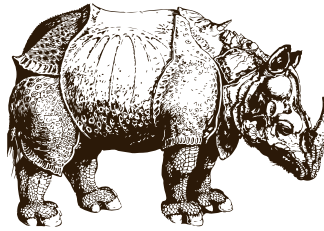


The Rhino Keeper

A Novel



Jillian Forsberg

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Prologue

Andrea

North Carolina

2022



Andrea shut the car door as hunting dogs brayed, their chorus of howls a discord. Her soft brown boots hit gravel in front of a white-columned manor. She tugged at her second-hand yellow sweater and stretched her legs from the hours-long drive. Jake lifted her overnight bag from her hatchback and carried their luggage toward the house. Waving pampas grass and trees dripping with southern moss lined the long drive.

The house's wraparound porch was golden-lit by black sconces. It was Thanksgiving Day, time for dinner. The last rays of the North Carolina sun sank below the house, and a rippling chill brushed Andrea's cheeks. The place looked like the cover of a luxurious Southern charm magazine. Her palms tingled. She didn't realize just how wealthy Jake's family was until now.

Jake's house was an eight-hour drive from campus. A copper touch of autumn had waved through the trees on the postcard-like road trip. She was glad to be out of the car, excited to meet Jake's family, incredibly excited to see the heirloom engagement ring his mother had retrieved from the family's safety deposit box. She grinned at the thought, tucked her dark hair behind an ear. The hunting dogs continued howling behind the willow trees lining the long, winding driveway. Jake whistled with two fingers in his mouth, and they quieted, whimpering.

"Sorry," he said. "Wild beasts."

Andrea slowly followed him up the steep steps, taking in the three-story manor.

"1775," he said, tossing his honey-brown curls off his forehead.

"What?"

"1775. The house was built in 1775."

Andrea's mind flickered. Many things happened in that year. Ready to spout facts and historical figures' names like a card catalog, her brain opened up. So did the wide navy-blue door. Behind her, a flagpole clinked in the wind. She glanced at it, recognizing the markings of a twisted Confederate flag. The dogs cried.

Jake waited by the door, beckoning Andrea in. She quickly stepped inside. A chill finger rippled up her spine. *A Confederate flag?*

A thin blonde woman wearing a magenta floor-length gown and dangling earrings rushed forward to embrace her, squishing a tiny fox-colored dog held in her arms. She smelled of bourbon and Chanel perfume. Andrea felt a wave of nausea.

"So nice to finally meet you," the woman said. The dog squirmed, and she set it down. It wagged its curled-up tail as Andrea knelt to pet it, angling her face to the door to see Jake hauling the luggage. The twisted flag around its pole pulsed in the dusk.

"Don't worry about Primrose. She's a mess, just like me," said the woman. "Jake's told me so little about your past, Andrea, only that you're also a history major. Tell me everything about where you come from."

The dreaded question of the past, so quickly? Andrea opened her mouth to answer, to reveal that she was fatherless and poor, the daughter of an artist, college paid by government grants and student loans, but Jake grabbed her hand.

"Let's get her settled, Mom, before the interrogation begins, alright?"

"Don't patronize me, young man," she said, voice slurred by liquor. She bent to pick up the little dog. Primrose growled, showing the whites of her eyes. Jake's mother frowned and let her be. "Andrea, you must be so tired. How about you head into the parlor while we get your bags upstairs? I'll get my dear husband and join you with cocktails."

Andrea was ushered to a darkened room nearby, passing a grand staircase. Her boots clicked on shining hardwood floors, and behind her, delicate paw taps from Primrose revealed the dog followed. Jake turned the light on, Andrea's small suitcase in his hands.

"See you in a second," he said. He kissed her briefly on the cheek, leaving a lingering scent of cool cologne, and rushed up the white-banistered stairs. Primrose sat at her feet, pink tongue lolling.

Andrea realized she hadn't been allowed a single word and pursed her lips. She exhaled and bent to the little dog, expecting a growl. There wasn't one. Andrea picked her up and the bell on her collar jingled.

"I wonder if the dogs outside have pink collars with silver bells, eh, Primrose?" she asked. Primrose's tongue darted toward Andrea. "My mom has a service dog that looks like you, girl."

Andrea then turned to the room and gasped, startled. Taxidermy animals loomed from the walls. Primrose wheezed. Animals only seen in zoos stared back at Andrea with glass eyes—a lioness’s mouth was open, teeth bared. Primitive-looking wooden nails held a crocodile skin to the wall, essentially crucified. Andrea’s heart beat rapidly, body tingling with sweat. She put the dog down. A half-dozen deer mounts lined the wall below the coffered ceiling.

Brown leather furniture, animal-skin rugs. The smell of hides and dust and sour fear filled her nose and mouth. A ringing sounded in her ears. Primrose pawed at her.

There was a framed picture on the wall. Jake. A massive rifle by his side. He and his dad leaned into each other, kneeling. In front of them was a male lion, eyes closed, tongue out. Blood pooled on the dirt below. Bile rose to Andrea’s throat. The male lion’s taxidermy mount stood in the corner of the room, illuminated by a single dramatic spotlight from the ceiling.

Jake’s feet sounded on the staircase. She rushed to the couch.

