



THE VANISHING ELEPHANT

BY DOUGLAS ALEXANDER



August Booker was in his office treading through a pool of papers when the lights went out. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Moonlight reflected off of the snow-covered campus, invading the oak-paneled office. St. Webster's was a small private college in Upstate New York; it wasn't well-known, but it did have its charm. August reached first for his coffee, but found it cold to the touch and instead grasped the engraved pewter and gold handle of his cane. Annoyed that he even needed a cane at age thirty-six, Booker stood, interrupting the menagerie of shadows being cast over the wall opposite the window and reached into the inside jacket pocket of his suit to check the time.

The phone in his hand vibrated just as 6:14 pm flashed onto the screen. "Booker," he answered.

"Professor Booker," the female voice on the other end started, "you wouldn't happen to still be on campus would you?"

Knowing the voice belonged to Sandra Tanner, the Vice President of Academics, he hesitated before answering. A few options laid out parallel in his mind. *Option 1: Tell the truth and risk getting pulled into whatever ridiculous faculty mixer or unnecessary meeting was occurring. Option 2: Lie and claim to have left for the day already, but risk being asked to return. Option 3: Create an elaborate explanation that entailed oversea travel, a possible kidnapping, and ransom demands that the school couldn't possibly afford.*

"Professor," the voice interrupted his thoughts, "It's rather important."

Sighing to himself, Booker made the responsible choice, although Option 3 was extremely attractive. "Vice President Tanner, how good to hear from you. I actually happen to be in my office as we speak. A very dark office to be honest."

"The blackout is partly what I'm calling about." As she said the words, the lights flickered and then came back on.

"Perfect. Problem solved." Booker answered hopefully. "Well, it was great to hear from you—"

"That's not why I called you," Sandra interrupted curtly. "We have a significant incident over here in the Kevin Hall Art Gallery. I'll see you in a few minutes." The call ended abruptly.

Shit, the professor thought, looking out at the snow.

While many of the buildings on St. Webster's campus were turn-of-the-century and half-covered in ivy, there were also modern buildings that had annexed parts of the historical campus over the last thirty years. The Kevin Hall Art Gallery was one of those modernized concrete and glass aberrations. Booker assumed it had been named after some regionally-famous alumni, in order to attract the donations of high-class benefactors who had a soft spot for local talent.

August found himself entering through a doorway that was constructed of double glass, sliding panels. Heat assaulted his face and exterminated any lingering cold from the New York winter. Two security guards were hovering inside the entry. He quickly showed his college identification and was ushered through. Pulling off his overcoat, August hung it over the nearest sculpture irreverently as he continued into the gallery, his cane tapping on the tile as he favored his left leg slightly.

"Professor Booker," Dr. Tanner's voice came from across the large gallery.

As she closed the distance, August scanned the room. Ten people not counting security guards and wait staff. *A small affair*, he pondered. Most of the attendees were in black-tie apparel, huddled together in small groups like penguins. No one was looking at the art. "Vice President Tanner, what seems to be the issue here?"

"We have a major problem," she hissed the words beneath her breath, keeping them between her and the professor. "During the blackout, the Bhopal Idol was stolen." Her eyes were large and intense, making her middle-aged, but still striking, face look unnatural.

"What is a Bhopal Idol, and why do we have one?" Booker asked, trying not to roll his eyes.

"It is an extremely expensive, rare artifact from India," Dr. Tanner shouted as loud as one can in a whisper. "It is on tour through the Collegiate Arts Foundation. And now it's missing!"

She waved August over to a barrel of a man with an impressive tuft of hair trying its best to escape his upper lip. "This is the campus Security Chief, Tom Richter."

Tom stuck out his baseball mitt of a hand. He was stretching the acceptable limits of polyester trying to stay in a uniform that was obviously made for someone two sizes smaller. "Mr. Booker. We'd appreciate any help you could provide with this mess."

