

on the floor

aifric campbell



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First published in this edition in 2013 by Serpent's Tail

First published in 2012 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd

3A Exmouth House

Pine Street

London EC1R 0JH

www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 809 6

eISBN 978 1 84765 801 2

Designed and typeset by sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



prologue

the BFT

5 march 1986

16:21

london

HERE'S HOW IT GOES, the moment of my becoming:

The call comes in at 16:09, while we're already winding down. The London market's just closed so the trading floor is quiet and the only shouting is what's spilling out of the squawk box from New York.

First thing I notice is a flurry on the Block Desk, a change in tempo, like the rumble of approaching thunder. Then the Grope strides out of his glass tower, his jawbone set like stone, the way it always is when something big is going down. And it's like a tom-tom alert has gone out, faces are bobbing up behind the rows of monitors as a Mexican wave of heads rolls right across the floor from South East Asia to the US desk.

Rob stands up at his pitch directly opposite me, slaps the receiver in his palm like he's testing a cosh. Al rises from the chair beside me and the big fat research report on waste management that he keeps telling us is the Industry of the Future. And then I'm standing too, the skirt amongst men.

The Grope stops at the Block Desk where Skippy Dolan is on his feet with the phone clamped to his ear. His elbow sticks out at a right angle so you can see the sweat circle darken his blue armpit. And I'm thinking it looks bad, Skippy standing there leaking like that, he's the only Yank

on the floor who doesn't wear a white shirt with a vest underneath to mop up the juice. The Grope leans into the Reuters screen and we're all craning our necks like prairie dogs, trying to see whose vitals he is checking.

'I'm guessing it's Fido on the line,' says Al. 'Skippy said he's getting real tight with them.'

And Skippy is ranting into the phone, nodding his strawberry meathead as if he's in spasm, as if he can't stop. His free hand chops the air space in front of him into big empty pieces and after 352 days in this job I can read all the signs: Skippy's client is a seller in size who wants out NOW. And I can tell from the way he's bent double and winding the phone cord around his neck, that if we don't pull the trigger soon, Skippy's client will trade away.

'Let me call Felix Mann.' My voice is very loud and very clear. The Grope snaps round. Heads swivel. Rob turns to face me with a flopped jaw. Al sucks wind through his teeth.

The Grope hoovers up the space between us and leans across Rob's desk to fix me with that killer stare.

'Felix Mann is the only one who can do this,' I say, the receiver smooth and warm in my hand like a favourite toy.

You make your own luck. You pick your moments and this is mine.

'Two minutes,' Skippy squeals, air-slicing his throat. 'Or my man takes his business to Goldman's.'

'OK, Geri, let's smile and dial,' says the Grope, all soft and dangerous. And then he tells me what Skippy's got to show.

It is midnight in Hong Kong but Felix answers on the first ring.

'Cemco,' I say. 'I have a seller in size.'

I hear his fingers flutter across the keyboard. Picture his pale face spotlit in the darkened office, the harbour lights twinkling behind the black glass.

'I've got 56 million shares on offer at 224.'

Al is a still life beside me. The Grope and Rob like a tableau on the other side of the monitors. And behind them an audience is assembling to witness my circus animal performance. The truth is I have no fucking clue what Felix thinks of Cemco. Or the price. Or anything. But I know that he's the only one who can do this right here, right now.

'And I've got one minute,' I tell Felix. Skippy is in panicked silence, his fingers counting down the seconds to expiry.

There is a lurch in my chest like a part of my lung has just collapsed. The tickers whizz green across the black tape and I reach out to touch my Reuters like a sacred stone. In the corner of my eye I see Al's finger tapping his desk, he is keeping time with Skippy's countdown as I hurtle towards my own funeral.

'Geri,' the Grope's voice hits me like a blow to the temple.

'Felix,' I say. 'We're out of time.'

There's a crackling on the line and I imagine my voice sinking undersea, picture starfish gliding dumbly over the transcontinental cable, a scuttle of claws across the silent floor. Al stops tapping the desk and the faithless audience leans in to get a better view of Geri Molloy choking on the slime of reckless ambition.

Felix's voice shoots to the surface and into my ear.

'He'll pay 223 for the lot,' I look up into the Grope's blinkless stare. Skippy holds three frantic fingers in the air. The Grope nods quick and tight and I raise my trembling thumb level with his head and say loudly, so everyone can hear: 'You're done, Felix, 56 million Cemco sold to you at 223.' And Skippy is thumping into his phone now, he's spinning round and unravelling the coil, waving the blue ticket above his head. 'Thank you, Felix.' I kill the line, write out a pink ticket and slam it in the timestamp. It is 16:21 on 5 March 1986 and everyone is gawping like I just became someone else.

'Kin-ell, Geri,' roars Rob and a hoot goes up. Skippy lunges across the monitors and my palm burns from a machine gun of high fives.

Then the Grope is beside me showing the full set of white teeth. His hand lands hard and heavy on my shoulder like it has never done

before. He lets it linger for a moment while he looks down at me, differently somehow, like I'm not the person he thought I was. For I am now reborn and in my hand is a piece of living history: the biggest ticket ever written on Steiner's trading floor.

