding, and she immediately agreed but asked me if I was sure that this was what I wanted to do, and I said of course it was.

The next day Gordon met with Shai and I at about nine o'clock in the morning and he explained the contracts and told Shai if he wanted to sign them he would have to do so at the offices of the senior counsel who had drawn them up.

Before that I had spoken to Winnie and she said the magistrates court in Randburg was where you got married. So I phoned them about an hour before we were due to meet Gordon and said I needed to get married right away. The booking clerk there said it wasn't possible at such short notice.

I said: "Listen, my name is Hazel Crane and I am a personal friend of Mrs Winnie Mandela, who is going to be a witness to my marriage, and I need to get married today."

The minute I mentioned that Winnie was going to be the witness, the doors opened. The lady said she would clear the courtroom.

“Just come any time and we’ll make sure that everything is ready for you.”

So when we left Gordon’s offices we went two blocks up the road to the senior counsel where Shai and I signed the antenuptial agreement. I had what I wanted - I clutched that piece of paper close to me. I was cold and calculating, but I was certainly not going to have brought Shai into my home and after eight years allow him to walk out with half of my possessions. It just wasn’t going to happen.

So Shai and I went home and Winnie was waiting for us there. She played her part beautifully.

“Now that you have the legalities sorted out, what better time than now to get married?”

Shai was suddenly a little reluctant.

“No, no,” he said, “we have to make all the arrangements.”

“No, no,” said Winnie. “It’s been arranged already - as a surprise!”

As she said it, her four security men, battle-hardened former Mkonto we Sizwe men stood up. Shai smiled nervously. He looked at me, then at Winnie, then at her four minders, then back at me. When his eyes met mine there was a brief flicker of comprehension. This was a shotgun wedding and now Shai knew it.

So Shai went with Winnie in her car, with two security men and I went in my car with the other two security men and when we got to the court we were ushered into the magistrate’s office and were married straight away. We used the rings that we were wearing, and Winnie was my chief witness.

That was on 11th of September. It was two days before Rosh Hashana and I said to Shai: “We’re celebrating at home tonight.”

“Okay, fine - I just have some business to attend to.”

“Okay, my sweet,” I said. “But please don’t be late.”

Over the three days since I had arrived back in South Africa I had had a team of private investigators unearthing Shai’s activities and movements while I was away. I had learned that the young woman Shai had been seeing did massages at the gym, and that he’d been seeing her for four or five months. She was in her early twenties.

I knew how many times Shai had seen this girl, where he had taken her... Shai had gone to Cape Town when I had gone to London and had slept with her at the Peninsula Hotel, in the same suite that we had always gone to - he hadn’t even bothered to be original. He did exactly what he would do for me. He was filling up her car using my fuel cards, buying her gifts, taking her to dinners, fucking her... basically he was treating her like a little concubine.

After the wedding I came home, packed Shai’s clothes into a single suitcase and had them put at the foot of the stairs.

That night when Shai came home at six o’clock. He looked bewildered. The first thing he saw was his suitcase. The next thing he saw was me, sitting at the head of the dining table.

“Where are all our guests?” he asked softly.

“No,” I said. “There are no guests. Sit down, we’re going to have dinner.”

I had cooked a fish and put it on a silver platter. Shai sat down at the other end of the table, very slowly, never taking his eyes off me.

“You know Shai, life is very strange. You and I are husband and wife now. You love me very much and I love you very much, but I can’t live with mistrust and I can’t live with lies.”

“No, Haze-”

"I know you have been lying to me and I want to know who this girl is in your life."

Shai began to deny it. I snapped.

"You can take your fucking whore Zoe and you can take your fucking fish and you can stick it up your jack."

I threw the fish across the table and it landed in his lap. He just sat there, stunned. Then he began to dig.

"Hazel, what are you talking about? I don't know a Zoe, I don't know anything--"

"You are a liar and tomorrow I am going to prove it to you. You get out of my house and get out of my life."

The war had begun.

That night I had a very bad night. I got my driver Elvis with me the next morning and we went off to the gym. I had my marriage certificate and I walked into the gym and strode straight through to the health spa - and there sat Shai in the waiting room.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Shai stood up. "I've just come to get a massage."

"Well," I said, "You're not having a massage with that bitch that's inside."

I threw the door open and there was this woman having a bikini wax - her legs were up in the air - and this Zoe was doing it.

Well, I grabbed Zoe and threw her up against the wall and I said: "You insolent little bitch, you see this, you've been having an affair with my husband, I married him on the 11th of September."

Well, the girl was so thick she didn't even know what a marriage certificate was. She tried to take it out of my hands and she tried to say it was nothing.

I said to her: "I want to see you out in the car park because Shai's gone out there and I want to see you both in the car park."

I walked out to the car park and when I got out there Shai jumped out of his car, where he had been waiting. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me violently.

"You're a bitch, how can you do this to me?"

"Because of what you did to me. Eight years meant nothing to you - how can throw them down the drain for a little girl?"

"I haven't slept with her."

"You liar, I have the receipts from the Peninsula Hotel, and I know exactly what you've bought her and I know exactly where she lives, I haven't stopped now, if you try you'll see nothing, because now I'm going to play with you."

He turned away and got back into his car. And as he tried to close his window I stuck my hand in to stop him. My hand got caught and he started to drive away. Thank God, my driver Elvis intervened by driving in front of Shai's car. Shai opened his window enough for me to yank my hand free. As he started to reverse away, Zoe cried out for him to take her with him. I turned her round and punched her in the mouth.

"I'm going to sort you out and I'm going to fix you for life," I told her.

Then both of us watched as Shai accelerated out of the car park, onto the road and away.

After a few days Shai started coming around to the house. He wanted to come home, he said. He didn't want to know this girl. This girl was clinging to him.

I was not very sympathetic. I told Shai I was going to ruin his business. I told him there was no way back. I told him I would send him back to Israel with the same plastic bags and dirty jeans and cheap runners.

In the six months that we were fighting, I took Shai down to R54 in the bank. He had nothing but his clothes, a rented town house and the Mercedes Benz that I had bought him.

I told him one day: "I want my car back."

"You're not getting it."

I went to the police. The whole issue was getting nastier and nastier by the day.

Then Shai called me and asked if I would meet him and Zoe at the Hilton to discuss the whole mess. I agreed. When I got there, Shai told me he was very sorry, he didn't know what he was doing. I picked up the cup of hot chocolate and threw it at him. The three of us were physically ejected from the Hilton. It was bad, but when you love somebody that much and they hurt you so badly, you don't care who's looking. No-one else exists. Now I truly understand what they mean when they say 'tunnel vision'.

Both of us were playing dirty now. Shai started sending me blackmail letters. He had the police raid my house after he told them there were diamonds in it, there were drugs in it.

And through all of this Shai and I couldn't talk to one another. We had to expend our anger first, and that seemed to take a very, very long time.

Eventually he couldn't afford to live any more. I heard that he was in debt to some very dangerous people. That night I did some very deep soul searching. I asked myself if I wanted to hear that he had been found dead in the gutter. The answer was no. I loved Shai too much for that, even though I had also learned to hate him.

So I called him to my house and I said to him: "Shai, there's only one way to go - you're going to take this one way ticket back to your family in Israel."

Then he threw me. He started to cry.

"Don't cry," I said, softening. I could see that he was broken. And I still loved him so very much...

"Don't cry, because what we can do is we can come to a compromise. I can never take you back Shai because the trust is gone. I love you very much, I always will, but you will never share my bed or my body again, that is the one thing that will never be compromised."

So he said to me: "Fine, how are we going to work it?"

"All I want to do is work with you on my diamond deals. If you do a diamond deal, it's a sixty percent split for me if I bring the client and a forty percent split for you.

"If you bring the client into the country, forty percent for me and sixty percent for you.

"You will look after me and that is how we will go through life. If you are happy with that arrangement, you can take over the business, and you will pay me an agreed amount of money every month, and I will run my home from that.

"What ever business I do is my business and what ever other business you do is your business. I have an apartment in Killarney. You are welcome to go and stay in it, I won't charge you rent. I'll furnish it and I will pay all the bills."

But I stipulated that the moment he brought that Zoe into the apartment, the whole deal was off and I would see to it that he was reduced to a beggar in the street. He agreed. And that is how Shai and I worked for the last 18 months leading up to what happened to him.

In that 18 months Shai met up with these Israelis. He took on as his partners four men by the names of Daniel, Aaron, Gideon and Abraham (**not their real names*).

First of all, the partnership was Daniel and Shai. Then he met the other two who were in partnership together, Aaron and Abraham. He brought them round to meet me. He introduced them to me as Fat Aaron, because he was very fat, and Skinny Abraham, because he was skinny. These fellows were not very creative thinkers.

Aaron and Abraham had been very close before they encountered Shai and Daniel. They had been partners for a very long time.

But when Shai and Daniel and Abraham started doing business deals together all over Johannesburg, Fat Aaron was, for some reason, cut out.

I don't think the business deals were diamond deals, I'm not too sure. Anyway I heard that there were a lot of black dollar deals going down but that wasn't my business. Shai and I had the diamond business together and he was paying me the money as arranged.

