



# JACK *of* DIAMONDS

NEIL BEHRMANN

## Acclaim for *Jack of Diamonds*

“At last, a highly unusual diamond thriller with a great plot, strong dramatic scenes and unexpected twists. Jack reminds me of Dick Francis’ likeable, vulnerable lead characters who are easy to identify with. I enjoyed learning much about diamond mining and the gems market.” - *Julian Gray, author, Interrogating Ellie*

“This gripping financial crime novel includes roller-coaster diamond and stock market speculation. The interweaving of the main plot and sub plots is masterly and they all move swiftly to their conclusions. In between are fascinating ideas on the psychology of market booms and how to handle them.”

- *Brendan Brown senior fellow Hudson Institute, and author Bubbles in Credit and Currency.*

Neil Behrmann has written extensively on diamonds for the Wall Street Journal, The Business Times, Singapore and South African, Australian, Canadian and Hong Kong publications.

Besides gem scoops and features, Neil has also written numerous articles on mining and commodities. They range from gold, platinum, silver and copper to coffee, cocoa and sugar.

Neil's major news breaking stories and investigative features for the Journal, Business Times and other publications, include several billion-dollar scandals. They include rogue traders Nick Leeson of Barings and Yasuo Hamanaka, perpetrator of the Sumitomo copper fraud. Neil has covered underhand dealings in the mining industry, energy and coffee market crises. He also investigated and wrote a ground-breaking feature on the hidden hoard of former Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Other numerous pieces include Bernie Madoff and several other major hedge fund scams. Neil is currently London correspondent and columnist of The Business Times, Singapore, a leading Asian business publication. He has been interviewed on UK, US and Japanese TV and radio on diamonds, other commodities and mining.

Examples of his articles and columns are placed on <http://neil-behrmann.net>

Jack of Diamonds is a stand-alone sequel to *Trader Jack- The Story of Jack Miner*. Reviewers say that the first thriller in *The Story of Jack Miner* series is a page turner. See reviews on:- <https://neilbehrmann.net/trader-jackstory-jack-miner/> and on Amazon.

Neil also wrote an anti-war fantasy, *Butterfly Battle- The Story of the Great Insect War*, which was published in 1998. The children's novel received exceptional reviews which can be seen on <https://neilbehrmann.net/butterfly-battle/> and Amazon. Butterfly Battle was updated and relaunched to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. The opening chapter starts with a computer game on the 18 June 1815 battle.

JACK  
OF  
DIAMONDS

**NEIL BEHRMANN**

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Cover Design by Ruth Mahoney

*To Joy, Amy & Anna  
for their help and encouragement*

*In Memory of my parents, George and Anne  
and my brother Tony*



# PART ONE

## THE LEARNING CURVE





## THE NEW ME

The autumn light was fading fast, but Oleg Melnikov had still not returned from his daily walk. Several messages were left on his mobile. There was no response. A search party rushed to the forest, but in the encroaching darkness couldn't find him. They continued early the next morning and eventually found Oleg at the bottom of a gorge. His face was blue and frosted and a gash was on his forehead. The coroner ruled accidental death.

Yelena, Oleg's wife, protested that the ravine was a fair distance from the walking path. In late October, Oleg would have been wary of slipping. Snow had begun to fall, so it was highly unlikely that he had walked to the edge of the ravine and risked injury.

When the police and coroner broached the possibility of suicide, Yelena insisted that the very idea was preposterous. Oleg was certainly not depressed and was about to go to London to visit Sasha, their daughter.

The funeral was the biggest ever in Dobrenska, a small town that housed employees of the Dobrenska Diamond Mine. Oleg, a mining engineer, began working for Dobrenska soon after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990.

Knowledgeable, efficient and popular, he was appointed manager of the mine and held the post for 20 years.

Dobrenska, situated in the north west of Russia and some 120 kilometres south east of Arkhangelsk, can be difficult to reach during winter. Since premature autumn snow and ice delayed her flight, Sasha Melnikov was too late for the funeral. When she at last arrived in Dobrenska, Sasha began to investigate the death of her father.

Prior to the coroner's inquest, Sasha had called a doctor friend and had asked him to examine Oleg's body. When she met the doctor in Dobrenska, he told her that he had doubts about the coroner's verdict. He was unconvinced that the fall into the gorge had caused the gash on Oleg's forehead. More likely it came from a hammer or another instrument. The doctor had also noticed bruises over the carotid artery. This indicated that someone held Oleg's neck in a "blood choke", causing him to lose consciousness. The doctor surmised that the assailant then hit Oleg on the forehead. This would give the impression that the fall had killed him. It was also possible that a fellow murderer helped dump the body into the ravine.

Despite the evidence, the police's forensic team didn't mention the possibility of foul play at the inquest. Sasha insisted that the case be reopened, but the coroner refused.

\* \* \*

I was half dreaming about the circumstances of Oleg Melnikov's death, when I came round from my operation. What Sasha had told me, was unnerving.

My face felt sore, so I gently placed my hands over my nose and mouth and found that they were covered with bandages. Then it came back to me in a fuzzy sort of way. I was recovering from surgery. I would no longer be Jack

Miner. The new me would be unrecognisable, maintained Slater Stapler, the plastic surgeon. Mr Stapler had been brief and to the point before the procedure.

“This is not my usual sort of job.”

“Sorry I’m no celeb,” I said, attempting to crack a joke to relax myself.

“Don’t be facetious,” Stapler said in an irritated tone. “My job is to reconstruct the bits and pieces of soldiers who were blown up in Afghanistan, not wasters like you.”

“You know something about me?”

“I gather you were in jail and obtained early release. You’re supposed to help the police.”

Plastic surgeons were supposed to be charmers who schmoozed their clients, but Stapler was obviously an exception.

“Not my normal sort of thing, but Scotland Yard twisted my arm on this one,” he said.

“If you are against identity change, why are you doing it?”

“My brother is in a wheel chair because of the Russian mafia.”

Stapler lifted my chin. With something that looked like a felt tipped pen, he marked my face, while I looked at the mirror in trepidation.