There it was. The reason he had been asked here. August was getting irritated with people calling him every time they thought they lost something or every time a crime had been committed. "Did you call the police?" Booker paused, then added irritably, "I'm not an FBI agent anymore. You all know that."

The administrator tussled her mousey hair nervously and pulled both men into a football huddle. "Listen this would be best handled 'in-house.' If we could find the idol before anyone outside of this room knows it's missing, it would save this institution a grave blemish on its reputation." Seeing the uncooperative look on Booker's face, she added, "I would be very grateful, Professor. Just take a look around. If you don't find anything in thirty minutes, we will call the Berksville Police. Chief Richter will assist in anything you need, just keep it quiet."

"Why are there only a few people in here?" the professor asked.

"It was a very private sneak-peak at the idol for the benefactors who are the most dedicated to higher education," Tanner stated proudly.

Translation, Booker thought, *the people with the deepest pockets*. He sighed. All he wanted was a little peace. Suddenly that stack of papers in his office didn't look so bad. At last, he caved. "Fine. I'll take a stroll through the gallery. No guarantees."

Leaning harder on his cane than he needed to, Booker looked at the ten other people crowded near the other end of the gallery. "How do you know this idol is still here?"

"The lights went out," Richter began, "and I turned on my flashlight and immediately checked the exhibits. I saw the elephant thing was missing from the display." He pointed to an empty white pedestal. "We locked down the whole gallery. No one has left."

"Elephant thingy?" August questioned.

The Vice President displayed an event program. On the cover was a picture of a pink statue in the shape of a man with an elephant head. The eyes, ears, and other parts of the idol were embossed with sapphires. "The Bhopal Idol," she pointed out.

"Was it just sitting on the display?" Booker directed his question to the security chief.

"No, it was encased in safety glass," the large man replied, leading Booker towards the far end of the room and the scene of the crime.

"What the hell are you doing?" August shouted, seeing one of the security guards sweeping up glass and debris from around the pedestal. The thin guard dumped it all in a trash can before turning to find out what all the fuss was about. "You have got to be kidding me." August stared at the chief in disbelief. "Nobody on your staff knows how to preserve a crime scene?"

Shrugging in defense, Richter offered, "We mostly deal with parking tickets and pot smokers."

Booker glanced down into the trash bin, it had been used previously. Food, paper plates, and napkins were jumbled in with what evidence there had been. "Contaminated. All of it. Useless now." He looked to Tanner. "You're not making this easy you know."

"Professor," a girl's voice chimed in. Snaking in between the officers, one of the wait staff for the event sought Booker out and presented herself to the unofficial detective. Barely standing five feet high, the college-age girl was in the white blouse/black pants universal uniform of wait staff everywhere. Her long dark ponytail swung from side to side when she held out her hand to present a plastic baggy.

"I saw the guard coming with the broom, so I collected what I could from the broken glass around the display." She looked at the bag in her hands for a second. "Sorry, sandwich bags were all I could find in the catering cart."

Looking pleased, Booker stepped forward. To the young girl's surprise, he didn't look at the bag but instead began to inspect her. Leaning on the titanium cane as he walked, he circled the waitress with shark-like intensity. "You're from a middle-class family, both parents work hard. You're quick thinking and a problem solver. I'm guessing the middle child."

His pace slowed as he circled back to face her. "Cheerleader or gymnast?" He questioned presumptuously.

"Both." She answered but gave him nothing else.

"You're a student here at St. Webster's?"

She nodded.

"And in one of my classes. Criminology Seminar, correct?"

She grinned. "I wouldn't expect you to notice me; there are over seventy students in that lecture."

"Oh, but you see, that's my curse. I notice everything." Booker placed the cane directly in front of him and closed both hands over its polished handle.

The young student turned to look at the other wait staff, a tall, thin girl with blonde hair. "See Tonya? I told you he was amazing!"