Anyway Shai and Daniel succeeded in splitting up the partnership between Abraham and Aaron. So the three of them now formed the nucleus of a new gang that started to do all sorts of deals not only in South Africa but overseas, mainly in the States and Australia. I don't know what deals they did but I'm sure those deals weren't very kosher - I'm sure that there are people in America and Australia who would be interested to know about the association between the three.

But Fat Aaron was left out in the cold. And Aaron started to run with other Israelis.

Then Shai came to me one day and said he didn't like Abraham, Abraham wasn't going to be in business with him any more, Abraham had taken money from him... and Shai now started to run with Fat Aaron, Daniel and their old friend Gideon.

I didn't like what was going down and I stayed away from them as much as possible. Shai would phone me and tell me to come and have coffee with the boys, but I would generally say I had other things to do. I wasn't comfortable around the gang. They reminded me of a pack of hyenas.

Shai was at my house every day at half past eight, and at four o'clock each afternoon. He would have meetings with me, he'd come and make sure that everything was okay, he'd look after my bank account and make sure that money was rolling in correctly, and in return I would look after him.

Shai made out a will and bequeathed everything to me. It was all mine anyway.

Shai was very generous to me, though, when he made any extra money. He would fly me overseas on a whim, to be with him in France, Monaco, Germany, Italy...

And when he was low on funds and I wanted a little company, I would fly him overseas. But we were just friends. We never became lovers after we finished. He still had the little girlfriend on the side. I know that she spent some time in the flat, three nights a week. I'd actually had a contract drawn up by an attorney to say that he could have anybody he wanted at the flat except for this girl, but Shai always managed to sneak her in the door somewhere along the way.

But Shai was already cheating on Zoe, although she didn't know it. He had four or five other girlfriends including an Israeli and an Indian. None of that bothered me. I wasn't sleeping with Shai, so that part of me was emotionally dead.

I was also seeing other people. The difference was that Shai did mind. He would find out who my latest love interest was and get hold of them, threatening that he was going to kill

them. On more than one occasion Shai arranged to have men friend's of mine followed home. Then - depending on Shai's mood - either they would be beaten up, or their cars would be beaten up - or both.

I started to travel into the Middle East on business. Shai didn't approve, of course, which made me all the more determined to carve a niche for myself in this rich market. It was an exciting world for me going into Egypt and Saudi, Kuwait and Qatar, to the Lebanon and to Dubai. It was very exciting and I loved the people and the way of life and the energy. I would get business groups from South Africa and from the UK and take them into these countries and try to put different deals together. Some of the deals worked, some of the deals didn't, but it was good for me and I was travelling a lot - a pastime I never tire of.

When I travelled, Shai would come in and check on my house - he never lived in the house, but he had keys and he would come and make sure that the maids were fine and that the dogs were fine, and he would take my cars to a car wash.

I was still worried about the fact that Shai continued to run with his new-found Israelis. The other Israelis that we both knew were mainly diamond dealers and were good people - but the lot that he had now got himself involved with were bad news... they were involved in dirty deals. On the rare occasions that I met with them they deliberately spoke in Hebrew which I didn't understand - my Hebrew comprises catch-phrases and a little conversational use, but was not at their level so it was very difficult for me to follow exactly what was going on. That was just the way they liked it.

But all of a sudden I found a reason to forget my worries - at least temporarily.

I met a wonderful Egyptian man. When I went to Egypt it was very difficult for me because I was west and he was east, he was Muslim and I was whatever you want to call me, part Christian, part Protestant, part Catholic, part Jewish... But we really felt for one another and were really starry-eyed.

He was very nervous and so was I, because these feelings had taken both of us by surprise. But we decided to travel together to Dubai - and that's where, for the fourth time, I was married.

I had a couple of witnesses and it was a case of a piece of paper saying 'I take you for my husband' and 'I take you for my wife' and so our honeymoon began.

It didn't feel like a marriage to me, it just felt like an affair. But apparently the piece of paper made him feel better about sleeping with me.

I was madly in love by the time I got back to South Africa. My Egyptian - I'll call him 'Omar' - followed me two days later.

He had an apartment in Johannesburg where he intended to stay while he was in town. But I persuaded him to stay with me. So we picked up a few things and brought them to my home.

On the second day I had made breakfast for Omar and a couple of friends who were coming over, so the table was set for about four or five people - a typical Middle Eastern breakfast of pitta, cream cheese, cold meats, goats cheese and olives. As I laid out the food, Omar was upstairs praying - actually it was quite funny because Shai used to say his Hebrew prayers every day and he used to look out of the bedroom window and of course when the Egyptian arrived he used to get out his prayer mat and get on his knees and face Mecca, looking out the same window...!

In any case I hadn't told Omar too much about Shai because I didn't feel that I was still married to Shai even though I was, because we had never lived together as husband and wife.

I should, of course, have known that it was going to happen. Shai came racing into the house at his usual time of half past eight - just as Omar was walking down the stairs.

They took one look at each other and it was hate at first sight. For once, I actually didn't know what to do. I was stuck in the middle of a thunderstorm. All Shai said to me was: "Who is this?"

And I said: "Um... this is ... um... my friend from Egypt and he's actually staying with me for a few days."

"Where is he staying with you..?"

"Upstairs," I said, innocently. "In my room."

Now Omar spoke for the first time.

"I am her husband."

Shai turned his back on Omar, to face me. He was white with rage.

"I want to talk to you right now, outside."

I smiled sweetly at him. I was in the thick of it now. There was no point in agonising over something I couldn't hope to avoid.

"Why don't you join us for breakfast?"

Shai was so taken aback at my reaction that he walked forward, pulled out a chair and actually sat down - at the head of the table.

Not to be outdone, Omar strode forward and sat down at the other end of the table, directly opposite Shai.

Needless to say, breakfast was a strained and silent affair. I was relieved when the phone rang and I got up to take the call in the lounge.

Shai followed me. He stood and glared at me until I had finished with the call. He spoke quietly but with venom.

"I want this man out of this house."

"You can't dictate to me, you can't tell me who comes and who goes from my home, this is now my life."

"It's never your life, you are mine, I'll never let you go."

"Who do you think you are?"

"You get rid of him now."

"Oh, Shai, grow up."

"You get rid of him or I will get my Israeli friends and we will come and kill him. You don't mix with Egyptians, we are Israelis, you are Jewish-"

"I am not!"

"This... this is an Arab!" He was purple with rage now. His eyes were bulging out of his head. I thought he was going to explode.

And just at that moment, Omar stepped into the room. He didn't say a word. Shai took one look at him and stormed out. He got into his car and reversed up the drive at speed, colliding with the electric gate because it hadn't opened quickly enough. Then he sped away.

Now Omar is a conservative man, and he was quite shocked by all of this. He asked me not to see Shai again.

"But that's impossible," I argued. "He is my business partner. Look, while you're here I won't see him."

And for one week I didn't see Shai.
Omar had to go away on business.
Before he went away he said to me: "Please, please don't see this man."
"Okay, fine, I promise you I won't."
I gave him my word.

Now I was still very involved with Shai, and it was also at that time that Winnie was going up before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I needed to give her my support, because Winnie had always given me her loyal backing. She had tried on many occasions to get Shai and I back together and I had had to explain to her, woman to woman, that I couldn't forgive and I couldn't forget.

It was very strange for me to be saying that to Winnie, because she had always known me to be such a forgiving person. It was just very hard for me to forgive Shai. But still, we had remained friends.

On many of the times that we had had fights, Shai would phone Winnie and beg her to come around and make the peace with me for him, and Winnie would come around. She became the negotiator or the referee, but always remained very neutral and a real lady.

A few days after Omar left for Germany I was sitting beside Winnie at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where she was facing quite a grilling.

So there we were, Winnie and I, with all the cameras of CNN, the BBC, ITV, SATV and a myriad others trained on us, when who should walk in but Shai. He sat down right next to me, leaned over and whispered to me that he was very sorry for what had happened. He took hold of my hand and wouldn't let go until he was sure every international TV cameraman had captured it on video.

And of course, who should pick up the touching scene on German television that night but my Egyptian.

Omar and I were due to go to Cape Town for December, but he didn't speak to me for three weeks. He wouldn't answer my phone calls. I knew what the problem was. When he did eventually return to South Africa, we had a blazing row. I couldn't take the pressure - I had Shai on the one side, and my Egyptian on the other side. I was torn in the middle, I didn't know what to do. I loved this Egyptian but Shai wouldn't let go.

Omar wouldn't speak to me for 18 months. It was a very sad time for me, I wanted to speak to him so desperately, I would phone, he wouldn't speak. He was very strong in that sense. I respected him for that, but it was hard for me.

In an effort to cheer myself up, I started to go out again. I went out with one of Shai's men friends. Shai phoned him up, went round to his flat, bashed everything up in his flat and was going to kill him.

Then all of a sudden Shai started to bring a new set of Israelis to the house.

He brought a guy by the name of Lior Saadt - who I didn't like from the word go. And he brought a guy from America, who I will call Hersh. Shai wouldn't tell me the business they were doing. He tried to tell me that it was diamonds but I knew they were up to something else, something that was no good.