“Your face is thin. I’m going to flesh it out a bit.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Bit flabby here,” he said, pinching the side of my hip and then digging his finger into it. “I’m going to use a syringe and suck out some fat from here and then inject it into your cheeks.”

“I don’t want a fat face,” I protested.

“Your nose and mouth are too thin. They make you look shifty.”

“Really?”

“Not after I’m finished with you. I’m going to broaden your nose and give you thicker lips to fit in with a fuller face.”

“I ... I’ll be chubby?”

“No. Your face will be rounder.”

“What about my eyes?”

Stapler’s smile was chilling: “That’s your best feature. Blue, sky blue. Perhaps we should blot the left one out. Place a black patch there.”

“Be careful... please!”

“See you in the morning. Remember, nothing to eat and drink overnight.”

And that was how I ended up in my own private ward, prior to being transferred to a military hospital.

\* \* \*

It was several weeks before the self-inflicted wounds began to heal in a hospital filled with soldiers wounded in the Afghan war. Compared to them, I had it easy. My time in prison was five years. They faced a lifetime without legs, hands, arms or other limbs. Many of them were suffering from disfiguring burns and post-traumatic stress was the norm.

There is no way I would have done this voluntarily. It was a painful necessity, an essential part of a deal with John Primeheart, Detective Chief Superintendent of Scotland Yard, International Branch. I was in the nick for a \$7 billion fraud. My time was reduced on condition that I would help ferret out evidence to prosecute the mafia. Not the Sicilians or Americans; the Russian lot.

A few days before they let me out, Dr Klugheim, my prison psychiatrist, told me the good news.

“You’re leaving because the Parole Board accepted my recommendation. I told them that you had responded well

to therapy.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Dr Klugheim.”

“Don’t deviate from the straight and narrow. An occasional share tip won’t go amiss.”

He chuckled; during my time, he had asked for tips and now had a sizeable pension.

“I also told them that you could be useful to Scotland Yard,” he said.

“The Russian crime unit?”

“You can thank Detective Sergeant Sasha Melnikov. She persuaded Primeheart after learning about your scrapes with the Russian mafia.”

“That doesn’t make me an expert on Russian crime.”

“What about the mining and hedge fund billionaire?”

“Yevgeny Faramazov? Doesn’t he now have an aura of respectability? He bought the football club I support!”

“Melnikov is convinced that he’s behind the murder of her father.”

Klugheim opened my file and paged through the contents.

“What happens to me now,” I said, breaking the silence.

“You’re going to change your identity for your own security. Your first name will still be Jack, just in case you forget yourself in an unwitting moment.”

“And my surname?”

“Sniper. Jack Miner will become Jack Sniper. All day, all night. Wake, work, play, sleep.”

Klugheim passed me a book and told me to copy the first paragraph.

“You can read this later. Seems your handwriting slopes forward. Now try the reverse. Keep practicing. Pre-procedure medical documents or anything else will be signed *Jack Sniper*. Your passport, bank account, credit cards will be Sniper.”

“Will surgery change my looks completely?”

“Plastic surgeons don’t like admitting it in public, but their techniques have advanced considerably.”

“What about friends who visited me in prison?”

“They will be told that you have been relocated for your own safety. I’m afraid you cannot be in contact again.”

“Not even a Christmas card?”

“Totally forbidden.”

“And you, Dr Klugheim? You’ve been a great help.”

“I’m the exception. Now that I’m retiring, we’ll find a way to keep in touch.”

“What about *Trader Jack*?”

“That’s the story of Jack Miner. From now onwards you are Jack Sniper. You will be released tomorrow and go straight to hospital.”

\* \* \*

Luckily for me, the weeks passed swiftly and my new face began to take form. After all that time in the nick I had become used to waiting. I read a lot, including Primeheart’s books on criminal investigations and Sasha’s papers on Russian corruption. She also gave me information about questionable deals during the “wild east” capitalism under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Dr Klugheim suggested publications on psychopaths.

To be frank, I was somewhat anxious when they let me out of prison. Five years is a long time in there. You get used to a sheltered routine without any responsibility. How would I perform outside?

There was also an emotional struggle. After fighting my own corner inside, I had, on the surface, become tough, hard and somewhat bitter. Inwardly, however, I craved affection and warmth. My mother had died when I was a boy

and my father when I was a teenager. Several people had helped me and became good friends. The serious downside of my new identity was that I could never see them again. I could endanger them and myself and alert Faramazov. Hopefully he and his gang would be prosecuted and be put away for years. Then I could fall in love, get married, have a family and put my past behind me.

I realised that my own problems and fears were self-indulgent, compared to the wounded. They were learning to cope with their artificial limbs and scarred bodies. After being severely damaged in the war against Taliban guerrillas, their bravery and camaraderie was exceptional. The generals had asked for more troops and this meant that growing numbers of new casualties were pouring into hospital. I shared a ward and night after night screams of soldiers woke me.

In the morning, the physically and mentally wounded put on brave faces. They had the discipline and faith to accept visits from padres, generals and politicians who wandered through the wards mouthing cheerful words of encouragement. Frantic families waited and prayed that their boys wouldn't join the growing tally of bodies that were taken out of the wards; that they would not be attending the ritual military burial; that the Prime Minister wouldn't be reading out their names perfunctorily, before answering questions in parliament.

Soldiers kept asking the name of my unit and where I had been wounded. I told them that it was a military secret and I could not discuss it.

\* \* \*

When the wounds had healed, I was happy to see that my features were more chiselled and angular than before. I



had a stronger jawline, my nose was longer and my cheek bones were higher. My mousy blonde hair was now cropped. Happily, the new Jack was more handsome than the old, but it still took me a lot of time to adjust.

Sasha Melnikov was my first and only visitor. She was wearing a dark blue suit, holding a large, matching handbag and her dark glasses reflected the sunlight. We walked to the far, quiet end of the hospital garden and Sasha took off her glasses. She was stunning. Grey blue eyes contrasted with a tanned complexion and her black glossy hair's long waves rippled down her lower back. Half smiling at my reaction, she clinically began to examine me. First my face, then my profile and finally, the back. She then took out some enlarged old photographs from her bag and compared them to me.

