

## PRAISE FOR ANNA DEL MAR

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### **Night Owl Romance**

“Top Pick and Five Stars! ... The unexpected twists to this exciting story kept me enthralled until the last fascinating word ... *The Asset* is a wonderful start to the series and I can only hope that future stories continue to showcase such compelling characters in equally exciting and mesmerizing situations.”

### **Midwest Book Review**

“*The Asset* by Anna del Mar is an emotionally compelling and sizzling romance, has two protagonists to die for, a well-thought out plot with carefully-timed, revealing twists, mounting tension, and thrills that will keep you turning pages ... del Mar is an exciting new name in the steamy romance genre and I look forward to read more from her. If you love romance, especially military romance, this is a must read.”

### **Library Journal**

“Author del Mar does the wounded warrior romance just about right...The romance is nicely and slowly built, and Ash, though a warrior, is not an over-the-top alpha. A military romance that will appeal to fans of Lora Leigh and Linda Howard.”

### **The Romance Review**

“I really REALLY loved *THE ASSET*, the first in the Wounded Warriors series... Ash was a freakin’ fantastic hero, one that women can both swoon over and be in awe of. Lia was also incredible, such a survivor and a strong, independent woman despite the terribly shitty life hand she’d been dealt...The intrigue and danger elements of this book were extremely well written and played out. Additionally, the story was fast paced without being overdone. And when everything came to a head, I felt like I was balancing on a tight wire of tension, it was excellent!”

### **Book Briefs**

“Bottom line: Whether you are a character driven reader, or a plot driven reader- *The Asset* will appeal to you. This is a kick butt book with a strong romance, strong characters and action galore. Check it out.”

### **The Suburban Eclectic Review**

“Complex characters, heart wrenching subject matter, quiet sensuality, and strength, *The Asset* will give you all the feels ... If you love romance, action, or thrillers than you need to read *The Asset* because it has it all and is told with gravity and graciousness. I cannot wait to read more from Anna del Mar and The Wounded Warrior series.”

### **Blushing Reads**

“This was an emotional roller coaster ride for me like no other... While this is the first book in the series I am super excited about reading each book that follows. If they are all as suspenseful and exciting as this one then I will be one happy gal!”

### **Splashes Into Books**

“WOW! What an amazing debut novel! A suspense filled, stunning novel which has well portrayed characters, a superb, enthralling plot and is a real page turner ... It is an action packed read that I have no hesitation in highly recommending, it is definitely one of my favourite reads for this year so far and, I suspect, will still be a favourite for the year.”

### **Romance Authors That Rock**

“I give this book 5 hearts! ... If you're anything like me you'll fall in love with these two wonderful people as they find strength, trust, passion and love in each other.”

### **Harlequin Junkie**

“*The Asset* by Anna del Mar will take our heroine on a dark, emotional rollercoaster in order to get her happily ever after...but she will get it! This is the debut novel for the Wounded Warrior series and I for one, can't wait for the next book in the series. This author has captured my attention with her well-written words, strong characters, and vivid storyline.”

### **Literary Addicts**

“I was glued to the pages from the very beginning and couldn't put it down...”

### **Happy Ever After Book Reviews**

“With boatloads of chemistry and action, this romance is built on a solid plot, well-developed characters, and vivid descriptions.”

## **Library Journal**

“Seth and Summer (*The Stranger*) each have their own baggage, but they are well matched, and their emotional journey works on all levels. Add in some danger and industrial espionage and you have a mix that will appeal to fans of Maya Banks and Lisa Marie Rice.”

## **The Romance Review**

“I'm obsessed with the frozen, dangerous story that Ms. del Mar has crafted about fire and ice, and it was fantastic! ... I'm looking forward to the next offering in this very excellent series!”

## **Blogcritics**

“Having read the first book, *The Asset*, all I can say is that *The Stranger* is another tour de force from del Mar. Once again, she delivers an addictive romantic suspense read with a compelling, emotionally charged plot and engaging, likable characters whom you will root for—not to mention an explosive, passionate love story filled with dangerous twists and turns. This was a fabulous fast-paced read, simply addictive. Sexy, with a touch of darkness, and humor to boot! If you haven't discovered Anna del Mar's books yet, you're missing something.”

## **Blushing Reads**

“As always Anna del Mar has created a world where the chemistry is enough to melt the Alaskan tundra!”

## **Happy Ever After Romance Book Reviews**

“I was totally taken in by this one. Del Mar has a very vivid way of story-telling, with well-developed and often

complex characters. The supporting characters always leave a mark, which is the perfect setup for the next in any series. There's a lot of action, sex, surprises, and heart-tugging. True Del Mar style. There's nothing cliché about her works, and it's her unique writing style that keeps me coming back for more."