They asked me if I could give them some contracts with some of the communications companies I knew in South Africa, and I said I would try but it never worked. Largely because I deliberately didn't give them glowing recommendations.

Then Shai came in very excited one day and said that he had had 'a bit of a fire', which meant that there was a problem.

"What's the problem, Shai?"

"No, I don't want you involved in the problem because it's with Israelis."

"Please Shai, be very careful."

"I am careful."

"Shai, I want you to tell me what's going on."

He looked at me, then stood up and walked to the window. After a few moments of inner struggle, he gave up.

"The deal is between Daniel, Aaron, Gideon and myself."

"What is it?"

"I've got an Israeli chap here, who got into trouble in Israel. He's a well known gangster. His name is Yossi."

"I want to meet him."

When Shai brought Yossi out I was shocked because he was a very tiny man, with jet black hair and round glasses. He was a very religious man. And a very intelligent man. Not at all what I had pictured.

I sat and spoke to him. Although I can speak a little bit of Hebrew, I have trouble maintaining a full conversation, so Yossi and I spoke through an interpreter. We spoke about clear cut business and he appeared to me to be a very nice person. By the time we had finished speaking, I was sure he was a wonderful person and would pose no threat. He spoke a lot about his mother, and mentioned the fact that he had a twin brother. He told me how much he respected his mother, and he spoke about his father who was buried in Egypt, and because I had been to Egypt so many times we spoke about trying to bring his father's remains back to Israel, and I said I would try to help. I bought him a CD in Arabic because he said he liked Arabic music and he could understand Arabic.

I didn't meet too many of Yossi's associates, and after that first meeting, and one other meeting, Shai kept him very much to himself.

Shortly afterwards, Yossi returned to Israel for a little while and when he came back he brought with him his wife and two children. He brought them to my home for dinner - and they were accompanied by Lior Saadt. Gideon, Aaron and Daniel also turned up.

We had a lovely time. They all knew that Shai had a girlfriend and they all asked why he didn't get rid of the girlfriend and come back home. And I explained to each and every one of them that it wasn't because Shai didn't want to come back home, it was because I was still very upset and very hurt and wouldn't have him back.

Yossi said to me: "Shai loves you, you must take him back, he needs your help."

I shook my head. "I cannot do it because it's too much pressure for me and I'm doing a lot of business myself now and I'm very happy with the way my life is."

Yossi went back to Israel for a wedding and Shai was supposed to go back for the same wedding, but the moment Yossi arrived in Israel he was arrested. I don't know what he was charged with, but he was given quite a long sentence. I don't know if he actually went to jail in the end.

(Note: Over the past decade, Yossi Harari has been in and out of jail in Tel Aviv, Israel, for crimes involving extortion, drugs and illegal possession of weapons. On March 19, 2000, he was convicted of attempted murder, threats and extortion, and sentenced to

seven years' imprisonment. He was aged 34 at the time. The Ramat Amidar crime syndicate, of which Harari was the head, has been embroiled in a turf war with arch rivals, the Pardess Katz gang, for up to eight years. The feud has so far claimed the lives of seven people, including a rabbi with eleven children. DK.)

While Yossi was on trial, I spoke to him a couple of times - we would have three way conversations on the phone with Shai, Yossi and myself. My discussions with him were brief, usually limited to simple niceties such as 'how are you' and 'I'm fine'.

That was all the contact I had with Yossi Harari, the big Israeli godfather.

As for Hersh, I only met him on two or three occasions. Shai and I went gambling with him at the casino in Sun City, or sometimes only as far as Four Ways, or we'd go for lunch or for dinner. We never spoke about business.

Then a young man by the name of David Milner joined the gang, which now comprised mainly Daniel, Aaron, Gideon, Shai and Lior. I don't know how David got involved in the business but shortly afterwards he approached me and seemed very distressed. He said he was living with Lior and he didn't like it because Lior was very temperamental. He told me he thought Lior was a bad guy and he was "too quick with a gun".

I said I thought he was joking because Lior didn't seem that type of person.

"No, Lior is quite bad and I don't want to live in the house with him, I want you to find me a flat."

"Okay, fine."

So I found a flat at St James' Court where a friend of mine was renting and he put the deposit down in cash and paid for the first month. He and his girlfriend moved into the flat and he asked me not to give Lior the address, in fact not to give anyone the address, except for Shai.

After that I rarely saw David because I was travelling overseas so extensively.

After one of these trips, to England, I had just got back when Shai phoned me.

"Come quickly to the Hilton, I have a present for you."

When I got there, standing outside was Shai, Lior, Daniel, Aaron, Gideon, Hersh and another quite fat man. Shai came over and said to me, "I want you to meet this man."

I didn't even get out of the car, the man came over to my window.

"Hello," he said, "My name is Mr C."

He shook my hand and said: "Hersh has brought a gift from Belgium - from Shai to you."

"That's lovely. Nice to meet you."

"It's very nice to meet you. I hear you are a very powerful woman in South Africa and a friend of Mrs Mandela."

"I don't know about being powerful, but I am a friend of Mrs Mandela."

What Shai had bought me was a Cartier watch. I said to him: "What are you doing?"

"I'm doing a deal with this Mr C."

The next day I had to meet a gorgeous French business associate, Michel, at the Hilton. He was with a couple of friends, Tom and Greg. We were downstairs when Shai happened to walk in. He came up to me and said: "What are you doing sitting here with the plebs? Why don't you come up to the executive lounge?"

I said: "Well, I'll come up just now, we're just busy in a meeting."

"I don't want you sitting down here talking nonsense, come up to the executive lounge."

"Just now Shai, I will."

Shai was unmistakably jealous. He stared at Michel for a few uncomfortable moments, then shrugged and turned on his heel.

I said to Michel: "Look, I'm going up to the executive lounge, I'll just go and see Shai and then I'll come down - just to keep the peace."

So I went up and when I got there, there was this Mr C, David, Gideon, Aaron and Daniel.

Shai said to me: "Do you remember Mr C?"

"Oh," said Mr C. "I believe you are involved in diamonds."

"Yes, I am."

"I'm doing business with Shai here - you must come and have dinner with us some time."

"How are you enjoying South Africa?"

"I am enjoying it very much."

"Good, I'm glad," I said, bade everyone goodbye and then rushed off downstairs again. And that's the last time I ever spoke to Mr C in person.

I had to make another trip to England and when I got back, I was sitting at the Killarney Mall when I got a telephone call from a friend of mine from Zimbabwe. This was on the 29th of September 1999 - nine days before Shai disappeared.

The friend told me that a very dear friend of mine had died in Zimbabwe - my son's godfather. The funeral was going to be on the 7th of October.

I was deeply upset. I phoned Shai and told him and he was very supportive. I asked him if he could help me to arrange tickets to Zimbabwe, and to organise some Zimbabwe dollars.

On the morning of my departure, Wednesday 6th October, Shai came to collect me in his new BMW. He had a chauffeur by the name of Alice, a lively girl with a wonderful sense of humour, with whom I knew Shai was having an affair. We all joked and laughed on the way to the airport - Shai was always very good at lifting my spirits when he knew I was down.

Shai had said he would look after the house while I was away. I gave him the house keys and he gave one of my maids his spare cell phone.

When we arrived at the airport Alice parked the car and Shai came in with me.

At departures, he took me in his arms.

"You know I'm coming home soon," he whispered.

"Shai, you always say that to me. You know you're not coming home."

"I am. I've got her out of the flat, she's going to her own place."

"I told you she's not supposed to be in the flat."

"Some of her things are in the flat, she doesn't stay there all the time."

"But Shai, I told you to get rid of this girl, she's nothing but trouble."

"I know, but I can never get away from her, she's phoning me all the time and every time I try to go away she keeps on phoning me. I'm scared."

"Why?"

"Because I feel I owe her something"

"Oh bullshit, this is the modern century - you don't have to feel that you owe her something. Get rid of her, Shai."

"Yes, I will."

I touched the heavy gold H on his wrist.

"One day you're going to have to change that."

"Never - over my dead body. I'll never let you go."

I changed the subject.

"What are you going to be doing while I'm away?"

"I have another deal coming up on Friday."

"Please be careful Shai, I don't know what you are up to but you've got to be careful."

"Nobody will touch me - you know I am king of the heap. Everybody loves me."

"Yes Shai, but you must be careful because sometimes you can be a bit silly."

Shai had been getting carried away with himself, he really had. He had a very big opinion of himself. Once he had come to me and said: "You know Hazel, you know how you said that I would never make money?"

"No Shai - I said that you would never make money the legal way."

"Ah, Hazel - the only way to make money is illegal and let me tell you something else - the only way to make money is by being Jewish and having Jewish partners."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. My Jewish partners, Daniel, Gideon, Aaron and myself have formed a pact that we will stick together through thick and thin and that is how we will make money - and you won't make money the legal way."

"Just be careful Shai, because I wonder if blood is thicker than water."

"They are my family, we do everything together, they know everything about me, and that's why, they look after me and I look after them, they cover my back and I cover their back."