“What Stapler has done is really something,” she said.

We had a brief walk around the garden, sat on a bench and Sasha got down to business.

“My father was trying to defend Dobrenska from a hostile takeover. Valdia, a mining and oil conglomerate, was the predator.”

“And then they find him at the bottom of a canyon,” I said. “You believe that Faramazov’s hitmen killed him?”

“Convinced. He’s a major stakeholder in Valdia.”

“If Valdia won the takeover battle, why didn’t they sack your father? Why murder him?”

Her wince made me feel a little guilty for being insensitive, but she swiftly steadied herself and continued. It seemed that detective work had hardened her.

“You have to understand the history. Russia was seeking foreign investment after the Soviet Union collapsed. Trekdiam, an Australian company, discovered Dobrenska’s diamond deposit. Its deal with the government was to raise finance, develop the mine and produce diamonds. In return,

Trekdiam would get a stake in the company and manage the mine.”

“How big a stake?”

The State was Dobrenska’s majority shareholder. Trekdiam, mine managers and workers owned the remaining shares.”

“So the State’s mining officials accepted Valdia’s offer.”

“At a derisory price. Trekdiam directors were furious. Oleg and the miners, too. Trekdiam decided to take action in the London High Court.

“On what grounds?”

“There was a legal window. In terms of the initial deal with the government, Trekdiam retained exploration rights within the Dobrenska area. Trekdiam claimed that Valdia’s acquisition didn’t cover the rights.”

“Another rich diamond deposit?”

“My father’s geological tests were promising. If Oleg were still alive, he would have been Trekdiam’s key witness. He was going to stay with me. I had booked some shows.”

“And they killed him because he knew too much,” I said. “The usual stuff, corruption, bribes...”

Sasha stood up, grabbed a red dahlia nearby, tore off the petals and muttered something in Russian.

“Faramazov has top contacts in Russia’s mining department and the FSB,” she said.

“The Russian Federal Security Service? Are you saying that FSB agents were involved?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“How are you going to prove all this?”

“That’s where you come in. Before we give you instructions, you will have to learn how to protect yourself; have a spell in the army, get super fit and handle arms. After that an intensive police course. You will then be an agent of my unit. It has links to Interpol.”

\* \* \*

Out of hospital at last, I began my basic training. Not with the police force, but with a Scottish infantry regiment, preparing for action in Afghanistan. The five other guys who shared our barracks were much stronger and fitter than me. We were woken at 5a.m., sometimes 3a.m. in the morning. Our bungalow had to be squeaky clean, beds made to perfection and overalls and uniforms ironed and spotless. Fortunately, I had learnt how to iron and sew in prison, so I helped my new mates, Charlie Munger, Bill "Stoney" Stoneheart and some of the other guys with these tasks. Our daily routine was square bashing for an hour or two in the morning, physical exercise, sprints, long distance running and stringent obstacle courses.

Route marching with full pack was up and down the Scottish Highlands. I tailed behind the others, but Charlie and Stoney helped me. Charlie, medium height with thick arms and an acne scarred face, had shaved off his hair. He didn't manage to finish school and tired of being unemployed had decided to join the army against the wishes of his mother. Stoney, tall, wiry and tanned had also been jobless for several years. He was brighter and more educated than Charlie and was most definitely officer material. Both had thick Glaswegian accents.

The troops cursed and sweated on route marches. It was tough work struggling with our hefty packs up the steep mountains; but at the top, magnificent open spaces and views overwhelmed me. Out in the open after being confined for five long years, the fresh air gave me a wonderful feeling of freedom. My sense of smell seemed to be greater than fellow troopers. They were puzzled during rest periods, when I lay flat on my tummy and brushed the thick

grass with my nose; smiled when I pointed at the different shades of green on bushes and trees. Appreciating nature's multi-layered variations, I would pick up white and yellow daisies and follow the flight of butterflies and birds.

Sometimes, truck drivers dumped us in an unfathomable place after dark. We could hardly see each other at close quarters. The task was to find our way back to the barracks from either dense woodland, mountains or valleys. My night sight, hearing and smell had become so acute, that I invariably led the way.

Then there were bouts of hand to hand combat, shooting on the run with automatic assault rifles and hand guns. Simulated targets popped up all over the place. I do not know how I managed to hit the bulls-eye so often, but it was lucky that I could live up to my new name. They even placed me in elite sniper squads while the others had machine gun and missile training.

The months of army training passed by swiftly, as we were so active. Compared to prison when I counted the days, the daily routine was interesting and varied. I was lean and fit and had a ruthless instinct for survival. It was now time to go to Hendon Police College, north London. There I attended courses on crime and analytical and forensic intelligence. The operational techniques and disciplines required to charge offenders, showed me life on the other side.

\* \* \*

I continued to follow the army's fitness regime in Hendon and was about to leave my room for a long run, when there was a knock on the door. John Primeheart and Sasha Melnikov were outside.

Sasha wore a fitted purple dress that fell just above the knee and high heeled, long leather boots. She had cut

her hair and it was now a shaggy bob. Primeheart, tall and imposing, was casually dressed.

On the face of it, they were off duty, but their stern expressions warned me that they were not.

“Hello Sniper, how are you getting on?” Primeheart asked.

“Fine thanks, but I miss the other guys.”

“You won’t be seeing them again. They have been sent to a detachment in Afghanistan.”

“Can I contact them? They must be wondering what happened to me.”

“Not possible, Jack. You’re ready for the next stage of your mission,” Sasha said.

“You’re off to South Africa to learn about your new identity,” Primeheart continued, in a flat, matter of fact way.

Sasha passed me a South African passport. Jack Sniper, born in Springs, South Africa.

“You’ve already given me a British passport.”

“Dual nationality will be useful. South Africans don’t need Russian visas.”