The other girl looked wide-eyed in embarrassment for her friend, who didn't appear to care who heard her admiration. "Kara—"

"Kara Allister?" Booker interrupted. "Of course. That makes sense. I particularly appreciated your paper on sociopaths working on Wall Street. Many people don't really understand the nuances of antisocial personality disorders." Kara became a thermometer, a blush rising from beneath her collar, up her neck, and across her face.

"I don't get it." Vice President Tanner stated, befuddled. "How did you know all of that about her?"

"It's what I used to do. Being a true detective is not like those ridiculous police procedurals you see on TV. It's not based on so-called 'gut instinct' either. I rely instead on the raw art of deduction. I observe and make educated inferences based on those observations," Booker explained. "For instance, Kara addressed me as 'Professor.' I'm not wearing a sign or name badge, so I deduced she must be a student because she recognized me as faculty. I then took one more inference that she was one of mine, due to her knowledge of how to preserve the evidence that the *professional* security decided to throw away."

He glared at Richter and his staff disapprovingly. "I assumed she was in my largest class, based purely on probability and the fact that I did not immediately recognize her face. Now, what student would want to work a stuffy, private event of a dozen people on a Friday night? Only one that would have to because she is working to pay for school."

"And the cheerleader analysis?" The administrator was intrigued.

"I just simply observed her body," Booker said nonchalantly. Kara's face returned to a not-so-subtle cherry.

He immediately noticed her embarrassment and pushed forward to explain. "What I mean to say is that she walks on her toes with a bounce. That comes from years of training oneself to point the toes. There are two disciplines where that is essential: dancing and cheerleading. Again, my analysis of her body

structure told me that she was most likely not a dancer.” He looked her up and down again. “You have too much muscle, but I assume you know that.”

Kara nodded and brashly looked down at her chest. “And too much cleavage,” she added with a giggle.

“So, Madam Vice President, I was left with cheerleader or gymnast. Her shoulder, arm, and thigh muscles were strong evidence.” He tapped the cane twice on the firm tile, emphasizing his point.

“Now if you don’t mind Dr. Tanner, could you introduce me to our illustrious guests?” August began heading towards the small group of penguins. He stopped abruptly and turned to look at Kara. “You coming, kid?” She eagerly bounced over to join him.

In order to cross the room, the small group of amateur investigators had to circumvent a fifteen-foot monstrosity. The sculpture was a ten-foot horseshoe magnet, hanging by a chain over a mockup of planet Earth, which the trees and greenery had been sculpted to look like they were being pulled off the globe by the magnet. GREED was written in big block letters on the magnet.

“Kind of superficial if you ask me,” the cheerleader remarked. “Lazy art.”

“Hmmm.” Booker shook his head as they moved to the other side where the guests were standing.

“They can’t keep us here all night. I have dinner plans after this,” a tall man with perfectly-quaffed grey hair complained as Dr. Tanner and Booker walked up, followed closely by the lively Kara.

“Excuse me, Mr. McPherson, I would like you to meet one of our newest faculty members, Mr. August Booker,” the administrator announced, “previously of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Jonathan McPherson, of the Upper Berksville McPhersons, looked interested at the man being introduced to him. “Tiffany honey.” He continued to glare at Booker while addressing the red-haired woman squeezed into an evening dress. “This is Sandra’s FBI agent. Remember, she was going on about her at dinner last week?” The redhead shrugged noncommittally. McPherson put his hand out to Booker in a business-like manner.

Booker shook it. “I assure you, Mr. McPherson, we will not be holding you up much longer. As you might have noticed,” he pointed to the empty display, “Dr. Tanner has misplaced her expensive Indian relic. So I have been summoned to help find it.”

“Quite excellent,” the man said approvingly, “and call me Jack.” He motioned for the other guests to come closer. Jack obviously carried some sway among the group. “How old are you Agent Booker? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s Professor Booker now. I left the Bureau, and I’m thirty-six.”