"What about this Lior?" I had had a bad feeling about him from the start.

"No, this Lior is our security and he will do anything for us."

So at the airport Shai kissed me goodbye and I went through, got on the plane and went to Bulawayo where I was met by my friend and his wife.

I stayed in Bulawayo and that afternoon we drove through to Kwekwe where the funeral was taking place. I must have spoken to Shai about ten times - every few minutes he was phoning me, asking me if everything was okay. At the funeral I had to turn my cell phone off, because Shai wouldn't stop calling. He phoned me outside the funeral. He phoned me at the wake.

The last time I spoke to Shai was at about half past seven on the Thursday night.

I said to him: "Please Shai, don't phone me any more - I'll phone you tomorrow."

But the next day we left Kwekwe at about 9 o'clock in the morning and there was no signal so I couldn't get hold of Shai. When we got to Bulawayo it must have been about two in the afternoon. I tried to call Shai again, but his phone was on voice mail.

My little brother Michael (not so little any more - now a professional hunter) was living in Bulawayo at the time. I called him and mentioned that I thought Shai must be annoyed with me because he had turned his phone off. It was not, however, like Shai at all.

I went back to my friend's place and when I got there he and his wife begged me to stay for the weekend. I said I had to get hold of Shai because he would have to cancel my ticket, and also because he was supposed to be picking me up at nine o'clock that night. I tried to get hold of Shai again - but his line was now constantly engaged.

By this stage I was thoroughly annoyed and told my friends that yes, I would stay for the weekend - if Shai turned up at the airport to collect me and I wasn't there, it would be his own fault for not keeping in touch. But at the back of my mind, alarm bells were beginning to sound.

At seven o'clock we had just sat down to the Friday evening meal, Shabat, when the phone rang. It was Daniel, for me.

"Hazel, we can't find Shai."

"What do you mean?" I fought to stay calm.

"His car has been parked outside a Japanese restaurant in Norwood since lunch time. Shai was supposed to meet me at the Europa restaurant in Norwood at 2:00 o'clock, but he never showed up. Hazel, we are worried."

I told Daniel where to go and look for Shai, and to call me back if he found him. But he had no success. I made contact with Shai's girlfriend, Zoe, but she put the phone down on me three times, refusing even to listen to what I had to say. All I wanted was for her to check and see if Shai's passport was in the apartment, to see if he had voluntarily left the country for some reason.

Eventually I managed to get talking to Zoe - she reluctantly told me that Shai's passport was not missing. I told her to lock up the apartment and go home to her mother, for her own safety. She did as she was told.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I got to the Bulawayo airport at 6:30am for the 7:00 flight to Harare, then caught a midday flight and arrived in Johannesburg at 3:00pm, where I was picked up from the airport by one of Shai's friends.

We drove straight to where Shai's car had been left, outside Norwood Sushi, near the corner of Grant Street and 11th Avenue in Norwood. This very Jewish area was Shai's territory, where he always hung out, meeting people to talk business or just for a social cup of coffee.

The car was locked. Shai always had a habit of leaving the sun roof slightly open for air - but it was not enough to gain access to the interior. The car was in the blistering sun. I felt the panic rising in me as I thought of Shai trapped in the boot of the car. We got the AA out, but they couldn't get in because the central locking system was based on a computer chip held in the ignition key. There were three parking tickets on the car.

In between trying to get into the car, we were also making calls to people who knew Shai, and visiting the homes of friends and acquaintances, desperately trying to piece together the events of the previous day.

Eventually I lost patience, took a brick and smashed the rear window. Someone climbed through, took the car out of gear and disengaged the hand brake. I called the AA in again, and they arrived with a tow-truck and removed the car to my home in Abbotsford.

Then I called in some contacts from Soweto to break into the boot of the car. By 1:00 in the morning, they had managed to get in. Relief washed over me as the boot opened to reveal nothing but a few broken CD covers - there was still hope that Shai was alive somewhere.

At the same time I was trying to stir up some reaction from Shai's associates, trying to force one of them to make a mistake and give the game away. I would phone one of them and tell him that one of the others had been accusing him of being behind Shai's disappearance. Then I'd call the other one and say the same thing. Tempers were fraying and a general sense of mayhem was setting in.

Lior came round to the house to find out what was going on. It was not long before I picked up that he was lying.

I knew that Lior was one of the last people to see Shai alive. He told me how he had met Shai on the day he disappeared, at 1:35pm... coinciding with the very last phone call Shai had made.

I went with Lior to Norwood and he showed me the spot where he claimed to have picked up Shai, opposite Norwood Sushi.

I knew for a fact that Shai had had lunch with some other people, including Zoe, at 1:00 o'clock, in Norwood Sushi.

So Lior had picked him up. But then he claimed that he had dropped him off about a block and a half away. He was unable to say in which direction Shai had walked, but said Shai had told him he was going to collect his Israeli newspapers from the only newsagents in the area that stocked them. On further investigation, I learned that Shai's were the only papers not to be collected that day - so he obviously never arrived.

Winnie and I went into one of Shai's favourite take-aways with Lior and showed the manager a photo of Shai. The manager agreed that Shai regularly bought food in his take-away.

Lior tried to put words in the manager's mouth. He said: "You know this man had lunch here at two o'clock, didn't he?"

I narrowed my eyes at Lior. Why would Shai have had lunch at two o'clock, when he had only just finished having lunch less than half an hour before?

That's when I backed off and said to Winnie: "There's a problem with this boy."

She agreed, and told me that she did not trust him from the moment she met him. She said to me: "Get into my car, don't even travel back with him," and I did as she said.

When Lior had gone, Winnie and I began to ask everyone on the street about Shai, and about Lior, both of whom were well-known faces in the area, being high profile regulars. Some of the people who worked close to the spot where Lior claimed to have picked up Shai said they had seen this. But no-one had seen Shai getting out of the car again. I believe that was because Lior did not stop the car after Shai got in. I believe he drove directly to his house.

But I could prove nothing at that stage. I had to play along. Lior even brought me a bodyguard - a tattooed bruiser by the name of Carlos. I said 'no thanks'. Winnie had already supplied me with five hand-picked former Umkonto we Sizwe men. They were armed with semiautomatic weapons, and they patrolled my home and garden, twenty-four hours a day. They were supplemented by two armed minders who were recommended by a 'Graham', a P.I. friend who had once been in South Africa's secret police.

As it turned out, it was just as well I had not taken Lior's little gift. Carlos, it transpired, was one of the men who had buried Shai.

On the third day after Shai's disappearance, I began to apply pressure on the South African police, who I felt were doing absolutely nothing to investigate the case. I was a regular visitor to Norwood police station, which was supposed to be the seat of the investigation. But the apathy I encountered made my blood boil.

One officer had the audacity to tell me that they were too busy trying to solve 'ordinary, decent crimes' without having to worry about the disappearance of a 'petty criminal'.

He added that there were 12,000 missing people in South Africa, and that Shai was just one of these - he wanted to know what made Shai so special that the police should simply drop everything for his sake.

I was absorbing this little gem when his phone rang and he answered it. He ended the call by saying "God bless you," to whoever was on the other end of the line, while looking directly at me with a sanctimonious grin on his sweaty face.

I lost it. I dived across the desk and grabbed this big, fat policeman by the top of his shirt, choking him, and I was screaming at him, "How dare you? How fucking dare you? I'll get God to bless you soon enough - you'll be fucking meeting him!"

I must have presented quite a sight - my feet off the ground, clinging to the collar of a man nearly twice my size whose face was rapidly turning purple.

A higher ranking officer ran into the office and managed to detach my hands from his subordinate's throat.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"I want this man off the fucking case," I said quietly, but with venom.

The other officer took me through to his own office and sat me down. He asked me what I expected them to do. I told him that I was handing them an open and shut case on a plate. I knew who had picked up Shai, and was able to give him what turned out to be a fairly accurate account of what I believed had transpired.

I suggested they pick up Lior Saadt and subject him to a lie detector test. The officer just shook his head and said this was too expensive and he would never be able to get it through on his budget. I immediately offered to pay for it.

Secondly, I suggested he go after the records of phone calls made by Shai, who was with the NTN cellular network. The officer shook his head again and said it would take three weeks to get a court order, and that he wasn't prepared to go to this trouble just yet. I lost my temper again and stormed out.

I went directly to NTN and I got into the highest office and demanded that they phone the police and that they release the details on Shai's phone calls. Without a moment's hesitation - without calling the police - they gave me the printout. I took a copy to Norwood police station and threw it down on the officer's desk - just over an hour after our previous conversation.

I do not know how Lior Saadt found out that I had offered to pay for his lie detector test. I discovered the leak in a fairly unpleasant manner... Lior drove his car through the security gates at my home. When my gardener, Albert, ran out to see what was going on, Lior clubbed him with the butt of his 9mm pistol. I ran out of the house and Lior aimed the gun directly at me and at the last moment raised it slightly and fired a round off just past my ear. He was screaming at me that he knew I had offered to pay for his lie detector test, and that he would kill me if I didn't leave him alone. Then he got in his car and zoomed off.