I opened the two passports and compared them. They weren’t brand new. Both had been doctored with indiscernible travelling stamps.

“Springs is a small mining town, about thirty miles east of Johannesburg. You’re taking over the identity of John Sniper,” Sasha said. “He was killed when a gang attacked him.”

“I need to know more.”

“You will, when you meet his mother. She’s British, but emigrated to South Africa several years ago. We want you to know everything about your previous life and where you come from.”

“What about John Sniper’s family? Where he was buried? His death certificate?”

“He was cremated. His father died when he was young. His mother still lives in Springs,” Sasha said. “She’s become a counsellor, specialising in post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“Detective Sergeant Watson Nkozi is our man in South Africa. He’s been in contact with Sally Sniper,” Primeheart said. “Nkozi assures us that she wants to help and will be discrete. We have contributed to her post-traumatic stress charity.”

“You are the reborn Jack Sniper,” Sasha said, while she scrutinised my new face yet again. “We chose the identity of the late John Sniper to give you a ‘mother’--- a more realistic life history.”

“Reborn? Resurrection? Me?”

“Very funny,” Sasha said. “We can thank Nkozi. It was his idea that your identity should be South African.”

“Why the mining town?”

“Two options. You can infiltrate Faramazov’s organisation or join an investment bank as a mining analyst. Either job should help you monitor his businesses,” Sasha said.

“Faramazov is active in exploration and development of African, South American and Asian gold, diamond and platinum mines,” Primeheart added. “South African geologists, mining engineers and metallurgists are sought after.”

“I don’t know much about that stuff.”

“That’s another reason why you’re going to South Africa. You’ll have a good teacher.”

“Who?”

“Fred Carrender. You told us about him when you were in jail. Remember? We’ve checked his credentials and integrity. He’s a leading geologist and is prepared to help.”

“Carrender will give you a solid background and understanding of practical geology. You can study the theory in your spare time,” Sasha said. “Your biography written in prison, shows that you have a proven ability to absorb

new subjects quickly.”

“Fred Carrender! He knew my dad. He’ll know who I am.”

“No way. You’re now Jack Sniper. You briefly met Carrender years ago. As far as he is aware, Jack Miner is still in prison.”

“I won’t be able to keep it up.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. Just remember we have an agreement. Don’t break it. You’re effectively on parole,” Primeheart said.

“No way I’m going back to prison. I’ve been reading Stanislavski. I’ll get right into the head of Jack Sniper.”

Primeheart looked puzzled.

“He’s referring to Constantin Stanislavski, the Russian actor and director who developed method acting,” Sasha said with a wry smile. “Marlon Brando was a famous exponent of the method. Daniel Day Lewis, another. The actor becomes the character. Gets inside the head, as Jack puts it.”

“What if the Faramazov lot ask for my qualifications?”

“You are a graduate in geology from Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg. Detective Nkozi has contacts at the University. Jack Sniper is now on its data base. Nkozi also managed to obtain the relevant graduation certificates,” Primeheart said.

“What about John Sniper’s class at university? His friends? Most people in the mining business know each other. I might come across them.”

“John didn’t go to university and wasn’t a miner. According to Nkozi, most of his friends have emigrated from South Africa. If by chance you meet them, you should be vague; indicate that you’re a cousin or relative.”

“Hmm... I presume Sally Sniper, will cover for me.”

“Precisely. That’s what mothers do.”

“I guess I’ll have to improvise. What about the accent?”

“Listen to the South African broad vowel sounds. Learn a bit of Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and Fanagalo,” Sasha said.

“You seem to think I’m a linguistic genius. What’s Fanagalo?”

Sasha couldn’t help but grin.

“It’s a mix of languages. Miners speak Fanagalo underground. Nkozi’s father was a miner, so he knows all about it.”

Primeheart shook my hand in a cold, offhand way: “You’ll be staying with Nkozi’s family. He’ll take you around Springs and will allow you to tail him and other detectives. Good luck Mr Sniper. Enjoy your trip. You’ll be hearing from us in good time.”



## THE IDENTITY

Detective Sergeant Watson Nkozi met me at O.R. Tambo International Airport, midway between Johannesburg and Springs. We drove to Kwa Thema, a sprawling township on the edge of Springs, about thirty miles east of Johannesburg. Kwa Thema was created during the Apartheid era, Nkozi explained. South African blacks then had to live in separate areas, away from whites.

“The vast majority of blacks still live in Kwa Thema, Soweto and other townships in the new democratic South Africa,” Watson said. “They’re happy to be with their old friends and communities, but the main reason is the Apartheid of wealth. They can’t afford to live elsewhere.”

Watson’s home was in one of the better areas of Kwa Thema, but before taking me there, he showed me a shanty town nearby. Families were living in corrugated tin shacks, without electricity and water.

“We still have extreme levels of poverty,” Watson said. “South Africa is a long demographic train that struggles up a steep hill. At each stop, another coach joins on.”

“The combination of a high birth rate and rising unemployment?”

“Yes, but we also have extensive illegal immigration.

Refugees are fleeing across our borders from Zimbabwe and other unstable African countries.”

Watson, about fifty, with dark greying hair, rugged features and thick strong arms, insisted on carrying my luggage into his house. It had a tiny garden in front and an Alsatian bounded up to the gate.

“Don’t worry, he’s friendly. Just relax and pat him on the head.”

“I had a dog once. Miss him,” I said patting and tickling the Alsatian on the back of his ears. “What’s his name?”

“Angus. Named after a Scottish friend, when I was on a course at Scotland Yard. Wait until you see him work. He has rescued me from tight spots.”

The dog led the way to the door. Watson’s wife, with a pretty round face and bouncy African curls, greeted me warmly.

“Hey guys come and meet Jack,” Thandi shouted, after Watson introduced us. “Give Facebook a break.”

Watson grinned, when the children arrived.

“Yolande and Jim, this is Jack.”

Their daughter, who smiled shyly when she greeted me, seemed to be about fourteen. She had straightened her thick black hair and tied it in a loose pony tail, which rested halfway down her back. The boy, sixteen, bore a striking resemblance to his father, but towered over him.