“Y’all right?” he said.

“Not...not really.”

“Yeah, I thought this might bug you some, but they’re dead already, see?” Jake tapped the horns of a black water buffalo.

“Bug me some?” Andrea trembled. “Jake, this is a nightmare to me.”

“People’ve hunted for thousands of years, girl,” he said, sitting beside her. She scooted away. Primrose leaped up between them and placed a paw on her lap.

“This isn’t thousands of years ago, Jake; this is this century. I... I can’t be here.”

“This is my family’s stuff, Andrea. My grandfather brought some of these home decades ago. They’re antiques now, you love antiques.”

“Jake, they’re endangered animals, and you’ve got them hanging on your living room walls.”

“This isn’t the living room.”

Andrea scoffed. “What the hell...?”

“This is the parlor. The living room is across the foyer.”

She blinked at him, eyebrows knit together.

“You really don’t understand, do you?”

“Relax,” he said, smirking. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

From his pocket, he pulled a baby-blue ring box. If her heart raced before, now it was a jackhammer. There was a silver “A” embroidered on the velvet box top. He opened it. It was the ring he’d told her about: his fourth great-grandmother’s, sparkling and white, made before the Civil War.

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Just then, his mother walked in, tray full of cocktails, followed by the handsome, tan-faced man from the hunting photo. They both grinned from ear to ear.

Jake stood from the couch and dropped down to one knee. Primrose growled. Jake was proposing to Andrea in a room full of nightmares.

Her mouth went dry when she tried to speak. The room began to spin. Jake spoke but Andrea's muffled heartbeat filled her ears. Primrose began barking at Jake, still down on his knee, beautiful toothy smile flashing brightly. In one hand he held the ring, and with the other he swept the little dog onto the floor. She landed with a thud and a whimper, silver bell tinkling.

Andrea rose from the couch and set her fists. She could not quell her trembling. She pulled her car keys from her thrifted purse and inhaled through her nose. She looked at Jake, and at his eager-eyed parents.

"No," she said, her voice strong. She longed to scream but ran from the room. Eyes bored into her back, though she could not tell if the feeling of being watched came from Jake and his parents, or the ghosts of the animals hanging on the walls.



Chapter 1

Andrea
Leiden, The Netherlands



Andrea sat on a sheetless twin bed, feeling the now normal stomach-churning ache of missing Jake. Her analytical brain knew she didn't actually miss *him*. She missed who she thought he was. Her brain understood why she left him, though her heart still ached. A dizzy wave of jet lag consumed her, and she squinted, head pounding as she took in her dorm room. Her new place was a campus apartment at Leiden University, with cold tiled floors and a cracked, silvery-paned cathedral-type window. A relic of a writing desk took up a quarter of the space, bolted to the floor with stripped screws.

What kind of college was this, to leave a once-valuable eighteenth-century antique in a dorm room?

Andrea embraced the weird. Traveling across the world alone felt necessary to rid herself of everything from her past. Her mother told her to apply for the semester abroad project in a series of relentless but loving phone calls and texts. Out of a thousand applicants, she was chosen. The impressive history work on her resume got her here, helping her escape the rumors on Charleston's small campus. *Did you hear how Jake and Andrea broke up over Thanksgiving break? She ran out of the house before they carved the turkey!*

The rumors hadn't caught up to the proposal. Andrea wondered if the other girls on campus, given the opportunity, would have said yes to the ring despite it all. She couldn't move forward with the relationship, knowing what awaited her future and shrouded his past.

Andrea tried to remember what people told her about recovering from jet lag. Stay up? Sleep? Coffee? Her phone dinged, battery dying. She found her charger and a plug-in, then cursed under her breath. The prongs wouldn't fit. She had buried her European converter plug in her checked bag.

She hauled her suitcase to the edge of the bed and unzipped it. The bag toppled off, contents tumbling out. The same yellow sweater she wore to Thanksgiving dinner was on top. A tuft of Primrose's fur was stuck to the sleeve. *The only nice family member*, Andrea thought. She picked up the sweater and threw it in the corner.

She rifled through her clothes and toiletries, sending the converter plug clattering under the writing desk. It was partly visible between the shallow arch of the floor and the claw foot leg. Andrea dropped down and cautiously slid her hand into the narrow gap, a dry film of dust coating her fingers.


Pulling on the charger did no good. It was wrapped around something. Using her dying phone's flashlight, Andrea saw it was caught on a small metal lever, flashing bronze. She wiggled the charger cord out of its grasp. Curious, Andrea pushed the metal piece upward into a slot. A gentle click sounded.

She slid out from under the desk and splayed her hands out, feeling the warm-wood surface. The thing was once beautiful with hinges, a locked front piece, and drawers, now scratched from years of student use. It was helpful even if it took up too much space. There was no way it would fit through the door. Who had bolted it down, and why?

Did the click mean something moved? This was the kind of desk seen on Antiques Roadshow—full of hidden compartments and secret drawers. Silver coins from the Dutch East India Company in a velvet pouch, pulled from a secret compartment, flickered in her mind. But the only thing out of place was a slender wooden column.