Through a friend, I managed to arrange a secret meeting with the elite crime-busting unit, the Scorpions. The two representatives I met told me the only division that could help me on this case was Brixton Homicide. If I could get the dockets moved to Brixton, this would be better.

I also found out that several other Israelis had gone missing - and that all of them had been 'friends' of Lior. Now I started to put the picture together.

I also traced back and found out what Shai's last deals were. He and Hersh had been doing many deals together, some of which had gone sour. They'd been dealing with a guy who I will call "Eli" who had come out to South Africa to do a diamond deal... Shai had

actually introduced me to this Eli once. I don't know if that deal went sour, but I know that Eli claimed to have lost money.

And I learned that Shai had done a large 'money deal' with a man named only as 'C'. I wondered if it was the same charming man who I had met briefly at the Hilton Hotel. I spoke to Hersh on the phone.

"Well," he said smoothly, "I don't know anything about that. You should stop worrying about Shai. Maybe he has just gone off on holiday."

I spoke to "Eli" on the phone and he said it had nothing to do with him.

Daniel finally told me that there had been a deal with the same Mr C I had met, and that it had culminated in Mr C being badly beaten.

I got hold of Mr C's phone number in Belgium and called him. He put the phone down on me.

I phoned him back again and I said: "Listen, will you take my call? I want to speak to you - you know who I am, my name is Hazel Crane and I'm phoning you from Johannesburg."

He said: "What do you want?"

"I need you to tell me what went on."

"You know what went on."

"I don't know what went on, Mr C. I hear there was a problem, that a Mr C was beaten up in South Africa. Was that you?"

"Yes," he said bitterly, "You do know."

"I don't know - you'd better explain the story to me."

So he told me that he had been doing a business deal with Shai and that he had lost US\$550,000.

"You as Shai's partner must have known this."

"Mr C, I am Shai's partner in diamond deals. I know that you weren't in the country doing diamond deals, because if you were doing diamond deals I would have made my people show you diamonds, and nobody showed you diamonds."

"Yes, but you live in Mr Shai's big villa."

"What villa of Mr Shai? Mr Shai's big villa is my home - it has been my home for the last fourteen years. Mr Shai came to live with me in MY big villa, and it's not such a big villa, it's my house."

"The Mercedes cars in the drive-"

"They are MY cars, one is my children's car and the other one is my car. And the apartment where Shai lives belongs to my children. How do you know about my villa?"

"I have been inside that house, Mr Shai brought me there."

"What were you doing inside my home when I wasn't there, because I never saw you inside my house."

"It was when you were in England."

"Yes, that's right, I was in England, because when I went away Shai always had my keys, he looked after my dogs and he looked after my house, and he looked after my motor cars. He even has my keys now because I was in Zimbabwe and my keys have gone missing with Shai. I have had to change all the locks on my doors."

"Miss Hazel," said Mr C quietly, "Mr Shai did a very bad thing."

"What did he do?"

“Mr Shai, Daniel, Gideon and Aaron took US\$550,000 off me and it was for a deal that I was doing at the Hilton, then I went to Mr Daniel’s birthday party where you came to talk business with Mr Shai.”

“Mr C, did I talk business with you?”

“No.”

“Have I ever talked business with you?”

“No.”

“Have you ever given me money?”

“No.”

“I asked you how you liked South Africa, that’s all the communications I had with you Mr C.”

“Miss Hazel, I can’t help you.”

“You know that Shai has gone missing.”

“Mr Shai did a very bad thing to me - he took me to Mr Daniel’s birthday party and he said to me the black people who had my money were going to take me and give me back my money, and I must go with them. I told Mr Shai I couldn’t go with them on my own, and Mr Shai asked Mr Daniel to come with me but Mr Daniel couldn’t come with me because it was his birthday party.

“So Mr Shai put me in the car and he drove me for twenty miles and the black people followed us and after twenty miles they pulled me out of the motor car and they beat me up. They beat me so badly I’m paralysed on my one side. They broke my face, they beat me. I begged them to stop, I said ‘Please Mr Shai, help me, help me,’ and he laughed in my face. He turned the car around and he laughed at me and told me to get out of South Africa and he drove away and left me with these black people.

“These black people were going to kill me. I told them I had fifty thousand dollars in my hotel room, that I would give it to them if they took me back. And these people stopped beating me and they said they would go for the fifty thousand dollars. They threw me in the motor car and they drove me.

“When I saw we were near the hotel, I managed to get out of the car, I rolled in the street and I ran inside, I didn’t run up to my room - I phoned my friend who Mr Shai didn’t know about, he had arrived with more money in dollars and he came down and helped me upstairs and cleaned me up.

“The next day Mr Shai phoned me and told me that was only a small taste of what I was going to get if I didn’t get out of South Africa... he was going to kill me - so my friend and I got out.”

I took a deep breath and tried to digest everything he had told me. It had just poured out of him. I sensed that he had not told many people about this, or if he had, he had not told them in quite so much detail. It must have been the most harrowing experience this poor man had ever suffered. I was horrified to think that Shai could have been involved in such a dreadful, uncivilised crime.

After a few moments of silence I spoke again, a little unsteadily. “Then what happened Mr C?”

“Miss Hazel, it is out of my hands now. It was given to the Israelis. I cannot help you.”

I considered what he had just said. It was given to the Israelis. Did he mean the Israeli mob? The Israeli police? Or Shai’s Israeli ‘associates’ in South Africa.

“Did you do anything to Mr Shai?”

“No.”

“Well Mr C, Mr Shai is missing.”

“No, Mr Shai has just run away, you are just making this up.”

“I am not making this up. I am telling you that Shai has gone missing.”

But Mr C had put the phone down on me. I saw no point in trying to call him again.

This is the true story of Shai’s last deal - this was why Aaron and Gideon and Daniel disappeared when Shai went missing. Now I knew why they ran away - because they were also involved and knew what was going on in the deal with Mr C, who was evidently a very well connected man.

I got hold of Brixton Murder and Robbery and was put on to Inspector Wayne Kukard. I explained who I was and asked him if he would come to see me.

“I am coming to you straight away, because I’m very interested in this case,” he said.

When he arrived I sat him down and told him everything. I told him that twenty people had seen Shai getting into Lior’s car, but no-one had seen him getting out of the car.

I told him that Lior was phoning me, I told him I was causing problems with all of them, phoning each one and putting the cat among the pigeons. Inspector Kukard seemed to find that amusing.

“I’m not getting any joy from Norwood Police. I want the docket moved to Brixton. I want you to help me find Shai. If he is dead, at the very least I want to know where I can find his body, so he can be given a decent burial. I will pay whatever your expenses are. I will help you. I will give you this case on a silver platter.”

Inspector Kukard touched my hand reassuringly. Only then did I realise that my hands were shaking.

“Mrs Crane, don’t you worry. We’ll find him - one way or another.”

By the next day he had managed to get the dockets transferred from Norwood to Brixton, and that’s when the police investigation started in earnest.

Shortly afterwards, I discovered that Lior had no less than five weapons licences issued to him, and a sixth was being processed shortly after Shai’s disappearance... how was this possible, when it transpired that Lior was wanted by the Israeli police?

Why did I receive a phone call from a senior member of the police to tell me that there was someone who wanted the reward I had offered, and who was prepared to meet with me... and it turned out that this ‘someone’ was actually arranging a hit on my life?

I only agreed to meet this ‘informant’ in an attorney’s office, with my own security present. When we met him, it quickly became evident that I knew more about the case than he did. He claimed that he had seen Shai with another partner who had disappeared, Morti Ross, running around Ghana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The police ‘source’ said I could trust this guy.

The ‘informant’ said to me that he could show me where Shai was if I would hire a private plane to fly us to Ghana. I said that I could do this, and that I’d be in touch with him. When I got hold of Inspector Kukard at Brixton, he looked into it and came back to me to say that if I tried to get on a plane with these people, he would personally break my legs.

I asked him what he meant, and he said his sources had told him these guys had an unmarked grave waiting for me in Ghana. A former associate of Shai’s and close friend of Lior Saadt by the name of David Milner - whose real name turned out to be Amir Mulner - had interests in a gun-running and passport forgery operation based in Ghana.

I had met 'David' on a few occasions and had even had him in my home for dinner. He was a fresh-faced young man, just 24-years-old when I met him. He was charming and faultlessly polite. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. But it turned out that he too was wanted by the Israeli police and military - unbeknownst to any of us, he was an ex-Israeli Special Forces member who was on the run after car bombings and murders in Israel. He was an explosives and firearms expert and extremely proficient in close combat techniques.

But to us he was simply David, a nice young friend of Lior's - I had actually been a little worried about him because I thought he was too young to be keeping such bad company. Thinking back, there's a kind of bizarre black comedy to it all.

I had colour posters of Shai printed - 500 of them - and began putting them up all over Norwood, and in every restaurant, take-away and coffee shop that Shai or his associates frequented. I made arrangements with the managers and owners of all these various places, that if Lior or any of his close pals - David, Carlos, Julio - came in, they were to call me immediately. As soon as I got such a call, I would jump into my car and race over to the place. Then I'd walk in and very deliberately put up a poster in front of Lior and his friends, on the wall or pillar closest to their table.