Jim carried my suitcase into a small room with a single bed and lots of books. Noticing that the house was tiny and that there were only three bedrooms, I insisted that I stay in a hotel. If not, I could sleep on the sofa.

“Not to worry. Jim’s off to a camp next week,” Thandi said. “Relax. Have a shower. The flight from London is a killer.”

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, Jim woke me up: “Time for a run.

Pops told me to keep you fit.”

“What about Watson?”

Jim grinned. “Can’t keep up with me; bit older than you.”

We ran through the township passing a long line of small brick houses and a new housing development. Then towards the main road that led to Springs’ town centre. Men and women were either walking, or on cycles on their way to work. Jim had to keep Angus on a lead and kept pushing me to the side of the road as there were numerous large “combi” taxis.

“Careful! They drive like maniacs,” he said.

At last we managed to get away from the traffic into open dry veld. I struggled to catch my breath and keep up, so Jim stopped to let me rest.

“And I thought that I was fit!”

“It’s the altitude. We’re on the Highveld, about 5,000 feet above sea level. Football players have to condition themselves.”

“What position do you play?”

“Midfield. Coach says I’m good enough to be professional, but Pops wants me to go to university.”

We ran for another couple of miles and once again I had to stop and drink some water. We were now on a hill overlooking some sandy old clay workings. Further on I noticed some industrial sites.

“Springs had a coal mine just over a hundred years ago. It supplied the energy for Johannesburg’s gold mines,” Jim said. “They then discovered gold on some farms here. At one time, there were about thirteen mines around Springs.”

“Springs Mines, Daggafontein, Grootvlei, Vogels,” I said, recalling my gold share trading before I went to jail.

“You’ve heard of those mines?”

“A South African friend told me about them. I thought there would be a lot of gold mining dumps around here.”

“You’ll only see remnants. When the price began to soar, gold specs were extracted from the dumps and refined into bars.

“How come the waste didn’t pile up on dumps again?”

“It was a brilliant operation. They pumped the waste down the shafts of old mines. There are now large flat areas for factories and houses.”

Jim had given me my first mining lesson. Very different from gold share dealing.

\* \* \*

The next day Watson drove me to one of the suburbs in Springs, a nondescript town on the “East Rand”.

“Rand is Afrikaans for reef--- the underground rock that contains gold,” Watson explained. “In the 1880s, gold was discovered on a farm near Johannesburg. Geologists then found that the reef continued to the East, where we are now. Later they found gold on the “West Rand”, the Western Reef. They’re still mining there.”

We drove to a housing enclosure in Selection Park, one of Springs’ suburbs. The detached bungalows, which were in a wide circle, surrounded a small rose garden. A security guard, behind a barrier peered at me suspiciously, but after Watson showed him his police identity, we were allowed to enter the gated development.

“Crime is rife. Tsotsis don’t only rob., They kill and maim,” Watson said.

“Tsotsis?”

“Gangsters. They murdered my father when he was on a train. Snatched his wage packet and pushed a knife into his spine. I was only fifteen at the time and decided to join the police.”

“That’s awful, Watson. How did your family survive?”

“Like most poor black families. They pull together. Fathers, mothers, teenagers, go out to work and pool their money. When my father died, I had to leave school and become a gardener and caddy.”

“Why don’t the Tstosis just rob? Why kill and rape?”

“Jealousy, bitterness and hatred. It’s a legacy of Apartheid. Whites made money and had the best salaries, homes, education, healthcare, sports facilities. Everything. Blacks were the disadvantaged underclass, who had to carry passes in white areas.”

“That’s understandable, but Apartheid ended years ago. South Africa is now a multi-racial democracy. The African National Congress is in power.”

“Sure. Growing numbers of blacks are becoming richer and several are multi-millionaires. Many blacks have good jobs and earn good money. I’m happy with my salary and Thandi is a teacher. We have enough to educate our children and go on holiday. But for others, life is without hope. They turn to crime and we police don’t have the resources to cope.”

\* \* \*

Wearing dark glasses to help me obscure myself from nosy neighbours, I pressed the security button of Mrs Sniper’s home. It was surrounded by a high fence with spiked poles, not surprising, considering what had happened. John, her only child, was about to go to university, when a gang hijacked his car. John tried to stop them and was shot. He lay in a coma for weeks until Sally Sniper reluctantly agreed that he should be taken off the life support machine. Aware that her tragedy was far from rare, Mrs Sniper told the police that she would help them fight crime.

The gates opened and we walked to the house via a short

pathway that was between a small garden and a swimming pool. Sally Sniper was sitting in a conservatory, filled with Proteas and other tropical flowers. In her late fifties, she had short brown, greying hair and a face lined by the sun.

Sally stood up to greet me just as I took off my dark glasses. Her face seemed to turn white and she began to wobble. Watson moved swiftly to support her and help her sit down.

“My God, you could be John’s twin.”

I glanced at the large photo of her late son on the mantelpiece and then a mirror nearby. Stapler hadn’t shown me photos of the late John Sniper. His work was remarkable.

“I’m sorry, I did...didn’t know about your tragedy,” I stammered. “I only heard about it last week. I knew that I was going to be someone else, but I thought that he had died years ago.”

“It’s OK Jack,” Sally said, recovering slowly from the shock. “Watson approached me and told me that you would be needed for an urgent job. We must fight crime. My son would have agreed.”

While we were having tea, we went through her photo albums of John Sniper from babyhood to university, before he was cruelly struck down. Sally tried to hold back her tears when she turned the pages and chatted about happy memories.

“My husband died when John was a child, but it is John I keep thinking about. He was an only child, you see... The years pass by, but it’s like yesterday. What a waste.”

“I hope we can be friends,” I murmured, embarrassed that we were using her.