This was how I became a legend in my own lifetime.

This was the Big Fucking Ticket that made me everything I am.

1

time delay

monday 14 january 1991

05:17

london

AND FOR A LONG, LONG TIME after the Big Fucking Ticket, things had all the appearance of being on an upward trend. I met Stephen and fell in love, the '87 Crash came and went, stock markets kept roaring ahead and I was coining it at Steiner's. So who could have guessed just how much trouble lay down the road? Who could have known that Stephen would dump me in Venice four years later, Felix Mann would be forcing my relocation to Hong Kong and I'd be lying here on the floor at 5:17 a.m. with an empty bottle of Absolut, watching a million troops line up in a desert theatre of war?

For a while I chose to believe that things just snuck up when I wasn't paying attention, but I've since figured out that this downward trend started exactly 737 days ago. It was 1988 and all through that summer I'd been dreaming about Kit Kats. The whole country was in meltdown about the nation's favourite chocolate bar being gobbled up by the Swiss and Stephen was working flat-out on the takeover bid, so I barely saw him.

'You know it's the ultimate compromise,' I told him one December morning in Kensington Gardens. 'The Kit Kat is the bar you buy when you can't decide what you really want.' Rex ducked his head

encouragingly, a twist of red tinsel around his collar and a slimy tennis ball in his mouth. I slipped my arm through Stephen's. He was wearing that navy pea coat and the mohair was tipped with frost.

'STAY,' he raised a hand but Rex lolloped off towards the Round Pond. 'I don't know why you even have a dog when you can't be bothered to train him,' he muttered and crunched away across the frozen grass. And I was struck by how easily my arm had given up its position, like a leaf falling on seasonal cue, as if this surrender was preordained and nature was ushering in the future of singledom that has since come to pass.

That moment was an early warning signal, like a bell tinkling faintly in thick fog to warn of rocks ahead. So the end, when it finally came 181 days ago, was surprising not for the event, but for what Zanna still calls my disproportionate reaction. I did not struggle or cry out. I let Stephen sneak off at dawn without a word, for how can you cling on to what isn't there? I packed my bag and flew back home to crouch cross-legged and hyperventilating in my sleepless bed as if each lung was a dying animal panting in my hands.

Zanna diagnosed a 'viral grief', which she had seen before, since Manhattan is years ahead of London in matters of the heart. So she marched me over to Finsbury Circus and into the consulting rooms of her private doctor who cradled her hand in both of his as if he might kiss it. 'Geri needs to sleep and she needs to chill,' Zanna announced, while I sat mute in a creaking Chesterfield. The doctor nodded gravely behind his outsize desk and took my blood pressure and I left with scrips for Valium and Mogadon. 'Look around you,' said Zanna as we stood on the steps outside. City workers streamed past on the pavement below us, shouldering their jackets in the August heat. 'And remember who you are,' she turned to face me. 'You are Geri Molloy, the biggest producer on the trading floor. You are the girl who bagged the elephant and this is nothing more than a temporary setback.'

Zanna's prognosis was largely correct, although I seem to have discovered some kind of biochemical resistance to sleeping pills which means I still average only 3.4 hours a night. But I am holding my

own in some quantifiable ways. I am still doing 25 million dollars of business a month with Felix. I am still the number one call to Steiner's biggest client. I have partially recovered my sense of humour. And my emotional lapses are mostly private although Zanna told me last night at Zafferano's that they are leaking into the public domain.

'You look—' she scanned me up and down, considering a range of possibilities, 'dismantled.'

'I only just got back from Hong Kong yesterday.'

'You don't look good at all.'

'I think I just need to eat,' I tugged at my sagging waistband.

'What you *need* is to cut down on this,' she tapped a scarlet nail on the side of my empty glass. 'A good night's sleep would help,' I rattled the ice cubes. But Zanna refuses to indulge my chronic insomnia, as if starving it of oxygen might make it cease to exist. I suspect she thinks I am either some sort of pharmaceutical mutant or guilty of gross exaggeration, so I have driven my debilitating frailty underground since I can't anyway account for my nocturnal horrors or the suspicion that some small rodent is scurrying round inside my chest, its sharp claws palpitating the raw muscle of my heart.

'You absolutely *have* to take that job in Hong Kong,' said Zanna, batting the waitress away before I had a chance to order another drink. 'Felix Mann is your meal ticket and it would be career suicide to turn it down, Geri.'

'But I don't want to go.'

'You've got the biggest hedge fund in Asia eating out of your hand and he wants you out there where he is. In Hong Kong. Every other sales person on the Street would be chewing their arm off for this opportunity.'

'I can do the job just as well from London.'

'Well, your number one client doesn't think so. And Felix calls the shots. You told me yourself that your competition is shipping out to Hong Kong – Merrill's, Morgan Stanley, Goldman's – they're all putting salespeople out there just to cover him.'

Zanna tucked a shiny blonde strand behind her ear and leant forward, elbows planted wide on the tabletop, staring straight at me across knitted fingers. I stopped prodding the polenta and lowered my fork.