Once, I went a little further than Lior could stand. After a call from a restaurant manager, I arrived just as Lior was getting into his car. I had my personal bodyguard, Gerald, with me. As Lior started his engine, I strode up to the car and slapped one of the posters with Shai's picture on it onto the windscreen, facing in. Lior sat and stared at it for a moment, then he got out of the car. He pulled out his 9mm pistol from the small of his back and put the barrel to my head.

"You fucking bitch," he snarled, "I'll fucking kill you, you fucking whore, I'll fucking cut your head off, I'll fucking rape you, I'll fucking rape your kids, I'll fucking blow your fucking head off..."

"Go on then, Lior," I managed. "Pull the trigger... if you have the guts."

It was like a game of Russian roulette. I was gambling on the fact that Lior was not a stupid man, by any means. He may have lost his temper, but I doubted that he would jeopardise his freedom for the sake of getting rid of me in public. I looked into his eyes and it was like staring up at a wild animal. His black pupils were dilated and glazed. But as I watched, they quickly shrank back to normal size and a spark of intellect returned momentarily. He had come to his senses. He lowered the gun, but not before he had leaned in and whispered raggedly into my ear.

"Fucking kill you. Fucking kill your fucking family. Keep away from me, bitch."

Then he put the gun away, walked deliberately up to Gerald, stared him in the face for a few moments, then returned to his car and sped away.

It was shortly after this incident that I paid a mercenary from Northern Ireland to come out to South Africa and "pick up" Lior. He came out, and was paid an advance fee of R100,000, although he was unable to locate Lior - as I was to discover later, Lior had already skipped the country, for Panama in Central America. Amir Mulner - David Milner - had fled with him.

I started getting phone calls - all bogus, designed to frustrate the investigation. There would be anonymous callers saying they'd seen Shai in the Casino or that he was in this night-club, or that one. We had no option but to follow up all these calls as they came in - some nights I'd be up and out to some seedy night-club at three in the morning. Graham, formerly of the South African secret police but now a successful private investigator, often accompanied me on these excursions.

We also had calls saying that Shai was buried in the foundations under the synagogue close to my home - we knew there had been some extension work done, so the police went in and had the new foundations dug up - but there was nothing.

And there was more than one call claiming that Shai's body had been dumped in the Melrose Dam, also close to my home. A huge team of police divers went in and dragged the floor of the dam - again without results.

After three weeks, I knew in my heart that Shai wasn't coming back - although a part of me still wanted to believe the bastards who were telling me that Shai had been seen in a hotel in Beira, Mozambique, or doing a diamond deal in some night club in Angola. Some of them said if I paid a certain amount of money, they would take me to him...

I so wanted to believe it! Even though I would have been enraged if I'd found out that he had had me going out of my mind with worry for so long for nothing... I would at the same time have been overjoyed that he was alive and well.

But one night I woke up out of a deep sleep and just knew that it was over for Shai. But I also knew that I had to continue looking for him, so he could have a decent burial back in Jerusalem, so his mother could have a grave at which to grieve as is any mother's right.

I went to tarot readers, fortune tellers, traditional Sangomas... but what did it in the end was the posters of Shai, and the reward that I had offered.

One of the gang finally broke, lured by the promise of the generous reward I had posted - R100,000.

From the day he saw the poster in the Brazilian Coffee House in Norwood, it was playing on his mind. He knew he could have it, because he had the information that we needed. Greed quickly overcame any shred of loyalty he might have had for the pack of dogs with which he was running, the dogs responsible for killing Shai.

There was so much tension building in the Johannesburg underworld as a result of the reward and the trouble I had been stirring up with the rumours I was spreading, that Inspector Kukard came to visit me at home to discuss my personal safety.

"Look Hazel, there's big trouble brewing. You have to get out for a while."

"Out of town?"

"Out of the country. Preferably off the continent all together."

"I won't be chased away by these savages."

"Hazel, you have to be rational about this. You have kids. These animals will stop at nothing to silence you. And from the stories we've been hearing, they'll make sure you suffer if they get their hands on you."

"I'm not afraid," I said defiantly.

"No-one is suggesting that you are. But lack of fear won't stop them from putting a bullet in your head."

I thought about it for just a few moments. As I've said, I don't like to dither.

“Okay. I’ll go. But I don’t want the pressure to be lifted. I want everything you have to be thrown at each and every member of that gang. And I want you to keep me informed every step of the way.”

“Okay Hazel. That’s a fair enough request.”

So I left South Africa, temporarily exiled because of a pack of cowardly, murdering bastards. I flew to the United States, then back to Europe, spending time in London and Paris, Berlin and Prague, before flying out to Australia to be with my daughter, Hayley. That’s where I got the first call from Wayne Kukard, to say an informant had come forward to claim the reward.

The tout was none other than Carlos, the ‘minder’ Lior had tried to fob off on me. On condition of total amnesty, he confessed that he was one of the two men who had buried Shai. I agreed to pay him the reward if the information he gave was verified - and also if it was proved that he had had nothing physically to do with the killing of Shai.

So he spilled his guts. He claimed that Lior had picked up Shai on the day he disappeared. He claimed Lior had driven Shai out to his home, where Amir Mulner aka David Milner was waiting.

According to Carlos, Lior and Amir were the only two at the house. But I believe someone else may have been present.

In the living room, Carlos claimed, Shai was punched and kicked and beaten with a baseball bat. He managed to break free and was pursued through the kitchen, down the hall and into the bathroom. He was beaten mercilessly, despite the fact that he was begging his attacker or attackers to stop. The beating caused the breaking of his arms, his hands, his legs, his back. According to Carlos, it took two to three minutes before Shai was dead. He was beaten some more, just to be sure. He was beaten so brutally that his body almost broke in two when he was dragged out to the garage. He was wrapped in a blanket and thrown into the boot of Amir’s maroon BMW, according to Carlos.

He said that Amir and Lior returned to Norwood, where they were seen by a few witnesses at about five o’clock.

They returned to the house at about 11:00pm. Because it was Friday night, Shabat, their religion prevented them from having any more to do with the crime, claimed Carlos. That’s how perverse their sense of worship was.

So, Carlos claimed, they made contact with him and Julio, and asked them to take Amir’s car and its gruesome contents, and drive out of Johannesburg to find a suitable burial site. After that, Carlos claimed, they made a limited effort to clean up Lior’s house. There was blood everywhere, on the floors, the walls, the ceilings, throughout the house. They did not bother to get rid of the murder weapon, the baseball bat.

Carlos and Julio then drove Shai’s shattered corpse out to the remote Hartebeestpoort Dam. They drove a little way off the road and unloaded the body from the boot. They had been instructed not to look at the body, so that they would not know his identity. But when they lifted him out of the boot, one of Shai’s shattered arms was exposed. Carlos recognised his smashed wristwatch.

They removed all of Shai’s jewellery. The expensive Versace belt, the heavy chain with its ostentatious H in solid gold, the watch, the rings. They had to pare one of Shai’s fingers because one of his rings was embedded in his flesh, smashed in when he tried to defend himself from the blows that had been rained on him.

Then Carlos and Julio dug a shallow grave, dumped Shai into it and covered him up. Then, Carlos claimed, they got into Amir's car and drove to Zoo Lake. There they made a pact that the whole bloody business would never be mentioned again. Then they threw the jewellery into the lake, before returning to Johannesburg and going about their business as if nothing had happened.

While the above was the account given by Carlos after he claimed the reward money, it has to be said that this is just Carlos' story. Things may have been very different. After all, Carlos was not – he claimed – present at the time of the actual murder. For all we know, it may have been far more complex. There is always the possibility that Lior Saadt and even Amir Mulner were being set up. They might well have been held at gunpoint by a third party while someone else murdered their partner and 'friend'. I am not the law. I can only say what I have been told. My suspicions may have been backed up by Lior Saadt's strange and aggressive behaviour, his threats against me in front of witnesses, his flight from the country after the fact. And there was the forensic evidence found at his home. But I cannot pass judgement legally. That is for the courts. I only hope and pray that the questions will be answered one day and that justice will be done.

My mother had come out to South Africa from Northern Ireland for a visit at Christmas time, about three months after Shai's disappearance. I took her to the Hartebeestpoort Dam for an outing. I had no way of knowing that the route we drove took us right past the spot where Shai was buried, just yards off the main road near the dam. If I had been in a slightly more elevated vehicle, like a Land Cruiser, I might even have spotted the disturbed earth. The knowledge that I was so close in December and still had to wait until early February before I knew the truth made me sick to my stomach.

Wayne Kukard assured me that Carlos had nothing to do with Shai's death - apart from the fact that he helped to bury him. I phoned my own minder, Gerald, and asked him to negotiate the deal on my behalf.

In the early hours of the morning Wayne phoned me and told me that they had opened up the grave, and that it was Shai. The body had badly decomposed. There was no jewellery on it.

The police forensics team worked all through the night collecting evidence.

The body was removed to the morgue where they did more tests. I got Gerald to deliver Shai's dental records and he was positively identified.

I broke down, I was finished. I called Winnie at home in Soweto and talked to her for a long while. She wept for me, and for Shai.