She slid out the column carefully. It was a narrow box, far too small for a pouch of coins, but it wasn't empty. Inside was a yellowed document covered in scrolling brown script—an artifact—a gorgeously archaic one. Andrea's heart pounded.

Andrea carefully unrolled the ancient crumbling parchment with trembling hands, desperate to read it.



Chapter 2
Douwemout van der Meer
Calcutta, India
1740



Douwemout van der Meer's palms sweated. It was his first time at his commander's house—a gleaming white palace inside and out, the porticos and open-air rooms surrounded by a palm-heavy garden. It was a stark contrast to his small, temporary apartment.

The mansion was furnished in a European fashion: imported French furniture with delicate legs and velvet cushions, walls decorated with fine Indian chintz tapestries. The drawing room was stifling despite the open archways. Jan Sichterman rose from a spindly-legged chair, bowing in greeting.

“Captain van der Meer. Come, it's cooler in the garden.” He ushered Douwe outside.

A Dutchman in a white wig was a strange creature to behold in the exotics of Calcutta. Sichterman dripped with sweat in a waistcoat, linen shirt, and deep blue velvet doublet. Even in late November the sun drenched the jungle city, the opposite of the late fall climate of their native Netherlands. Douwe observed his commander, mimicking his gestures to fit in. It was the first time he'd seen him without his Dutch East India Trading Company medal, usually strung about his neck during formal speeches, indicating his position of power.

Sichterman was in charge of all of the Dutchmen and their trade in Bengal. The VOC was the largest company in the world. Douwe captained one ship, the *Knappenhof*, a colorful East Indiaman that hauled 650 tons of trade goods back and forth from India to Europe, South Africa to Batavia, and onward to Japan.

Jewels, spices, shoes, fabric, and silver jewelry created a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors in the hull of Douwe's ship. Stacks of fabrics and silks, specially selected for his European customers, softened the ship's dark

stores. The weavers made magic in India, and the fabric was sent to the finest tailors in Europe, who fawned over the florals and scrolling patterns.

The coins Douwe earned were stamped on one side with the Ver-eenigde Oostindische Compagnie's initials: VOC. On the other side was a lion roaring over a striped flag. The lion was a warning—the VOC was the apex predator of the seas. No other beast dare challenge it and survive.

Fabric was a common trade good for the company, but Douwe thrived in his specialty: delivering exotic creatures from around the world to European masters. While the hulls of the *Knappenhof* were stacked with fine goods and fragrant spices, above decks was the smell of livestock and the rattling cages of beasts. He was responsible for the trade and care of these creatures, great and small.

"Thank you for the invitation today, Captain. Your home is impressive." The sun made them squint, the garden path bright.

"Tell me, Van der Meer, why are you in Calcutta?"

"Sir, surely you don't mean I brought the *Knappenhof* here by mistake?"

"You are not present at social activities. You stay for months, I see you twice for your papers, and you are gone again with a full ship and a deck crawling with animals."

"Yes, sir," Douwe said. He hesitated.

"Do you not find yourself longing for more, Captain?" Sichterman said.

"I find fulfillment in my work," said Douwe. "Especially the deck of animals."

Sichterman humphed.

"Do you know why I am in Calcutta, Captain?"

"Commander?" Their boots sank into newly laid gravel.

"Thirty years ago, I won a duel," Sichterman said. "I was born to nobility but fled when I killed another man. My father managed to get me on with the VOC before the body hit the ground. I did not ever desire to live here."

Douwe's mouth was dry. He slicked back his chestnut hair, hustling to keep pace with Sichterman, who was significantly taller.

"The duel ended in my favor, and yet I was punished. Not unlike our work—even if we succeed and make our shipments and the coin, we are punished by the sea, Africa's cape, or India herself."

Native palms spilled over the walkways despite a gardener's obvious attempts to tame the place to formality. A fountain gurgled in the middle, its brightly colored tile shimmering with water. A banyan tree shaded a distant corner of the garden, innumerable arches mimicking the

chalk-white mansion's curves. Bright floral smells filled the garden, and Douwe closed his eyes in the glaring sun. The gravel dusted his brown leather boots, stained with sea salt.

"I do not long to live in India, either, sir," Douwe said. "I want to see more of Europe. Rome, Paris, Vienna. I have lived longer in India and Africa than in my own bloodlands."

"Were you a boy when you joined?" Sichterman asked.

"Fifteen, dropped off in Amsterdam by my father. I begged to go. Now I've spent more of my life at sea than on land. I suppose I thought my career would be short. That I'd meet a woman and settle. Yet here I am twenty years later, and my only woman is a ship called the *Knappenhof*."

"Well, she's a true beauty. And you, a true careerman," Sichterman said. "Though you can make a home here, if you like, or one in the Netherlands."

Douwe pursed his lips. He did not stay long enough in any port to allow the rocking of the ocean to leave his body, let alone call a place home. He opened his mouth and shut it abruptly. Sichterman led him onward through the garden and a flickering thought entered Douwe's head: how would it feel to own a place like this and stay?

"I have invited you here today because I have a cargo that I can no longer support, Van der Meer, and a proposition for you."

Douwe's heart quickened. He straightened, hazel eyes scanning Sichterman's sea-tanned face.

"Your experience with animals is well-known," Sichterman said.