\* \* \*

Later Watson drove Sally and I around the town and then

to her son's former school. At Springs Boys High, John Sniper played cricket and rugby for the first team, was a swimmer who won medals and passed with distinction in maths and science. Afterwards we drove to the centre of the town where John went to movies, clubs and the Civic Theatre. The library was near an Art Deco Fire Station that was built in the nineteen twenties. We passed the Springs Country Club and Pollack Park golf courses, where he played golf and tennis.

After taking Sally Sniper for lunch and then home, Watson drove past Springs' industrial sites that had a diamond research laboratory, glass, tools and other factories. We passed Kwa Thema and went through the small towns, Brakpan, Benoni, Boksburg and Germiston, on the way to Johannesburg.

"The towns were founded near the gold mines," Watson said. "That's ERPM, where my father worked."

He pointed towards the shaft of the goldmine, which was near Boksburg: "He used to go down early in the morning and finish late at night."

We continued westwards until we came to Johannesburg, a large sprawling City and then drove to Witwatersrand University, where I, Jack Sniper, was supposed to have been a geology student.

"What happens if I bump into friends and relatives of John Sniper?" I asked while we wondered around the campus.

"His close friends have emigrated to Australia. Sally Sniper was an only child and has no close relatives. Cousins are in England."

"There must be a risk that I'll come across them. What should I do then?"

"You'll have to play it by ear, Jack."

"What if a future colleague went to his funeral?"

“Vowels, Jack Vowels! Get into that South African accent. Sally told me that John didn’t have close friends. He was a bit of a loner. I’ll try and check out who went to the funeral--- just in case.”

“Ag maan I’m Saath African,” I said, doing my best to mimic the accent

I was now beginning to feel seriously uneasy about “Operation F”, the investigation into Faramazov’s global businesses. Initially it was an interesting and enjoyable experience; great to be free and travelling after being cooped up in prison. Now reality was facing me.

Watson noticed my tension and gave me a tour of the northern suburbs of Rosebank and Sandton, with their sparkling shopping centres and plush hotels. There the white and black elite were dressed fashionably, isolated from the despair of the disadvantaged. The fear of crime, however, was ever present. Private security vans roamed around and security men and women made their presence felt in every building. It was difficult to pass through residential roads without coming across a guard. Through the barriers, home after home had high fences, security gates and intricate alarm systems. This was Johannesburg, one of the violent crime capitals of the world. People went about their business, seemingly happily, but they were street wise and acutely aware that random criminal acts could happen at any moment.



## DIAMOND SMUGGLERS

During the following weeks, I tailed Watson while he worked on several cases ranging from petty theft to burglaries and murders.

Watson was a meticulous detective but it was exceedingly difficult to find adequate evidence and witnesses to prosecute. He complained that the police force was undermanned and that many officers were corrupt.

“If we persist, we’ll get them. Look for detail, detail, detail, the smallest detail, Jack. Listen for a slip in the tongue.”

We went to Soweto, the city that spawned the anti-Apartheid revolution in the 1970s and later to its Baragwanath Hospital. It was Friday and unfortunate victims of Tsotsi knifings, were patched up or delivered to the mortuary, after being mugged for their weekly wages.

“The whites complain about crime, but we’ve had to face it for a long time,” Watson said.

\* \* \*

I had just returned from a run a few days later, when Watson shouted: “Hurry up, we have an interesting case.

Customs have detected diamonds at the airport.”

Before questioning the suspect, Watson Nkosi had briefed customs officials to repack his suitcase and put the diamonds back in their hiding place. The suspect, Pacy Palatus, was an American student who had flown in from Windhoek, Namibia. Sniffer dogs had smelt a reefer of pot, which was hidden in his socks, so customs searched for hard drugs. While they were doing so, they found seemingly unopened tubes of toothpaste, shaving and sun cream in the wash bag. They placed them through the X-ray machine and noticed that they contained gems. Since Palatus had arrived from Namibia, a country rich in diamonds, they drew the obvious conclusion and called Watson. He told them to leave the tubes untouched and not to begin the interrogation.

When we arrived, Palatus was in a small customs interview room after being detained there for about two hours. Tall and thickset with brown hair, he was dressed in jeans, a plain t-shirt and trainers. Watson began the interview with a CCTV camera and recorder on, but didn't refer to the diamonds. Sam Mtetwa, an airport detective, sat next to Watson, opposite Palatus. I was in a chair nearby, observing Palatus' reactions.

“Name, address and occupation,” Watson said, as Mtetwa passed him the passport and air ticket.

“Pacy Palatus. 15 Avondale Road, San Francisco. I'm a student studying anthropology at the University of California. I've been in Namibia for a month to research and meet Bushmen for my final year project.”

“Pot is legal in California,” Watson said as he took the reefer from Mtetwa. “You obviously know that it's unlawful here.”

“I'm not a dealer, I promise you,” Palatus insisted. “I just like a smoke from time to time. I clean forgot that I

had left a reefer there. We had a party before I left and I packed in a hurry.”

“Cannabis is called dagga in South Africa. Ours is very potent. What other drugs do you take?”

“Nothing else.”

“Hmm. How long do you intend staying in South Africa?”

“A week. I have to do more research on Bushmen at Witwatersrand University’s Anthropology Department. Then I’m flying to Europe to meet my girlfriend.”

“Where is she?”

“In Madrid. She’s studying Spanish history of art.”

“So that’s why you’re flying with Iberia and not an American airline,” Mtetwa said.

“Yes, sir.”

Watson nodded at Mtetwa who left the interview room and came back with Palatus’ belongings. He placed the suitcase on one side of the table.

“I know that customs officers have already carried out the search. Do you mind if we double check? Drugs are a serious problem in South Africa. We cannot be too careful.”

“Sure. I have nothing to hide,” Palatus said, as he fidgeted with a pen.

“Could you unlock your case and place all the items on the side of the desk?” Mtetwa asked.

Palatus began to unpack while we observed him silently. Shirts, trousers, boxers, socks, towels were neatly placed on one side. Books on the Bushmen and files with his research and writings, were piled next to them. A small package was opened and it contained wooden carved animals. Mtetwa picked up a carved knife that looked like ivory.