“From all the fuss Sandra here has been making about you joining the faculty, I thought you would be older,” the wealthy man declared to everyone in earshot.

This was a dominance play. Booker had seen it many times in Washington. Whenever an alpha male thinks another threat is looming, they must put the offending party in its place. As always, Booker responded with the exact opposite of what was expected. “Coincidentally, I thought your wife would be older too.” He indicated the red-head who was maybe half of Jack’s age, conservatively. The room went

silent. Kara covered her mouth to keep from laughing. The guests looked from Jack to August and back again, waiting to see what would transpire.

Jack burst out laughing, "I like this one, Sandra! You should keep him around." He threw his arm around August's shoulders. "Let me introduce you to the group."

Before moving on with introductions, Booker turned and whispered to his new assistant. "Kid, collect any pens from Dr. Tanner, all the security guards, and you and your friend Tonya." Kara nodded, fully attentive. "Then bring them to me." He indicated with a tilt of his head.

Kara began to open her mouth questioningly, but thought better of it and started her mission.

Booker stepped back into the conversation. Jack was talking with a small man in round-rimmed, tinted, glasses.

"Professor," Jack started, "this is Benedict Handson. He is a big art lover. His family has donated many of the pieces in this collection." The new man shook hands with Booker who took a quick glance over Mr. Handson.

"My father actually knew Kevin Hall, the gallery's namesake." He puffed out his chest.

"Of course, I would expect so." Booker moved to the next person. "And this is?"

A broad-shouldered gentleman with a jewel-topped walking stick that matched his silk tuxedo was standing with a dark-haired woman in a modest, but expensive evening gown. "These are the Sullivans," Jack announced. "Harry owns the only chain of jewelry stores in town," he pointed to Mrs. Sullivan, "which is why Janet married his ugly mug." Mr. Sullivan laughed a deep, hearty gust of air, and his wife slapped playfully at Mr. McPherson.

"Oh Jack," she teased, "you're just jealous you couldn't get me."

Visually inspecting Booker's cane, Henry commented, "I like your walking stick. It's streamlined and classy."

"And functional." Booker rubbed his left thigh.

Henry nodded. "These are our children, Henry Jr., and Phoebe." He indicated the two teens glued to their phones behind him.

"This is lame, Dad. I thought we were going to the movies." Henry Jr. complained without looking up.

Phoebe glanced up briefly. Seeing the handsome professor standing in front of her parents, she put her phone to her side. "I'm Phoebe Sullivan." She batted her eyes. "It is *exhilarating* meeting you, Professor," she added in a half gasping tone that Booker assumed she thought was seductive. It reminded him of an asthma attack. Her mother elbowed her and gave her a look.

Booker felt someone at his side and pivoted to see Kara, hands spread, holding half a dozen writing utensils. He examined them quickly. "Nice job, kid. Throw them in that garbage can over there." Obediently, she zipped away. He returned to the group. "I believe there are only two people I haven't met."

Jack steered him to the last two men. One was in a burgundy tuxedo and the other was in a plain traditional black ensemble. "This is Todd Sanford and Terry Lawson. They are...roommates," he said uncomfortably.

"What Jack means," Todd clarified, "is that we are Berksville's high society token gay couple."

Jack cleared his throat, "I meant no disrespect."

"We know you big burly bear, you just haven't caught up to the times." Todd booped Jack's nose, and the alpha male stepped back in shock.

"It is good to meet you." Booker shook their hands and then spoke loudly for the whole group to hear his instructions. "I appreciate all of you being patient with our delay. I promise we will allow you to leave in just a few moments." Dr. Tanner didn't look so confident.

Booker used his jacket sleeve to clear the top of the pedestal of any glass shards. He summoned Tonya with a flick of his hand. "Kara's friend, do you have a piece of paper?"