‘I know why you don’t want to go,’ she said and I recognised her look as the precursor to uncomfortable revelations about the state of a balance sheet or, in this case, the state of my heart. I have seen her assume this position in a boardroom, telling Steiner’s clients that their multi-million dollar investment is a dog and they should ditch the stock fast before it blows up in their face. Unlike many other analysts, Zanna is happy to nail her true colours to the mast when necessary and she never shies away from delivering the tough sound bite that will send you reeling.

‘You don’t want to move to Hong Kong because of Stephen.’

‘Not true,’ I croaked but I couldn’t offer any evidence to support this plaintive denial or any convincing reason for resisting what is clearly the logical career move.

‘Oh, Geri,’ she shook her head sadly, ‘if you lose Felix Mann’s business you’re history.’ And Zanna slid her hands wide on the tabletop like she was clearing space – for what? For the wreckage I am becoming?

‘You don’t know how weird he is.’

‘What do you care how weird your client is if you’re getting all his business? For Christ’s sake, Geri, he’s not asking you to marry him. He doesn’t even expect you to sleep with him. Apparently.’

At a table across the way a woman idly skimmed her fingertip around the edge of a wine glass while the man opposite her gesticulated in full and earnest flow. Zanna sighed, loud enough to be heard above the swishing of waitresses and plate clearance and the sudden clanking in my head like an empty tin can being kicked around the walls of my skull.

‘Anyway, you won’t have a choice because the Grope will make you go. Do you really think your boss is going to let you put all that order flow at risk?’

‘Felix did say he might call him.’

Zanna checked her watch and signalled for the bill. Her Sunday night rule is bed by ten except in exceptional circumstances, which this was clearly not.

‘Now, Geri,’ she leaned back in the chair, ‘repeat after me.’ And I had to return her smile because this is Zanna’s old trick and I’m always happy to play along since I’ve discovered it is curiously therapeutic to be led by the nose.

‘Repeat after me: I will move on.’

‘I will move on.’

‘I will give up on history.’

‘I will give up on history.’

‘I will go to Hong Kong.’

‘Why does everybody think I should go?’

‘Because everyone wants the best for you,’ she shrugged. ‘And you are letting things slip. Look, I’m just saying the hard stuff, the things that other people won’t say. One day you will thank me for all my good advice.’ She laid a cool hand on mine, gave it a little squeeze. ‘I am your most effective friend.’

Zanna may well be right about the slippage since it’s never great to wake up at 5:17 a.m. and find your torso on the floor, your legs up on the couch and the dog staring down at you with that look of creased sadness that is always so unbearable, even though I know it’s not sadness at all, just a jowly looseness around his golden snout. ‘Good boy.’ I ruffle Rex’s neck fur and he pricks up his ears as if he hears someone coming. I still catch him watching the door at night, the times that Stephen used to come by after a late meeting. Sometime Rex whimpers in his sleep, a weighted comfort on my legs. Perhaps he is in a dream remembering how Stephen used to throw the tennis ball for him with the straight-armed bowl of a cricketer and he’d scabble on take-off like a cartoon dog, barrelling down the grassy slope, leaping awkwardly in the air on the bounce, tongue lolling, a little foam around his jaw. For it was

Stephen who first introduced Rex to the art of retrieval – a skill that should have been instinctive for his breed – though he preferred to fetch within a tantalizing five-foot radius and dance over the ball, a habit that Stephen, who is intimate with the attributes of good gun-dogs, always took to be an indicator of shoddy genetics. Lately I notice Rex has begun to drop the ball directly by my feet as if he has suddenly decided to demonstrate his compliance, in case it was his stubbornness that drove Stephen away, like the difficult child who suspects he may be the cause of parental separation. Or maybe he is urging me to tell Stephen, as if this transformation in Rex's skill might bring him back again and give us all another chance. He's even taken to keeping the ball in his bed at night, as if to be sure he is fully prepared for the return that Stephen is never going to make.

The alarm bleeps in the bedroom and Rex nudges my chin with his nose. I turn my head sideways and this sudden movement unleashes a shooting pain in my right temple which I recognise as the cumulative effects of dehydration, jet lag, insomnia, malnutrition and the contents of the empty bottle on the floor beside me. The clock on the stereo says 05:22 and I feel I could lie here forever, like a car stuck in the ditch, wheels spinning with no rescue in sight. And I think: maybe this is burnout, maybe my life story as investment banker is morphing into a shabby decline and fall, a blazing star in the moments before it crashes to earth. So I lie here for a while scratching Rex's head but in the end it's his persistent whining that makes me get up and take him around Pembroke Square even though his walker will be here in a couple of hours. I step out the front door and into a head spin, just make it across the street in time to throw up in the icy gutter. After that I feel well enough to stand shivering on the edge of the pavement under the yellow glow of the lamppost, watching a light snow dust the railings of the garden square, and it seems for a moment like I've stepped out of the wardrobe and into Narnia. I'm half-expecting Rex to turn into