“Do you know that ivory is illegal? We’re trying to protect the African elephant.”

Palatus was startled.

“They told me it was a plastic copy. Not ivory.”

“Let me see. Oh yes, very realistic. What are these?”  
Watson asked as he emptied a small bag.

“Just some worthless semi-precious stones. Cost me about ten dollars in a Windhoek market.”

All Palatus’ belongings were now on the table and Watson casually pointed at the wash bag.

“Could you empty that please.”

Out came a razor, blades, a toothbrush, small scissors, an athlete’s foot powder container, plasters, a small box of condoms, two large toothpaste tubes, a large tube of shaving cream, and sun and foot cream tubes.

Watson observed Palatus silently and then smiled: “I think we can let you off with a warning this time, Mr Palatus. Don’t bring in pot next time. This isn’t California.”

Palatus, sighing with relief began putting his things back into the wash bag.

“Seems you have a lot of toothpaste, Mr Palatus. Do you think that South Africa is an outback?” Watson said with a chuckle and he leaned over casually and picked up a tube.

Palatus looked puzzled and said nothing.

Suddenly, without warning, Watson passed the tube to Mtetwa. He squeezed it hard while Watson observed Palatus’ face intently. Several small stones came out and landed on the surface of the table. Palatus’ expression was a combination of horror and amazement. Mtetwa squeezed all the tubes and out came more uncut diamonds. He took out a Swiss army knife, cut off the tubes’ nozzles and managed to push out some more gems. Mtetwa then took photos of the stones and slashed tubes. After that, he used some tissue paper to clean off the toothpaste and cream from the diamonds. He placed the stones in a neat pile and took another photo. While this was happening Palatus, who was becoming more and more agitated, glanced at the CCTV

camera and tried to control himself.

"I swear I did not know they were in my bag. I'm not a diamond smuggler."

"Who said that we were accusing you?" Watson said in a gentle, soft tone. "We were merely going to ask you how these gems were miraculously inserted into your tubes of toothpaste and creams; how they came to be in your luggage."

Palatus was breathing heavily.

"Those people at Windhoek airport must have set me up."

"Please tell us how," said Watson with exemplary patience.

"There was a large crowd of people when I arrived at the airport. When I was about to check in, I found that my passport and ticket were missing."

"Where did you put them?"

"In the pocket of my jacket. I was carrying it because it was hot."

"You were rushing through the crowd and they fell out of the pocket?"

"I guess so."

"What did you do about it?"

"I was in a panic. I sat down and went through all my pockets and hand luggage again and again. A couple who had sat down near me, noticed what I was doing and asked if they could help."

"What did they do?" Watson asked.

"They were sympathetic. The man called a security officer nearby. The officer suggested we go to the lost property office. The man and I went to the office. The woman said that she would look after my luggage. Luckily my passport and ticket were at lost property. Someone must have picked them up."

"How long was your luggage left with the woman?"

Surely you're aware of airport rules?" Mtetwa said.

"She was very kind and helpful. I trusted her."

"For how long was the luggage in her possession?" Mtetwa repeated.

About five to ten minutes at the most. Enough time to..."

"Plant the tubes in your suitcase. But you had to unlock it here. How did she manage to mysteriously place them in your case?" Watson asked.

"When I was looking for my passport, I unlocked the suitcase. I was so stressed that I must have forgotten to lock it again."

"Officer Mtetwa can you call Windhoek lost property? Ask them whether they have a record of his passport and ticket," Watson said.

"No problem," Mtetwa replied and he left the room.

Watson passed a bottle of water to Palatus. He was sweating, despite the air conditioning.

"Describe the couple," Watson said.

"They looked respectable and were good to me. As I said before, they were patient and helpful. The guy was lean, looked in his forties and had a Spanish accent. He was in a light brown suit. Designer."

"And the woman?"

"She was Namibian. Elegant. Had a gold necklace and diamond ring."

Silence, while Palatus drank his water and relaxed a little.

"Windhoek lost property does have a record of the passport and ticket, Mtetwa affirmed when he walked into the room. "They said that the owner claimed them about half an hour after they were handed in."

"Told you. She must have planted the tubes in my wash bag. I brush my teeth with Sensodyne toothpaste. Those

tubes are Colgate. I didn't pack sun cream."

With his left hand, Mtetwa pushed the small pile of diamonds closer and examined them. Then he took out a tissue and wiped off the remaining toothpaste and shaving cream while we observed silently. The action seriously unnerved Palatus and his face began to twitch.

"I swear I'm not an illicit dealer. I would never have anything to do with conflict diamonds. I've read that diamond dealers only accept certified diamonds."

"You seem quite knowledgeable about diamonds for an anthropology student," Watson said. "Wait here, we'll decide what to do with you."

Watson, Mtetwa and I went into the observation room and watched Palatus. The diamonds were still on the table. He moved his hand towards them to pick some up, but quickly withdrew. He then shook his head and sat there looking dejected.

"What do you think they are worth?" I asked.

"They seem to be top quality gems ranging from a half to two carats," Watson said. "Difficult to say. About \$100,000, maybe."

"What are certified and conflict diamonds?"

"De Beers, other diamond mining companies and gem dealers in Antwerp, Tel Aviv and Mumbai have an agreement to prevent trade in 'blood diamonds'," Mtetwa said. "The aim is to monitor diamonds that are mined in conflict areas and are sold to finance wars."

"How can dealers be sure that they are not buying blood diamonds?"

"Expert dealers can gauge where gems come from and are only allowed to trade in certified diamonds. If they believe that the diamonds are from war zones, the gems cannot have certificates," Mtetwa replied. "The system is known as the 'Kimberley Process'. It aims at ensuring that each

shipment of rough diamonds is exported or imported in a secure container. The gems have numbered, government-validated certificates to ensure that they are from conflict free areas.

“Do you think Palatus had conflict diamonds in his possession?”

“I’m not sure. It is unlikely that they were stolen from De Beers’ Namibian mines,” Watson replied. “De Beers has very tight security. They could have come from Angola or Zimbabwe. The Namibian border is vast.”