The skinny girl dug through her purse and produced a journal sized spiral notebook. "Thank you." Booker took it and opened it to a blank page. "Now all I need from you, our valued guests, is to sign this sheet."

They looked around, a few of them at Jack for guidance. Ever the leader, McPherson asked, "Just sign it?"

"Yes, sir. Think of it as an attendance sheet." Booker made a show of searching his pockets. "We seem to be out of pens, so just use your own."

One-by-one, the guests stepped up to the pedestal. Jack looked to his wife, who extracted a ball-point pen from her purse, and the two signed. All four Sullivans approached. Henry pulled a fountain pen from his pocket and signed for himself and the family, glancing at Booker to see if that was okay. The professor just nodded approval. Todd and Terry were next, Terry pulled out a pen and scrolled his name and his partner's. Lastly, Benedict Handson pulled a unique gunmetal grey pen from his pocket and signed his name.

"That's an interesting pen." Booker admired.

Benedict slipped it back into his jacket.

"In fact, it's titanium I believe," Booker pressed on. "I know a thing or two about the metal." He held up his cane. "Superior strength and excessively light."

The group looked around, confused by Booker's odd change of topic. "I've seen those pens before," Booker said. "They are made for travelers to carry in their vehicle. In the case of an emergency, the titanium is strong enough to strike a window in a disabled car, breaking the safety glass." The professor held up the sandwich bag containing safety glass. "It leaves a spider-web pattern similar in nature to this."

The benefactors all stepped away from Benedict. "This is absurd," he protested. "I have no need to steal anything. Search me, where would I be hiding a sculpture?" He held his hands out at his sides.

“Now that you mention it, Mr. Handson, we don’t know that. I mean we know that your family doesn’t have a need, but at first glance, I noticed your rented tuxedo. There is a small tag inside the cuff— a dead giveaway for someone who intends on returning their wardrobe for a much-needed refund. Also, your cufflinks, unlike the other gentlemen’s in the room, are knockoffs. Not very good ones, either, I might add.”

Booker tapped the cane against the floor. “No, if we were to look into it, my guess is that your father hasn’t given you free access to the family wealth.” He shrugged. “So, your family may not be in need, but *you* are. And as Jack has told us, you are an avid art aficionado, so you know the worth of the Bhopal Idol, and you probably also know some discreet buyers.”

Booker then made a motion toward his eyes. “And those green tinted glasses, my guess is they enhance in the dark. Almost as if you knew there was going to be a blackout.” He looked to Dr. Tanner and Chief Richter. “Small details when seen separately, but when put together, you seem quite suspicious.”

“Even if that’s true,” Chief Richter began, “how could he have kicked the power? I saw him standing right here when the lights went out.”

Benedict seemed to relax at the security man’s question.

“Well, that’s where his accomplice came in.” August watched the small bespectacled man tense up again. “Chief, if you wouldn’t mind summoning that guard who was sweeping up the evidence?”

“Daniels?” Richter asked. At Booker’s nodding, he called for the guard, who rushed over.

“Yes, sir?” Daniels reported.

Before the chief could say anything, Booker asked, “Where were you when the power went out?”

The guard looked hesitantly to his supervisor, uncertain if he had to answer. Chief Richter just said, “Go on son. Answer the man’s question.”

“I was doing rounds near the library,” he stated. “Then a call came in over the radio for all guards to come right here.” Daniels looked to the ground.

“Anyone with you at the library, Mr. Daniels?” Booker continued. “If not, that’s okay. We can just verify it with GPS lock. The program on the dispatcher’s computer tracks the location of each guard by their radio. I’m sure it will show you near the library.”

Daniels looked unsure. “Well, I could have finished the library. I may have been closer to the gymnasium,” he said.

“Isn’t that where the power relay for this side of campus is Chief?” Booker tried to sound as if it were an innocent question.

Chief Richter looked hard at his guard. “Yeah, the relay is on the side of the gymnasium.”