Douwe felt more comfortable around animals than people. Plus, money was abundant when taking on animal cargo, even if it was easy to get attached. On his last voyage, a flock of parrots and a small white-faced monkey became hard to part with. Pigs and chickens were kept for food, goats and cows for milk, and, if needed, slaughtered. But the creatures delivered to noble families to fill their menageries made him feel important. Horses, camels, peacocks, and monkeys departed the decks and entered royal households, filling Douwe with a sense of wonder upon delivery. He was responsible for the rarest creatures in Europe, even if he was the middleman.

"I enjoy the transport of livestock and have a cat around my apartment," Douwe said, smiling cautiously.

"I've heard cats on the *Knappenhof* were not keen to leave your lap. And the monkey meant for Louis XV grew rather attached to you."

The monkey was fun to be around, and the ratter cat was useful against the plague of vermin. She gave birth to five kittens in the cargo hold and the crew grew fond of them in the six-month journey. Douwe loved them, especially the black mother cat he named Betsy.

“Helpful along the way, cats,” said Sichterman.

Douwe did not respond. They neared the edge of the gardens. Palms and heavily burdened fruit trees filled the beds. Outside the stone garden wall was a stable and a small paddock for grazing.

“I have come across a creature that is not as helpful as a cat. I know you’ll want to see it.”

Sichterman kept Arabians transported across the Himalayas the year prior. They were specimens befitting a king—their shining coats caught the eye of every passerby in Calcutta during the nightly airings on the concourse where Dutchmen socialized. Surprisingly, the horses were inside in the heat. The paddock was occupied.

A gray mottled monster grazed there. Douwe’s heartbeat echoed in his head. He had patted an African elephant and held a white-faced monkey. Swaying camels draped in golden tassels carried his goods in the streets of Calcutta. Across the world, he saw wild beasts and things living in the sea unknown to land-bound men. He did not recognize the beast in front of him. The book of Job echoed, recited in the lofted church of his home in Leiden, Holland:

Look at Behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength it has in its loins, what power in the muscles of its belly! Its tail sways like a cedar; the sinews of its thighs are close-knit. Its bones are tubes of bronze, its limbs like rods of iron.

Sichterman whistled. The Behemoth raised its head, black tufted ears perked. Its skin was like plated armor, gray and mottled like the Black Sea in winter.

“Douwe,” said Sichterman, “this is Clara.” The beast stood within arm’s reach. Sichterman put a hand between the fence posts and waited for the snuffling mouth.

Douwe’s throat caught—what was it? He was draped in excitement and apprehension a few feet from the creature.

Sichterman chuckled. “Clara is an Indian rhinoceros. She’s a little thing now but will get much larger. I have heard she could live one hundred years.”

Douwe swallowed. A rhinoceros. His schoolteacher taught him from the writings of Pliny the Elder that rhinoceros were enemies of elephants: vicious animals that killed men and devoured them without hesitation. This creature did not seem dangerous—it was absolutely devoted to the sun-scorched grass and paid little mind to the two men.

“Clara. What a pleasant name for a Behemoth. Where is her horn?”

“Seems they are not born with horns,” Sichterman said. “Behemoth indeed!” He rolled on the balls of his feet in a bouncing laugh. “She’s

harmless despite her stink and her weight. Hunters downed her mother last month. My wife could not resist her.”

Douwe inched closer. Clara’s ear fur skimmed the earth as she grazed. Her skin had pink folds between each joint. Was she smooth, like a dolphin? Rough like the elephants in Louis XV’s menagerie? Was her mouth soft and warm, like the muzzle of a horse? The cobbles of her skin were tempting, as was the thought of touching her feathery ears. Her lip worked quickly over the grass, her padded pink feet rounded as she slowly paced.

“She eats grass already? I would assume she needs her mother’s milk.”

“She drinks goat’s and mare’s milk. I have asked the locals, and they say she is better off with a mother rhino, but they cannot find one. Even if they did, we do not know if it would take her as its own or trample her to death. Soon, she will be too large for my stables.”

Clara raised her curved, finger-like lip to the sky and sniffed, snorting as she did. She was, despite her oddities, a fine addition to Sichter-man’s collection. Europeans would pay a handsome sum to own such a rare animal. Men took pride in the trend of curios: taxidermy birds and creatures, beautiful shells and bones displayed in the fine homes of Europe and the European homes of Calcutta. Menageries held the same appeal with living creatures.

“Douwe, you must come for dinner. Clara will be the evening’s entertainment. I will part with this animal for the right sum.”

“Of course, sir,” Douwe said. “Who would you like to sell her to?”

“To you.”

Thirty minutes later, Douwe was on the winding street back to his apartment, sweat dripping down his parchment-thin shirt. The breeze only touched the tops of the palms. Calcutta was a delightful puzzle to a European who grew up in the formality of Amsterdam. There, the straight-gabled homes and shops created order.

In Calcutta, the juxtaposition of rambling shacks neighboring fine houses looked like the buildings were picked up, shaken, and tossed down with no care where they landed. But paces away, the Ganges Delta connected the cream-tea-colored Hooghly River to the sea, beckoning sailors onward to the shores of the world. In a roundabout way, the Netherlands’ harbors beat with the same waters.

