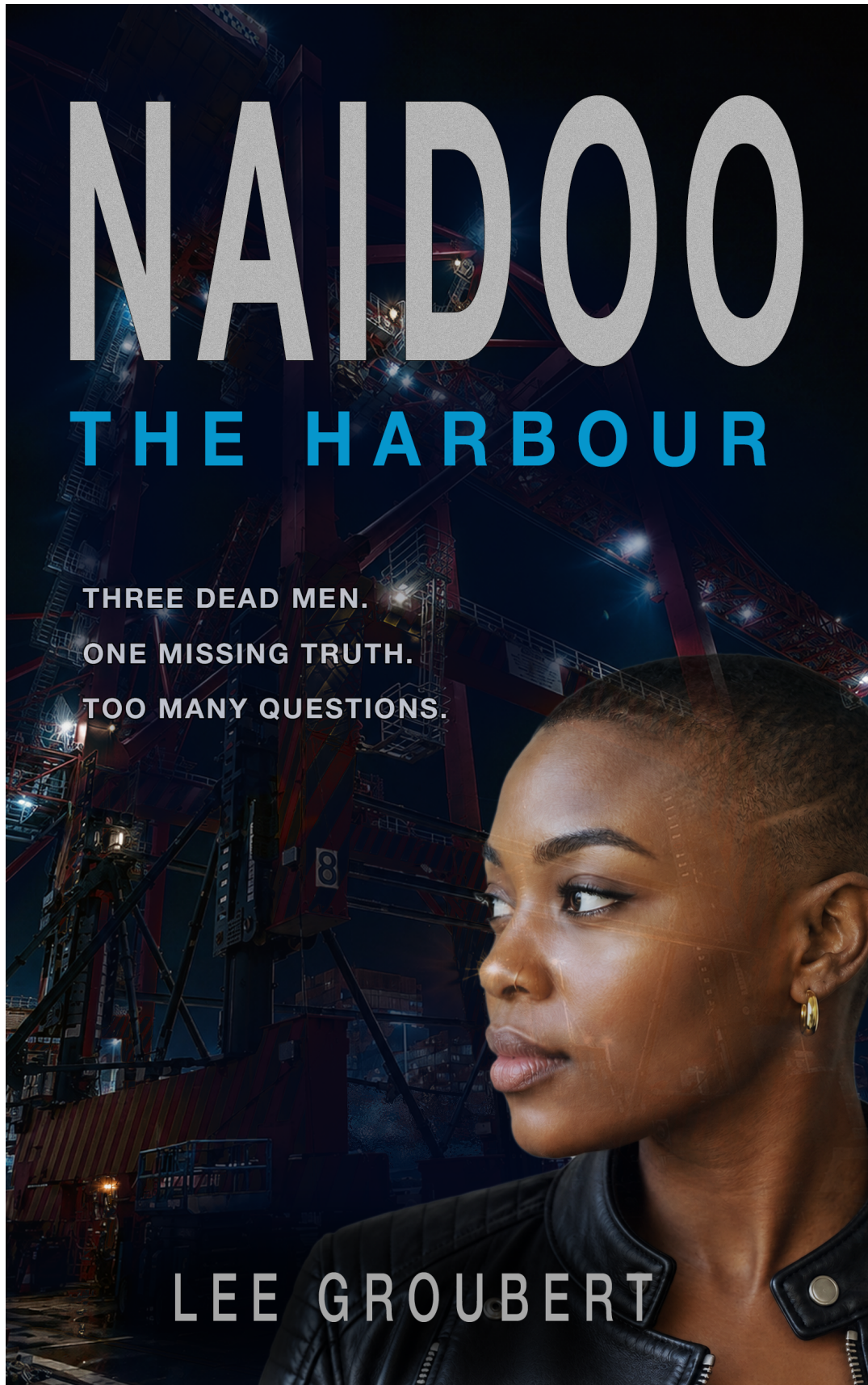


Teaser: NAIDOO - THE HARBOUR



After a few exciting and exhausting hours in Troy's hotel suite, Mara returned to her apartment. The doorman stared at her curiously, as if he suspected she had a certain side job that typically required working at night.

She made herself a cucumber sandwich and drank a glass of orange juice. After eating, she gazed for a long time through the kitchen window at the beach and the relentless white-capped waves, whose roar echoed dramatically against the wall of the hotel opposite.

At that moment, she felt like a passenger on a surprise taxi ride through a strange city. The driver was deaf-mute, the lighting was poor, and the sights were neglected and barely recognisable as such.

The case had structure and rhythm. But both were hard to discern amidst a great deal of background noise. It might simply have been the unfamiliar city—with its unfamiliar customs, unfamiliar people, unfamiliar climate, and unfamiliar foreigners.