“Do you believe his story?”

“Whether they are drugs or diamonds, most suspects say that the goods were planted,” Mtetwa said. “The passport claim is more unusual and could be true. Windhoek Airport confirmed his story.”

“They could have stolen the passport and ticket to obtain Palatus’ personal details and his destination,” Watson said. “They would have watched him panic, allowing them the opportunity to hide the diamonds in his luggage. By then the passport would have been placed in lost property.”

“The smugglers could then have emailed his photo, details and arrival time to gang members in Madrid,” Mtetwa said. “It would only be a matter of time before they snatched the diamonds from the unwitting carrier.”

“Maybe it’s a double bluff. The passport and ticket were deliberately lost and handed in to give credence to his story,” I said.

“You’re beginning to learn, Jack. Yes, that’s a very real possibility,” Nkozi said, as we watched Palatus sitting there in silence, waiting.

“On the other hand, if he were a diamond smuggler, would a reefer be left in his luggage? He wouldn’t have been that stupid. He wouldn’t have risked sniffer dogs.”

“Spot on again, Jack,” Watson said and smiled at



Mtetwa.

“As an observer, what would you do, Jack?” Mtetwa asked.

“If you charge him and he’s guilty, he’s unlikely to disclose the smugglers. I would let him go. We can then tail him to see if someone makes contact.”

“That’s precisely what we’re going to do, Jack. We can always pick him up later,” Watson said.

\* \* \*

According to the squad who tailed Pacy Palatus, he hired a car and checked into a hotel near Witwatersrand University. During the following week, he went there every day. In the evening Palatus would get in his car and go to restaurants and movies in Rosebank and Sandton. He was with some student friends from time to time, but none seemed to be criminal types.

Late one night when we were watching a football match on TV, Watson received a call.

“You damn fools, how did you manage to lose him? Where the hell is he?” Watson shouted. “He went to Hillbrow? You lost him there? How? Keep searching.”

“They lost him?” I asked.

“In the worst possible place. Hillbrow is dangerous and overcrowded,” Watson said. “It’s a haven for drug dealers and criminals from all over Africa.”

“How did they lose him?”

“Palatus was driving through Hillbrow early evening. There was a traffic jam. He managed to slip through and our detectives were caught in the snarl up. He hasn’t returned to the hotel.”

The next morning, Watson received another call when we were having breakfast.

“Palatus is dead. They found him in an underground parking place in his car, the exhaust going full blast. It could be suicide but they reckon it was murder.”

I felt awful.

“Hell! It was my suggestion that we release him. If he had been in the nick he would have been safe.”

Depressed, I walked out of the house into the garden to relax and try and lift myself and shake off the guilt.

Watson came up to me and gently placed his hand on my shoulder: “Don’t worry, Jack. It was my decision. If they wanted him dead, they would have found a way. Come, we’re going to take a look at the body. Another day, another Johannesburg murder.”

\* \* \*

On the way to the mortuary to examine the body, we drove to the centre of Johannesburg. On the streets and in open spaces near decaying office blocks and skyscrapers, were vendors selling fruit and vegetables, meat, clothes, electrical and other goods. Few whites were around. Those who were on the streets were dressed simply, so that they could blend in and avoid potential muggers.

Between the city centre of Johannesburg and the northern suburbs, was Hillbrow, one of the seediest places that I had ever visited. There was some regeneration, but washing lines were hanging from balconies of filthy, tatty, high rise apartments. Some windows were broken, a few shops were boarded up and streets were crowded and dirty. It was a haven for criminal cockroaches.

Detective Sergeant Frikkie du Plessis was waiting for us at the Hillbrow mortuary, the site of a former “Non-European”, blacks only hospital, during the Apartheid years. Du Plessis took us into a room where Palatus’ body was

lying on a table with a sheet over it. He took the cover off and shook his head.

“What a handsome boy; what a waste,” du Plessis said.

An imposing figure, du Plessis was well over six foot tall. He was around forty and the broken nose and cauliflower ears indicated that he had been a rugby player or wrestler.

“His parents will be devastated. Can you imagine losing a son, Watson?” the policeman said.

“I can’t think of anything worse,” Watson said.

The pathologist, a young, pretty, Asian woman in a white coat, walked in and made a thorough examination from head to toe as we looked on. The face was not contorted and there were neither bullet nor knife wounds.

“The only sign of violence is this,” she said, pointing to a small bruise on the neck a few centimetres below the jaw. “One of them could have pressed the carotid artery. Within a few seconds, he would have been unconscious or dead.”

“You don’t think that the fumes killed him?” du Plessis said.

“They would have finished him off, but he was probably dead before they put him in the car.”

“Do you think they could have drugged him?” I asked. “He looks so peaceful.”

“Possibly. We’ll be checking his blood.”

\* \* \*

We drove from the hospital to the scene of the crime, passed the walls of “The Fort”, an historic prison and then through the main streets of Hillbrow. Angus, Watson’s dog and du Plessis’ Alsatian were at the back of the car. After reaching a rundown building, du Plessis, drove us down a ramp into a filthy, musty underground parking lot. The area around the car had been sealed off with tape and a

policeman, holding a rifle, was on guard. The dogs were let loose and they immediately went to work. They rushed to the car sniffing and then ran around the area, searching. Watson examined the inside of the car thoroughly, while du Plessis carefully searched for objects or other clues in the immediate surroundings. Angus started barking and we rushed over. In front of him was a small white badge with a black snake. Watson picked the badge up with a hanky and placed it into a small plastic bag.

“Do you think that it could belong to one of the murderers?” I asked and patted Angus.

“Perhaps. It could be an insignia for a gang or some organisation. On the other hand, it could belong to someone unconnected with the crime.”

“Do you believe that Palatus met a fence and was murdered because he didn't have the gems?”

“Possibly,” Watson replied. “On the other hand, the gang could have decided to get him out of the way as he could have been a witness against them. Now that he's dead, we may never know.”