Douwe preferred the sea. As a boy in Leiden, he shaded his hazel eyes against the sun to spot whales in the harbor. Their waterspouts blurred the horizon. He tugged at his mother’s dresses when he found them,

squealing with delight. Shells filled his pockets, sand lined his shoes, and the smell of the North Sea rarely left him. Douwe became the farthest traveled in his family of sailors when he made it around the treacherous horn of Africa, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans collided.

On the balcony of his modest apartment, the black mother cat twitched her tail. A green pigeon teased her from the adjacent palm. The pigeon cooed, and Betsy chattered, baring her fangs. Douwe felt more like the pigeon than the cat.

It was an honor to be invited to dinner, but Douwe never enjoyed formal society parties. He preferred to spend his evenings watching the sunsets from his apartment and listening to the sounds of the city, black cat on his lap, poring over trade routes, marking sandbars, and dreaming of what creatures or people waited at his next stop. He had few longings to make lasting connections. Each place felt temporary, like his feet weren't quite on the ground, like the next best thing waited for him.

He had little time to get ready and batted dust off his pea-green formal coat, praying it still fit. The clock chimed the quarter hour. He slicked his curly brown hair with a tortoiseshell comb, petted Betsy from her ears to the tip of her tail and clicked shut the door despite her protesting mews.

The formal meals were held early in the day, lasting hours. The party was not as exciting as the prospect of owning the baby rhino. He wondered why Sichterman had chosen him to buy the Behemoth. Clara. He should call her Clara.

The white manor was bathed in palm shadow. The elegantly dressed kanasmah greeted partygoers at the door and led Douwe to the parlor, where VOC officers mingled, clinking their silver wine goblets. The air was thick with the earthy-sweet smell of rice, swirling incense, and men in hot wool.

An elephant tusk was mounted above the fireplace, a tiger skin rug tucked into a corner. An Indian fruit bat dangled in a cloche on a bookshelf, and a curio cabinet was filled with treasures. Inside were swirling seashells, small mammal skulls in a row, a glistening ammonite, and a fragile, translucent porcelain locket featuring the portrait of a fair European lady—her eyes were sad and brown. The locket hung on a simple gold stand.

The curio held leather-bound books, rare in this part of the world. Douwe slid a big book off the shelf with a sea-calloused hand. Could it be? Yes—a Gutenberg Bible. Douwe felt a pang in his gut. The Bible had opened to the book of Job.

“Douwe,” Sichterman said. He clapped him on the back. Douwe’s

knees collapsed, and the Gutenberg nearly dropped. He steadied himself and slid the book back to its home. "I see you found the Gutenberg. I was about to board the *Rooswijk* with it. Some sort of god looks out for me, though I cannot confirm it is the one in this book."

The *Rooswijk*. Douwe had friends aboard that vessel when it sank. None survived.

"May they rest in peace," Douwe said. "Death at sea means their souls wander the fathoms, not bound to earth."

"That is comforting," Sichterman said, smiling broadly and handing Douwe a silver goblet. "Though one a bit morbid for a man about to embark."

"I leave in two weeks. I do not expect the gods of the sea to support my sails on every voyage. I work alongside them, and they guide me." Douwe drank. The tang of alcohol burned his throat, a wave of heat following.

"The gods of the sea are cruel, Douwe. May we be ready when we meet them face to face," Sichterman said. He raised his glass. Douwe met his goblet.

"I am sure you know most of these men," Sichterman said. He turned his back to the curio cabinet, gesturing to the room. A dozen men were sweating, laughing, talking. No one seemed interested in Sichterman's collection, though they were surrounded by it. They were more interested in the future: deals and silver to be earned. Douwe could practically smell the metal coins in their hands.

Douwe nodded at them, raising a glass in their direction. They returned the gesture and promptly returned to their conversations. Their mouths formed his name—he was being reintroduced.

The kanasmah escorted the party to the white dining room. The women were led in simultaneously, trailing their gowns across the floor from the opposite parlor. Servants plated food: rice and roasted fowl cooked with herbs. Fruit dripped with honey, piled high in gilded porcelain bowls.

Sichterman examined his long table with a satisfied smirk.

"You may all be wondering why I have brought you here on such a fine and heavy-hot day in Calcutta." A small bird wove in and out of the dining room through an open archway, gulping an insect mid-flight. "I have received notice from the VOC that I have been promoted. My new title, effective immediately, is Councillor Extraordinaire of India, and we have received the funds for thirteen new trading ships."

The room burst into applause, and the men shifted eagerly in their seats. This meant a payload. Their eyes shone like VOC silver. Douwe quickly counted: thirteen men plus Sichterman sat at this table. It meant a ship for all except Douwe.

“We are celebrating tonight, and we will have news for you all over the next months. Proost!”

Sichterman thrust his glass into the air, and the others followed, drinking heavily after a raucous cheer. Their waistcoats bulged as they tucked into dinner, excitedly talking about the future of trade in Calcutta. Dinner jackets were tossed onto chairs, trailing their velvet tails on the white tile. Wine glasses were refilled in earnest.

