

Rhino Horn Underground

By Deven Greene

Chapter 1

With the hot sun blazing above, I strain my eyes as hard as I can to look downward, but the blade pressed against my throat remains out of sight. My pulse is racing, and my breathing is so fast I can only gasp. Is that a trickle of blood I sense slowly making its way down my neck, or is it my imagination? Below and to my right, a hand holds a well-worn machete handle. That hand is attached to the muscular forearm of the man standing behind me, ready to end my life any moment. I don't know what he looks like—it all happened so quickly—but I know he's a Black man with a thick African accent. He's telling me to hold still. As if I would do anything other than that right now. I clutch the cell phone in my hand, wondering if I caught anything useful on the video I'd been shooting moments before. Is the camera still running? If my phone were found, the identity of the man holding me would be revealed to the authorities who were sure to investigate later—too late to save me.

Our guide and four others on the tour of the wildlife reserve lie dead on the bare earth ten feet away, each in a pool of their own blood. As I take in the scene, a second Black man holding a rifle shoots the veterinarian who had been speaking to us. Now with a large hole in his chest, the veterinarian, armed only with a vial containing an animal tranquilizer, staggers and falls.

I think of my husband, Quinn, thousands of miles away from this South African wildlife reserve—probably asleep, oblivious to the fact that he is about to become a widower.

The two attackers yell back and forth. They seem to be having a disagreement, but I don't understand their language. The man with the rifle raises it. I wince and brace myself for impact,

but instead of aiming at me, he fires at the rhinoceros in a nearby pen. Blood and tissue—hide, bone, and brain, I suppose—spray from the back of the animal’s head. I watch in shock as the massive creature emits a haunting wail and falls.

A fraction of a second later, another shot rings out, this one quieter. I freeze as the man standing behind me collapses. His machete nicks my arm before he hits the ground. A second shot is fired, and the man who just murdered the rhino falls.

Who did that? Am I safe? I’m shaking as I slowly turn, just as Ethan, the only other surviving member of our group, grabs my arm and yells, “Let’s go!”

With no time to think, I struggle to keep up as I let him drag me. I check my arm where the machete cut it—it’s only a superficial wound oozing a small amount of blood. Ethan tucks the large pistol he’s holding into his waistband while racing toward the dead rhino. My heart is already pounding when loud voices—African voices—approach from heavy brush close by.

Ethan stops and appears to think for a moment, as my heart revs so hard I feel my chest will burst. After the brief pause, he pulls me along again, but in a different direction, now heading towards the body of the dead man who shot the rhino. He drops my hand to search the killer’s pants pockets, pulls out a set of keys, then snatches the rifle lying in the dust nearby. Motioning me to follow, he dashes to the small parking lot and jumps into the driver's seat of an open, doorless jeep that wasn’t there when we arrived. I don’t know this man, but I scramble into the passenger side as fast as I can.

Ethan guns the engine and heads out of the park. My mind is speeding as I struggle to fasten my seat belt, hoping I don’t fall out the side of the vehicle before I get it secured. *Who is this guy I met this morning and know only as Ethan?* All I know is what I can observe—he’s an average-looking middle-aged White man with a dark tan and thick black glasses, dressed in gray

cargo pants. His belly is covered by a dull gray, loose-fitting, long-sleeve shirt with breast pockets and front snaps, hiding the paunch underneath. His gray bucket hat hides his hair, if he has any.

He told our group his name as we left Richards Bay that morning for the two-hour drive to the wildlife reserve in the eastern part of South Africa, where we would see several rhinos and witness the horns being sawed off of one. While the other travelers and our guide were lively conversationalists as we traveled the dusty roads, Ethan remained silent, seemingly uninterested in the scenery. I had written off this milquetoast of a man as someone who was there only because he wanted to take pictures to show people back home, hoping to convince them that he was an interesting person.

Now I'm wondering: Who carries a gun under his shirt when on vacation to view wildlife? And who would be able to fire it so accurately, so swiftly?

I finally snap my seat belt and study him. He stares ahead as he removes a device from his shirt pocket and places it on the dash.

"What's that?" I ask.

"GPS device." Moments later, he veers off the main road. Small trees and bushes snap under the jeep.

Not sure what to do, I ask, "What about those people? And the rhino?" Stupid, I know.

"They're all dead. No time to waste. More were getting close to us."

"More what?"

"More poachers."

"How do you know?" I ask.

He glances at me as if I'm an idiot. "I just know."

“Were you going to take the horns of that rhino?” I know it’s a crime, and I don’t want to sound accusatory, but I can’t imagine any other reason he would start to run toward the deceased animal.

His face tightens and his eyes narrow. “What if I was?”

Now I’ve gotten him mad. I need to change the subject. “Where are we going?”

“I’m getting us to a safe place.”

“I really appreciate what you’ve done, but wouldn’t it be best to head back to Richards Bay?”

“It’s not safe. There’s more where they came from.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Ethan reaches into his right breast pocket and pulls out a leather case a little larger than a credit card. He throws it my way, and it lands on my lap. I gasp as I lift the front flap and see his identification. His name isn’t Ethan, but his picture is on the plastic ID. The man sitting next to me is Spencer Crenshaw, and he’s an FBI special agent.