Then I phoned Shai's mother in Israel to break the news. I even phoned the girlfriend's mother and told her, because it wouldn't have been right that she hear it on the news, despite what I thought about her. And I phoned Daniel, Shai's 'good friend'.

Before catching my flight back to South Africa I asked Wayne when Shai's body would be released for burial. I explained the Jewish religious beliefs to him and he said they would be finished with him by Friday. I made contact with the Jewish Helping Hand organisation in Australia who said they could help with the repatriation of Shai's remains to Israel. And I arranged for money to be wired to Shai's mother to pay for the funeral in Jerusalem.

Daniel, Gideon and Aaron, who had suddenly resurfaced, said they would send her US\$10,000 to help. Whether she ever received it, I don't know. It was none of my business.

I had spent nearly R800,000 on the hunt for Shai and I still had to pay out a further hundred thousand on the reward. But it was worth every cent, because I had ensured that Shai was given a proper burial, so his spirit could finally be laid to rest. And now that I knew something about his murder, I could finally begin planning my revenge.

*

“Revenge?”

I was startled. For hours, it was as though I had been talking to myself. The journalist, David Kray, had not interrupted my tale for ages. Until now.

“Hazel, what do you mean?”

“What do I mean by revenge? Come on. You're a journalist. What do you think the word means?”

“Well, it can mean many things. Are you seeking to bring your husband's killers to book... or do you plan to go further than that?”

I shrugged.

“Hazel-”

He was interrupted by the ping of the aircraft Tannoy. The flight captain was announcing the descent towards Heathrow. David waited until the announcement was over, then he leaned close to me.

“Hazel... what are you going to do?”

“David,” I smiled, “You'll have to buy the book.”

*

GERALD ACCOMPANIED ME TO BRIXTON POLICE STATION THE day after I arrived back in South Africa.

In his presence, and that of Wayne Kukard, I handed the informer Carlos R100,000 in cash. I made him sign a receipt. I was amazed that anyone could be so stupid as to sign a document proving he had betrayed his friends. Powerful, dangerous, ruthless friends.

The homicide detectives had done their homework: They had gone to Lior Saadt's house with a team of forensic scientists. They had found blood everywhere, in the lounge, in the kitchen, in the bathroom, on the floors, walls, ceilings... I was told that the samples of blood and tissue they found matched Shai's. They had also found a baseball bat, presumed to be the murder weapon and firearms. Shai's killers had evidently left in a hurry.

A police sub-aqua team had dived Zoo Lake for four days and had managed to retrieve the jewellery thrown into the water by Carlos and Julio. They also recovered a set of handcuffs.

Thanks to forensic and other evidence, other unsolved crimes were also now connected to the fugitive Lior.

Interpol and the Israeli police now became involved in the investigation. I was interrogated by Israeli investigators for over five hours. There had been a cruel rumour that Winnie and I had Shai killed so we could claim his life insurance. Figures bandied about varied from R5 million to R12 million. Of course, it was ludicrous because there was no insurance. I know how this particular rumour began circulating - it began with the wife of one of Shai's Israeli colleagues. They were at the airport one day with us some months before Shai disappeared. I was seeing Shai off before he left for one of his many 'business' trips. Shai always made me the beneficiary of his life insurance before he got on an aeroplane. He remarked to his friend that he should do the same for his wife.

"But you are not even married to Hazel any more," commented the wife. "Why don't you sign everything over to Zoe?"

Shai shook his head and said very seriously: "Hazel is my wife. She will always be my wife."

Then he jokingly said if anything happened to him, I would get paid out as much as R12 million. Of course it was nowhere near this amount. And at any rate, this was only travel insurance and didn't apply any more once he had touched down on home soil. Shai disappeared from inside South Africa, so there was no insurance.

The South African police now issued a warrant for the arrest of both Lior Saadt and Amir Mulner. But both of them had fled the country and were believed to be holed up in Panama. It seemed hopeless that they would be brought back to face justice, as no extradition treaty exists between South Africa and Central America.

But I am not so easily beaten.

It's not over 'til it's over.

*

POSTSCRIPT

EULOGY FOR HAZEL CRANE

READ TUESDAY NOVEMBER 18, 2003, JOHANNESBURG

We all know one thing for certain. We are never going to know anyone like Hazel again. She was utterly unique. To an outsider that may sound like a just another typical platitude expressed on someone's passing.

But those of us here who knew Hazel – and even those who had met her only once, briefly – will testify to it as fact. Hazel was unique, one in a million. We were so privileged to have been a part of her glittering universe, like planets orbiting a sun. When the light was suddenly extinguished, we were thrust into an awful, aching darkness.

Everyone I've spoken to since hearing the news has told of the same sense of wretched emptiness, something akin to amputation. And disbelief. How can it be that someone so vibrant, so vivacious, so full of life, can have been taken from us so suddenly? We all still expect our Hazel to stride through the door without warning, sweeping into the room and effortlessly dominating everyone in it with her charisma, her charm, her unshakable self confidence.

But Hazel's spirit is too resilient to be overwhelmed by something as mere as mortality. When I have been at my lowest ebb in this past week, I have closed my eyes and seen her wearing that impossibly mischievous grin, her eyes asparkle, and I've heard her child-like laugh – remember the way she would laugh so hard that she could barely breathe? But she'd still be trying to tell the story between gasps. And even if you had to get her to tell you all over again what it was she was trying to say, you'd be infected with it, laughing without knowing why, simply because Hazel was laughing. That was enough.

Nothing Hazel did could be described as average. She lived life to excess – she celebrated every moment of it, which is the way it's meant to be. She never took no for an answer. If you told Hazel something wasn't possible she'd look at you like you were speaking another language. "Nonsense," she would say, and then she'd set out to prove you wrong - and she would usually succeed. Hazel achieved the impossible routinely.

In her career, she met the chauvinist barons of business head on, brought them to their knees and left them broken and confused in her wake. She never once backed down. She was so full of fire and determination that they never stood a chance.

If there's something we should all be taking from the rare privilege of knowing her, it is that one single rule by which Hazel lived – life is for the living. Half measures are for the weak. Every day should be an adventure, one roller-coaster ride after another. Hazel's philosophy was simply this: If something gives you pleasure, indulge! And then, indulge again.

Hazel never accepted less than one hundred per cent of her expectations. She raised two beautiful and successful children, Hayley and Anthony, single-handedly ensuring they had all the choices in life that they deserved. Hazel never got tired of talking about her children. She was so proud of them both. They were at the very heart of a world of loved ones for whom Hazel was an anchor; her mother, Maisie, her sisters Karen and Dorothy,

her brother Michael, her dear nephew Keenan, the wider family and the countless friends she had all over the world.

Hazel never wallowed in self pity. If she was knocked down – and she was, many times – she picked herself right up and threw herself into the fray once again, more spirited than the time before. She never quit. She always, always got her own way in the end.

But you could also never miss the fact that Hazel was a beautiful woman. It wasn't simply her innate sense of style - the chic wardrobe, the elegant make up or the magnificent jewellery she wore. It was a magical quality that went so much deeper than anything on the surface. Men were captivated and mesmerised by her. So many fell hopelessly in love with her. Like any woman would, Hazel adored the attention. She had endless fun with the awesome power she wielded. This is another way we should lift our spirits, remembering her for the wonderfully incurable flirt that she was. What a joy it was to see. I'll smile whenever I think of it, and that's always a good thing.

Hazel will be deeply, deeply missed by all of us here and all those around the world who couldn't be here today. Here's another one that sounds like a textbook sentiment but has to be said anyway because it's true: Those whose hearts she touched are richer for knowing her, and so much poorer for her loss.

She was a courageous, impetuous, keenly intelligent woman with an irrepressible and irreverent sense of humour. She was a strong woman, but generous to a fault. She could be a ruthless businessperson, but was always a doting mother. She lived for the tender embrace of a loved one, the feel of silk against her skin, the taste of a fine wine, the scent of a favourite perfume. She took nothing and nobody for granted.

And the many who grieve her passing can take comfort in the knowledge that she is still savouring every new experience, and familiar ones too – safe once more in the arms of her one true love, the father of her children, Anthony.

It was only right that Hazel became known the length and breadth of this land as the Queen of Diamonds. Hazel was a living diamond, strong and beautiful and rare, with a fire in her heart that burned so brightly anyone who glanced her way couldn't miss it. She was priceless.

We won't forget you, Hazel. How could we possibly? After all, you wouldn't allow it - and you always did get your own way in the end.

PRESS REPORTS

Mafia mayhem lies behind killings

Motorcycle gunman sprays police van with bullets in latest attack on men linked to South Africa's Israeli crime syndicates

MAFIA intrigue that could involve a jailed Israeli 'godfather' is unfolding in Johannesburg as police investigate one of South Africa's boldest assassination attempts. Last year Shai Avissar, a diamond dealer and alleged Israeli mafia kingpin who was formerly married to the socialite Hazel Crane, was found murdered and buried in a shallow grave near Pretoria, with a cloth tied around his head in a way that suggested a ritual.