Douwe listened and did not say much. He thought about Sichterman’s offer to buy the rhinoceros in the paddock. Was the animal such a burden that Sichterman wanted it gone before he could show her off to his underlings?

The servers and kanasmah were acutely aware of the diners. Douwe did not want for anything. Sybilla Sichterman, however, was particularly vocal about her needs. She snapped her fingers at the wine bearer when her goblet needed refilling. A woman in a shimmering green dress was seated to her right. Douwe, a fabric expert, knew the quality of her gown—it glowed olive and clover depending on the light. A servant spilled a single drop of red on the chintz tablecloth. Sybilla seethed but stopped at her friend’s gentle touch on the wrist.

Sybilla’s skin was dull—powdered and pasted. She had deep lines under her eyes, the corners of which were in a permanent position of mourning, drenched with elegant sadness. She was a much older version of the woman in the porcelain portrait that swung in Sichterman’s curio.

Douwe stared at the woman to Sybilla’s right. She had an aquiline nose, auburn hair, eyes that danced with laughter. She was an emerald gem at the table. Drops of pearls dangled from her ears. He liked her even more after she touched Sybilla’s wrist. She demurely put a fan in front of her mouth as she reprimanded her friend, and Sybilla calmed immediately—a snake charmer.

Sybilla was unpleasant a few more times. Each time, the white fan popped up in her companion’s gloved hand, fluttering like a moth, and when it withdrew, Sybilla was calm. Douwe glanced their way, smiled, and raised his glass to her.

“A lovely hostess, indeed,” he said. “Thank you, Mrs. Sichterman, for inviting me to your home today.”

Sybilla smiled, the lines of her powdered makeup creasing around her eyes and mouth. Her teeth were crooked and purple from the red wine.

“Who are you?” Sybilla said. She did not raise her glass or remove her smile.

“Douwemout van der Meer,” said Douwe, lowering his goblet. “Captain of the *Knappenhof*.”

Sybilla closed her lips over her teeth.

“What a pleasure to meet you, Captain van de Meer,” said the woman in green. “I am Johanna van der Weijden. It must be your first time at the estate of the Sichtermans.”

“It is, Mistress van der Weijden. A magnificent home that fits the leader of the VOC and his lovely wife.”

Sybilla stared at Johanna. Johanna smiled politely and turned to her friend. “Sybilla said she knew all of her husband’s captains. It is a surprise to be meeting you now.”

“I understand, madams,” Douwe said. “I do not regularly socialize here in Calcutta. I am here and gone again before anyone notices me.” He gave a small laugh.

“We have certainly noticed you, Captain van der Meer,” said Sybilla. “No wife, yet no interest in the single women at the table. You keep staring at the married ones.”

Douwe blushed. “I apologize, ladies. The two brightest gems in Bengal shine at this table. I shall turn my attention elsewhere.”

Johanna fanned herself. Flattery went far with Sybilla, and she raised her goblet to him. Johanna breathed deeply—a sigh of relief, perhaps? The fan waved wildly. The ladies turned their conversation inward, and a drop of sweat ran down Douwe’s back.

Dancers and musicians filtered in and out. Douwe anxiously fidgeted. Sichterman signaled to the hookah burdars to bring forth pipes and tobacco. Servants carried in hookah pipes and desserts. Plates covered the table, full of round, colorful sweets.

Hookah bottles rested on the crimson and camel-colored carpets. The air thickened with dense smoke, the heat of bodies, and Calcutta’s humidity. Douwe had no desire to linger in the cloud. The rhino had not been mentioned and he wanted to see her.

Douwe grabbed several desserts from a silver platter. He excused himself politely, though no one noticed. An arched open-air doorway led to a chorus of crickets in the garden. The sun had set. The breeze picked up and the temperature melted; it was finally, blessedly, cool. A blue-white moon, nearly full, rained light on the palms.

The stable glowed white beyond the fountain in the distance. Douwe took a bite of the crumbling, sticky sweet meat that tasted of cardamom and honey. He heard the diners behind him laughing and glanced back. Coils of blue smoke curled under the archways.

He took the winding path to the stable. The voices in the house grew in volume as the partygoers smoked and drank and dripped honey into their mouths. Ahead, the paddock was empty.

The Rhino Keeper

A boy sat on the threshold step of the stable, playing a ball-and-cup hand game Douwe recognized from childhood.

“Fine night,” Douwe said. The boy startled. His focus had been on getting the ball in the cup.

“Sir,” said the boy dismissively. He was thin, with coal-black hair that framed his long face. He had warm, tawny skin and overly large front teeth.

“Is Clara in there?” Douwe said. “The rhino?”

“She is,” said the boy. He furrowed his brow and flicked the ball toward the cup. A miss. “Why?”

“I’d like to see her,” Douwe said.

“Why?” He played with his toy. “She’s coming to dinner. Just wait.”

The ball did not land in the cup.

“Coming to dinner? Dinner is over, my boy. The hookah is on the floor as we speak.”

The stableboy leaped to his feet.

“I’m done for! I was supposed to lead her in for dessert! Sichterman will have my neck!” The ball-and-cup clattered to the ground. Douwe picked it up.

“Let me help you,” Douwe said. The boy hesitated, panicking. The ball landed in the cup. The boy smiled.