She switched on the small desk lamp on her compact corner desk, opened her laptop, and began searching.

There were hundreds of cases with foreigners involved. Almost all were petty offences. A few concerned copper theft. Mara didn't dwell on them, though even a cursory glance usually revealed very flimsy evidence.

Informant tips.

Then—

A shootout. Three dead. All armed. No arrests.

Two unusual details made it interesting. The crime scene wasn't Umlazi or one of the usual hotspots. It was *Glenwood*, west of the harbour—a normal residential area, as Street View showed. In front of a hotel.

Identification of the victim was impossible at this time due. They carried poorly executed forgeries of Kenyan passports. An identity inquiry had been submitted to the Kenyan police. So far, there has been no response.

Mara examined the crime scene photographs more closely. An ordinary street corner. Daylight. Three shabbily dressed bodies on the asphalt. Not together. Scattered. Likely fleeing.

An ambush?

The pathologist—apparently an amateur anthropologist—had concluded, after some deliberation, that they could not be South African, Zimbabwean, or Malawian. Their physiques were too small, too muscular. Their skin colour was far too dark. Their cheekbones were not particularly high. There were no epicanthic folds, and their nasal bases were flat.

In short, they displayed a physical type more commonly associated with the Central African rainforest than with the Kalahari.

That was the pathologist's assessment.

Mara checked.

No, it wasn't Dr Singh.

The recovered weapons were run-of-the-mill: one of the usual Makarovs; a homemade "*craft gun*" from a local workshop in Mali or Ghana; and two Chinese copies of the *Tokarev TT-33*.

Three dead. Four firearms recovered. Four had checked into the hotel in front of which they were attacked. One escaped.

Interesting.

The cause of death in all three cases was multiple gunshot wounds. All nine millimeter rounds.

Forensics had outdone themselves—or at least, that's how the ballistics report read. Everything pointed to HK MP5s: the number and width of the rifling grooves, the direction and rate of twist, the barrel profile.

The adversaries were no mere desperados. An MP5 didn't come cheap. The foreign nationals hadn't fallen victim to their own kind. Something wealthy was behind the scene.

She checked hospital lists for a patient that might fit the description of the hotel owner. Without success.

When Mthethwa entered the barracks, Mara had already been at her desk for sixty-seven minutes.

"Good morning, Naidoo. Coffee?" she said.

"Come in," Mara said.

"Oops. I'm not aware of having done anything wrong. I even took out the rubbish," Mthethwa said good-humouredly.

"The interview today. How many officers are assigned?"

"What? Which side of the bed did you get out of this morning? Is it already a full moon?"

"Tell your commander to expect resistance."

Mthethwa stared at her.

Mara thought for a moment.

"Recommend body armour. Helmets."

"Seriously?"

"Ja."

"From a couple of foreigners?"

"Ja."

"You know something?"

"Nee."

"Then why?"

"Pattern recognition."

"So I have to go to Mofokeng and tell her that our guest, Liaison Officer Naidoo, has requested a SWAT team for a passport check?"

"Ja."

"You're insane! No, wait. I'll do it. I enjoy waking her up in the morning with a few riddles."

She left Mara's office in high spirits.

Mara reached for the phone.

"Nkosi."

"Warrant Officer Naidoo. SAPS is assigned to interview foreign nationals this morning. I recommend additional support."

"Seriously? Reason?"

"Three unidentified Central African males were killed in Bluff. Another group matching that general description is about to be interviewed."

Nkosi frowned.

"That's a very broad category, Naidoo."

"Correct."

"Do you have evidence they're connected?"

"Nee."

"Intelligence?"

"Nee."

"A specific threat?"

"Nee."

"Then what exactly am I supposed to tell the Provincial Commissioner?"

Mara considered.

"That caution is inexpensive."

Nkosi paused.

"Fine. I'll inform the station commander."

"Additional vehicles."

"No."

"Body armour plus helmets."

"Standard issue."

"Body armour plus helmets."

"Stop it."

"Long guns."

"It's an interview, Naidoo, not Operation Serval."

Nkosi paused again.

"How likely is violence?"

"Unknown."

"Give me a percentage."

Mara thought.

"Between zero and one hundred."

"That's not helpful."

"It is accurate."

Mthethwa returned.

"Your boss?"

"Ja."

"Well?"

"He'll notify them."

"That's all?"

"Correct."

Mthethwa nodded. "SAPS."

Mara looked at her.

"Metro would've done exactly the same."

Mthethwa smiled.

"Probably. But it's more satisfying blaming SAPS."

She laughed.

"Mofokeng approved bulletproof vests for us. The SAPS guys will laugh their heads off if we show up looking like teddy bears."

Mara said nothing.

"You're still coming?"

"Ja."

"You're wearing body armour?"

"Ja."

"Okay then. That's finally a reason."