“And then you rushed over here and proceeded, without prompting, to clean up any evidence of the crime?” Booker grinned but didn’t wait for an answer. “How much was Handson going to cut you in

on? Fifty percent? That seems fair, I mean the job couldn't have gone down without the power outage. The risk was on you. Unless, of course, he knew you wouldn't be smart enough to want your equal share."

The guard had a moment of realization, and then angrily addressed Benedict. "Thirty-five percent? You greedy son-of-a-bitch! You hear what he said? I was essential."

"Shut up!" Benedict spat.

"And there it is." Booker grinned. "I'll be here all week, folks."

Richter grabbed Daniels while other guards detained Benedict Handson.

"My suggestion would be not to call the police." The professor looked at Dr. Tanner. "You said you wanted this kept quiet. Police intervention would bring attention to the fact that you almost lost a nearly priceless cultural relic."

The administrator was aghast. "So they get to go free?"

"Well, Daniels is fired, I would suspect." Booker looked at Richter who nodded in agreement. "And how long will it take for the rest of you to spread the word around social circles that Benedict here is a thief?"

"I would say by the end of the week, he won't be able to show his face at any party in town," Jack answered brightly.

"And I'm sure his daddy won't be too pleased with him either," Kara scoffed.

The Vice President still didn't look convinced. Booker continued, "Truthfully, there was never really a theft, only a lame attempt."

"What about the Bhopal Idol?" Dr. Tanner asked.

"It never left the gallery," August answered. "Hey, kid, are you still any good at gymnastics?" He asked Kara.

"All-state three years in a row!" she declared proudly.

"I figured as much. Climb up to the top of that horrible magnet." Booker pointed to the aberration in the center of the room.

Kara kicked off her shoes and was ascending the sculpture before the near-hyperventilating administrator could stop her. She reached the chain and pulled herself up to straddle the arch of the giant magnet. Tugging with both hands, she freed something.

"Professor Booker," Kara called down. Triumphantly, she raised the elephant-headed statue in the air.

Booker addressed the group. "When we walked around this sculpture, I couldn't help but see the magnet. That's when I thought about the photo of the Idol."

Kara gingerly descended, protecting the statue in the crook of one elbow.

“It reminded me of a common mineral that can be found in sedimentary and igneous rocks. Hematite. Hematite is a type of iron ore, which gives it two interesting properties. First, it tends to have a soft pink hue, like the statue. Second...” Booker paused. He took the Bhopal Idol and held it to the side of the GREED sculpture. Removing his hand, the relic stayed attached to the side. “Second, it is magnetic.”

He faced Benedict. “I have to say it was a good plan. The lights went out, you used your pen to break the glass, and then as everyone was scrambling in the dark, you just tossed the Idol over the magnet, knowing it would stick.”

Booker tapped his cane. “I would have done it the same way, though I may have chosen a more adept accomplice. I assume you were planning to have Mr. Daniels, swing by on his rounds later tonight to pick it up after everyone assumed it was gone.”

The professor pried the pink elephant-god off the side of the magnet and handed it to the Vice President. “No harm done.”

As they walked out into the cold winter night, August Booker pulled on his overcoat. “This isn’t going to be an occurring thing, Dr. Tanner.” He tucked his cane in his elbow and blew into his cupped hands. “I left law enforcement to find a more relaxing life.”

“I know,” she said apologetically, “But you really saved my ass tonight. I guess I owe you one.”

The professor took a few steps and then looked back. “I want to begin an advanced Criminology program.”

“Fantastic, I don’t see any problem with that.” She said expecting a bigger request.

“Good. Now, let’s talk about class size.” August grinned mischievously. “I cannot have too many unqualified students registered in my advanced courses... but I do believe that one Miss Kara Allister needs to be enrolled.”

Follow the further adventures of August Booker and his students in the upcoming novel, *Killer Curriculum*, available in August through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and anywhere you buy books.