Author's Note

The most common reaction to the story of Douwe and Clara is: is this true? Did a rhino really tour Europe? The answer is yes. But unfortunately, Clara's journeys were not documented in detail. Many facts will remain unknown unless primary documents from Douwemout van der Meer or his assistants emerge. If Douwe's journal existed, I firmly believe this little-known history would be common in our societal vernacular.

But there isn't, to anyone's knowledge, a captain's log or journal left behind by Douwe. What primary sources exist from the rhino keeper himself? A handful of signatures, a land deed, a marriage certificate, and a few small portraits of him. We know the path, manifest, and dates the *Knappenhof* sailed thanks to VOC records. We know that Sichterman's wife, Sybilla, really sent her children back to Holland thanks to Jan Sichterman's family papers found in a trunk in an attic.

We can trace the voyage of Douwe and Clara via art—many things were painted and sketched and sculpted with her likeness. It gave me great joy to scour the many portraits of royalty who had some kind of rhino in the background, including the son of Maria Theresa, whose portrait of him holding a rhino book on a small porcelain disk sold at auction in 2022.

As for Douwe himself, even the correctness of his name is debated: some historians see his signature and understand his name to be Douwemout van der Meer, while a newer publication says his name was Douwe Mout and that he later changed his first name to David. While more archives become digitized, the puzzle pieces will shift and mold into a different narrative. All of this is filtered through a lens of fiction in *The Rhino Keeper* to help you, dear reader, keep track of our adventurous captain.

We know that a rhino calf was sold or gifted to Douwe in Calcutta and somehow survived a perilous sea voyage. The dates of the *Knappenhof's* voyage are not common ones, and when I showed them to my friend, professor and historian Ken Yohn, he was puzzled. Most large ships sail

at the same time of the year for favorable conditions. But the *Knappenhof* didn't follow normal VOC schedules—we aren't sure why. But Douwe landed in Rotterdam with a rhino in tow, seemingly unharmed.

There are many questions that emerge—why did Douwe decide to take this animal? Why did he have just one exotic animal when he could have had a traveling menagerie? Who helped him? How did he keep her alive with no vet care, little husbandry knowledge, no idea of what she should or shouldn't eat? For example, citrus in large quantities is dangerous to rhinos and can cause iron overload. I personally believe diet is one possible reason Clara died. There was no other rhino on the continent during Clara's time, which means we assume no persons knew how to properly care for her. Versailles did end up purchasing a male species who unfortunately was slaughtered by revolutionaries. After Clara's passing, Douwe himself disappeared from the historical record until his own death in 1775.

In the research process of this book, I spoke to real rhino keepers and their responses were much the same when I asked how it was possible that Douwe cared for Clara in the way he did, as a traveling animal. Their answers were the same: a shaking of the head, a wonder-eyed pause, a deep inhale, and similar conclusions: "They must have been bonded." This is truly uncommon for the eighteenth century. Most exotic animals were treated poorly, and died quickly, usually due to lack of knowledge. It needs to be said that Clara's living conditions were unfavorable to her species. I do not believe this was malicious. I believe it was a lack of understanding, and an overwhelming sense of awe surrounding her, that led Douwe to travel with her as he did.

In an analysis of her body condition from her many portraits, which I believe to be accurate to real life as the artists would have no other depictions or mind's-eye imagery to skew their art, she was a little thin but healthy. No writings currently discovered mention illness in appearance or behavior, besides the common temper tantrum, that would lead us to believe she was mistreated.

It's important to understand that eighteenth century thinking meant Douwe and his companions had no concept of species survival or conservation. They saw no harm in taking Clara from her natural habitat. Animals in the eighteenth century were treated differently than they are today. Many incorrect and disturbing scientific studies from the seventeenth century and before took years to disprove—many believed animals making noises in distress were simply squeaking like a machine, and that they did not feel pain. Later in the eighteenth century, people like Voltaire, who really did meet Clara, argued that animals have souls, feelings,

and rights, and that their bonds with people are legitimately emotional.

Rhinos are not unlike dogs or horses with their caretakers, though our society may not acknowledge it as the ancient teachings of Pliny still permeate our view: the image of a violent, charging rhino. Rhinos are wild animals and must be treated as such. Male rhinos are known to charge when threatened, and all five remaining species of rhinos are jumpy and skittish. Due to their large size, this can be dangerous for people. Rhinos in captivity are creatures of habit. They can be trained for blood draws, to open their mouths, to step on a scale, all useful for their survival. They recognize those who care for them and know their own names. They are food-oriented, playful, and responsive. Real life Clara and Douwe likely had a simple understanding of one another.

It is true that Clara was weighed at the Leipzig Easter fair at close to 5,000 pounds. There is one unfortunate report of the death of a young child as the result of Clara's trampling during an event, but the media also reported that she drowned several times and did not. It is unsure what writings about her are true and which are exaggerated. We know she was extremely food oriented, and Douwe could likely get her to do many things with the promise of snacks: bread, beer, oranges (perhaps to her demise), and other produce.