Since then the case against the prime suspect, Lior Saadt, 30, has been dogged by a series of gangland shootings.

One witness, Julio Bascelli, was shot in the head three times in a deserted garage in Modderfontein, east of Johannesburg, last November.

Then another witness, Carlo Binne, was shot in the driveway of the Club Gecko Lounge in Cresta, Johannesburg in April - seven days before Saadt was arrested for Avissar's murder.

Just last week, Saadt himself - now charged with the murder - was the target of an even more brazen shooting.

A gunman on a blue motorbike sprayed a police van carrying Saadt and other prisoners with bullets, killing a teenage prisoner and wounding Saadt.

This week, Crane - a friend of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela - gave this bitter reaction to the shooting: "I don't give a damn what happens to Lior Saadt. You can never bring Shai (Avissar) back but he (Saadt) has to learn to pay for it."

The latest attack happened last Wednesday in Mayfair at about 8.40am. The police van was taking Saadt and four other prisoners to the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court when a passenger on the motorbike fired on the van while it was stationary at a robot.

Most of the 21 shots were grouped in a tight pattern at the right of the prisoners' bay.

Sixteen-year-old Lester George, arrested for the theft of a motor vehicle, died in the attack and another prisoner was seriously wounded.

Saadt - a tall, bearded former motor mechanic - was shot in the buttocks and discharged after treatment.

Police spokesman Chris Wilken said it was not yet known whether the target of the attack was Saadt.

However, when Wilken named Saadt as a suspect last year, he said it would be better if he handed himself over to the police so that he "can be under protection and out of danger from assassination".

Wayne Kukard, the police officer investigating the Avissar shooting, said then that he believed Avissar had been killed by his lieutenants because they were angry he was sending the syndicate's money to his reputed "godfather", Yossi Harari - said to be the head of the Ramat Amidar gang, Israel's largest crime family.

Kukard said Harari had stayed with both Avissar and Saadt in South Africa in 1998, but he added that he had “several suspects”.

Saadt, a South African resident since leaving Israel in 1991, was arrested on April 8 at the Mozambican border by customs officials because his visa had expired.

The first time Saadt appeared in court it was revealed that his life was being threatened, and it was agreed that he be kept in police cells rather than in Johannesburg Prison.

Kukard now confirms that police have “changed” security measures for Saadt.

Saadt’s lawyer, Lawley Shein, said his bail application had been scheduled for Tuesday but the attack had caused his client to “consider the situation”.

(Sunday Times, South Africa, June 24, 2001)

Socialite dies after shooting

JOHANNESBURG socialite Hazel Crane, a close friend of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and wife of deceased Israeli diamond dealer Shai Avissar, was shot dead on Monday while on her way to give testimony in the Johannesburg High Court, police said.

Superintendent Chris Wilken told Sapa Crane was shot in her car on Monday while standing stationary on the corner of 1st Street and Athol Oaklands Drive, Johannesburg. Apparently a man appeared from behind a bin and fired six shots at Crane through the passenger window.

Crane, who was shot in the head, chest, leg and arm, was on her way to attend the trial of Lior Saat, 33, accused of battering to death her estranged husband near Sunninghill in 1999.

A friend of Crane's, who was in the car with her at the time of the attack, was shot in the hand. Her other more prominent friend, Madikizela-Mandela, was often seen at the Johannesburg High Court during the Saat proceedings, lending support to Crane. Madikizela-Mandela was not present at the time of the attack.

Saat, who apparently appeared in court on Monday, is currently facing 13 charges, including intimidating Crane. He allegedly held a gun to her head. However, he is challenging the jurisdiction of the South African courts to try him.

An Israeli citizen and alleged member of the Israeli mafia, Saat was captured at the border with Mozambique and brought to South Africa to face trial.

On June 14, 2001, Saat himself was wounded in a drive-by shooting while being transported to the Johannesburg magistrate’s court from the old Brixton police cells.

(South African Press Agency, 12:53, November 10, 2003)

Crane’s husband linked to network

THE estranged husband of murdered Johannesburg socialite Hazel Crane wasn’t a mafia ‘don’.

Shai Avissar was lieutenant to Yossi Harari, said to be the head of Israel’s notorious Ramat Amidar gang.

Crane was shot four times on Monday in a suspected hit as she left her home to attend the Johannesburg High Court trial of Avissar’s alleged murderer, Lior Saat.

Saat also faces a charge of intimidating Crane by allegedly holding a gun to her head and

threatening to kill her.

Detectives are searching for Amir Moila, alias David Milner, for questioning in connection with Crane's death.

Police believe Harari, the head of Israel's largest crime family, came to South Africa in 1998 and stayed with both Crane's husband and his then-lieutenant, Saat.

Superintendent Chris Wilken said yesterday that Crane, a friend of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, had been involved in criminal activity. Crane was convicted in 1993 of dealing in uncut diamonds and fined R50 000 (or two years in jail).

In 1994, the friendship between the two women took centre stage when it was reported in the media that Crane had bought a luxury Cape Town house for Madikizela-Mandela.

That claim was proved false only a year later. Crane had, in fact, never bought Madikizela-Mandela a house - she had only made an offer to purchase.

Media reports in 1995 said Crane, a 'commodity broker', had been involved in a dispute with a Nelspruit company about missing gems, and a R300 000 civil suit in which she and Avissar were alleged to have undertaken a foreign-exchange deal that went wrong.

She was not under investigation, however, at the time of her death, Wilken said.

The battered body of Avissar was found in 2000 in a shallow grave on a smallholding in Pretoria.

In April 2001, Saat was arrested for his murder. By that time, two possible witnesses had already been eliminated.

Julio Bascelli was shot in the head in a garage in Modderfontein shortly after Avissar's murder, while Carlo Binne was shot dead at a Johannesburg club in April 2001.

On Monday, Crane became the third potential witness against Saat to be eliminated.

One of the state's only remaining witnesses, the woman who was in the car with Crane at the time of her murder, is being kept under police guard in hospital.

* SAAT has been reprimanded for using a cellphone in court.

The drama started after lunch yesterday, before the court resumed proceedings, when Saat used the cellphone of lawyer Lawley Shein.

A court orderly and a police officer guarding him told him he wasn't allowed to use a cellphone. After a while, Saat gave the phone back to Shein.

Saat is challenging the jurisdiction of the South African courts to try him. He claims he was kidnapped by the police from Mozambique and brought to SA illegally.

In final argument yesterday regarding the issue, the state said Saat's evidence was full of contradictions and lies.

Saat's counsel, advocate Johan Pretorius, was today expected to make his final argument on the matter today.

(Sapa, November 14, 2003)

Saat catches first flight to Israel

A STATE prosecutor has said that while charges against alleged Israeli mafia kingpin Lior Saat were withdrawn, this did not mean that the prosecution would end.

State counsel advocate Tom Dicker said yesterday that the death of both Hazel Crane and investigating officer Wayne Kukard had a bearing on the case, but this did not mean it

ended there.

"There is a possibility we can reopen the case if circumstances (the availability of some witnesses) change," he said, adding that there were witnesses who had initially wanted to testify against Saat but later declined.

Meanwhile, Saat did not spend a single night as a free man in South Africa - he caught the first flight to Israel.

He arrived in his home country yesterday after flying out of South Africa just hours after the state withdrew charges against him, his lawyer Lawley Shein confirmed.

Before the withdrawal, Saat (33) had been supposed to go on trial in the Johannesburg High Court on Monday on various charges, including murdering alleged South African Israeli-mafia head Shai Avissar.

Avissar was the estranged husband of socialite and businesswoman Crane. He was bludgeoned to death in October 1999 and his body was found in a shallow grave on a smallholding in Erasmia, Pretoria, in February 2000.

Crane, who was due to testify against Saat, was gunned down in November in upmarket Abbotsford, Johannesburg.

The state withdrew the charges against him because of the death of key witnesses, including Crane and Kukard.

Kukard died of a heart attack on January 6 this year. The other witnesses who had been murdered include Julio Bascelli, killed in April 2000, and Carlo Binne, gunned down in April 2001.

(Johannesburg Star, March 3, 2004)

Killers on the loose?

By the Editor

IT is clear for all to see that justice was not done in the so-called "Israeli mafia" case.

What we have is four bodies and one former accused who is scared out of his wits.

We accept that the state had no other option but to withdraw murder charges against Lior Saat, and so we may never unravel a series of events that can be described only as bizarre.

The known facts are that diamond dealer Shai Avissar was murdered, as were three witnesses, one of whom was his estranged wife, Johannesburg socialite Hazel Crane.

Other witnesses, we are told, withdrew in fear. And to compound the whole disaster that this case became, investigating officer Wayne Kukard died of a heart attack.

But while it is now seemingly impossible to pin the Avissar murder on anyone, the South African public is entitled to know how it is possible that syndicates/members of a foreign mafia can operate with impunity here.

It is not as if the victims/villains were handing out Easter eggs. People were being assassinated left, right and centre. And there must have been a reason for this. Perhaps Home Affairs can tell us how the people who became corpses got into the country.

And can we assume that the killings related to this case have stopped?

(Johannesburg Star, March 3, 2004)