There was a time that Clara did not show up at her advertised appearances. She was in Rome one moment and though scheduled at a few other places in Italy, she did not show up, and when she resurfaced many months later, it was without her horn. We do not know how she lost her horn—according to modern keepers, it's likely she shed it by rubbing it in her wagon due to boredom or stress, or Douwe cut it off himself if it got too long. Cutting a rhino's horn is not painful; the keratin growths are like our fingernails.

Clara lived eighteen years in Europe with Douwe, and while that is around half the life expectancy of a rhino in captivity today, it is significantly longer than any other rhino in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. He and his team had to have been devoted to her, or she would have died, perhaps not even surviving the ship voyage. Instead, she died at The Horse and Groom pub in Lambeth, London, in 1758. You can visit the pub today, renamed Horse and Stables.

A few character notes: Zubin is fictional, though there is a dark-haired boy in two paintings of Clara. Douwe could not have cared for her alone, and Zubin was born of those boys tending her in paintings. Lionel/Lonnie is also fictional. Douwe married a woman named Elisabeth, but I absolutely love that a few women in the 1700s would dress in men's clothing to escape their by-the-book lives, usually out of a sense of adventure or

for monetary need, and simply had to include her. Lonnie is loosely based on the first woman to circumnavigate the world, Jeanne Baret, a botanist who helped identify many plant species unknown to Europe.

The menagerie keeper, ship's doctor, baytar, crew members of the *Knappenhof*, and stable hands are all fictional. Real characters include Douwe and Clara, all of the royals, the anatomist Jan Wandelaar, and the porcelain maker Johann Kaendler.

For more information on Douwe and Clara, I recommend *Clara's Grand Tour* by Glynis Ridley, who read *The Rhino Keeper* very early on. She and I have continuously corresponded about Douwe, Clara, rhinos, and continue to share new things we learn together. Other readings include *The Rhinoceros: from Durer to Stubbs* by TH Clark, and *Clara the Rhinoceros* by Gijs van der Ham, the newest non-fiction book on the subject which contradicts many things previously reported. I read Van der Ham's book after I wrote *The Rhino Keeper*. My storyline follows Ridley's work more closely. Everyone who has studied Clara agrees on one thing: we don't know everything.

Friend and writer Jenna Blum asked me where Clara's shed horn and remains are today. I firmly believe that Clara's horn is with Douwe. There are no auction records of a rhino horn, no newspaper articles about the horn's placement in museums. We do know that The Grant Museum in London has an old Indian rhino skeleton. The museum cannot confirm nor deny that the skeleton in their collection is Clara. Records are spotty. I hold it in my heart that it is her and would love proof someday.

A few interesting things I left out: Clara was not named right away. She was called Virgin Clara when she made it to Germany, and it stuck. Clara was the first of her species to be scientifically named by Carl Linnaeus in Switzerland, *Rhinoceros unicornis*.

As the years go on and more archival documents are digitized and searchable, we may know more about Clara and Douwe. For now, we can revel in the one unmistakable truth: Douwe and Clara created absolute wonder, and I hope they live long in the collective memory of readers today as they did long ago, when the two-ton queen of Europe walked the cobbled streets.

A note on conservation

Indian or Greater One-Horned rhinos are a vulnerable species in need of our protection. As of this publication, around 4,000 individuals live in the wild. At home in the marshlands of India and Nepal, they're one of five remaining rhino species. In this work, I have chosen to call the

species Indian rhinos as during the eighteenth century, the term Greater One-Horned did not exist.

For generations, people have long sought the “magic” of rhino horns and other body parts. Science has proven that rhinos hold no medicinal properties in their flesh or horns. This ancient way of thinking, along with habitat loss, has contributed to the awful truth that less than one hundred years ago, fewer than fifty Indian rhinos remained.

Though numbers are increasing, and new technology allows for animals in captivity to breed more easily than ever before, humans must be aware that large mammals need worldwide support to thrive. Luckily, sanctuaries in Assam mean the Indian rhino can survive in its natural habitat.

I’ve had the luck of meeting five of the species so far. The first of whom sparked this unpredictable voyage was Joya in Salina, Kansas, at the Rolling Hills Zoo. He has since passed. I’ve also met Taj in Seattle, and Monica, Stacks, and their baby MJ at Tanganyika Wildlife Park in Goddard, Kansas. I highly encourage you to sign up for a rhino encounter to safely meet these animals. There’s nothing quite like getting slimed by a rhino mouth. They are absolutely remarkable and deserve our every effort to protect them through the Species Survival Plan and natural conservation efforts. A portion of the proceeds from this book go directly to rhino conservation funds.

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About the Author



Jillian Forsberg is a historian and author with a master's degree in public history from Wichita State University. Her research on little-known historical events led her to discover the true story behind her first novel, *The Rhino Keeper*. In addition to being the former editor for Wichita State's *The Fairmont Folio*, Jillian is an essayist whose articles have been published in academic journals. With a passion for 18th-century history, Jillian can also be found gardening, exploring antique malls, or reading every label at a museum. Vintage dresses are Jillian's clothing of choice, except when she's at the zoo. She lives in Wichita, Kansas, with her husband, child, and pets. She's currently working on her second novel. To connect with Jillian, please visit her website at jillianforsberg.com.

For exclusive Clara the Rhino artwork, please visit the link below.



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