### **Carlene Inspired**

"I will pick up anything written by Anna del Mar and *The Stranger* is a perfect example of why ... I highly recommend it to all readers of romance and suspense, especially those that love a particular breed of strong characters."

### **For the Love of Fictional Worlds**

"This was the first book for me by this author and honestly, the moment I was done, I went ahead to buy all the books by her within the next five minutes!"

### **The Indie Bookshelf**

"Ms del Mar has given us a great story with writing that flows around you like melted snow pack. There is intrigue, danger, quirky people, jealousy, sexy times, secrets, and fierce loyalty. All covered in a layer of ice and snow and star filled nights."



# THE GUARDIAN

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ANNA DEL MAR



*The Guardian*

By Anna del Mar

*From the Amazon Bestseller author of The Asset and The Stranger comes Anna del Mar's latest romantic suspense, The Guardian.*

*Ex-SEAL turned game warden, Matthias Hawking is engaged in a fierce battle to end poaching in Africa, but when a beautiful journalist defies the poachers, he will do everything in his power to protect the woman who has captured his heart.*

Game Warden Matthias Hawking is a decorated ex-SEAL engaged in a grueling fight against ruthless poachers in Africa. He's short on resources and long on enemies. There's a price on his head. The last thing he needs is the unexpected arrival of a beautiful but stubborn journalist threatening to uncover his secrets, an alpha female challenging his alpha male and getting into trouble, a hurricane wearing boots.

Jade Romo is a veteran of several different kinds of war. She's survived her heroin-addicted mother, the foster care system, and the conflict in Afghanistan. Jade's tough, confident, cynical, and self-reliant, a woman who doesn't believe in forever. But when she defies the poachers and lands at the top of the warlord's kill list, she's forced to rely on the skilled, attractive, but supremely infuriating game warden who has captivated her body's undivided attention.

Haunted by his past but driven by his courage, her mysterious guardian will do anything in his power to protect the woman who has captured his heart.

*This book is approximately 115,000 words*

*Edited by Nancy Cassidy*



*To the extraordinary people of Africa, who challenge the odds every day to build a better future for humanity.*



Dear Reader,

I'm so excited to introduce you to Matthias Hawking and Jade Romo, the sexy, fiery pair that captivated my imagination during my travels to Africa. Perhaps it was unavoidable that a setting as dazzling and magnificent as the Serengeti would spawn an epic love story in my mind. Maybe I should've seen it coming even before I boarded the long flight across the ocean. But Matthias and Jade? They caught me completely by surprise!

I went to Africa on a non-writing, no-laptop vacation, to check off a bucket list item that entailed world-class wildlife viewing. I also wanted to pursue a life-long yearning to connect with my Caribbean-forged African heritage. Silly me. Little did I know that Africa was about to grab me by the throat, shake awake my soul, and capture my heart for good.

Yes, I loved the wildlife. Yes, I loved the land. The Serengeti is one of the most beautiful, last wild places on earth and we **MUST** support the effort to protect it. But it was the people I met in Africa that left the greater mark on my soul, the extraordinary folks who challenge the odds every day to build a better future for themselves and for humanity, the diverse communities that face complex, difficult, sometimes heart-breaking realities on the ground with skill, resilience, and wisdom. Their hopes and dreams inspired the story in these pages. Their courage drives the characters that you are about to meet.

Looking back, there was never a chance that I'd experience

## INTRODUCTION

such an intense, transformative journey and not share it with you, my reader, my life-long traveling companion. So thank you for choosing to read *The Guardian* and thank you for coming along on Matthias and Jade's adventure.

AdM

*Jade*

Flying had never been my definition of fun and yet here I was, with my stomach stuck in my throat, traveling across Africa in a dilapidated, single-engine plane that rode a lot like a moped in the sky. According to our rakish South African pilot, the six-seater had rolled out of the factory in 1956, thirty long years before I'd been born, in a century far, far away. I could've done without the trivia tidbit. I was the sort that worried about metal fatigue. But I'd made it to Africa at last. Africa!

Three other passengers crammed with me in the sputtering little plane, a gaggle of excited grad students of about my age with some impressive academic credentials. They were on their way to work as research assistants at the private wildlife conservation reserve that was also my destination. Loud, chatty, and excited, they looked alike. They were perky, enthusiastic, and all blonde to some degree, a quirky fluke that, in my current state of jetlag, struck me as a little funny.

I was decent at identifying wildlife species, but terrible with names, so I made an effort to keep my traveling companions straight. Short-bob Sarah and curly-haired Lara

sat in the seats directly behind mine. Like me, they were new to Tanzania. Poor pony-tailed Cara was jammed in the very back seat between loads of supplies. She'd been working at the reserve for the last year and was returning to the station after a break in Arusha.

In the three hours since I'd met my traveling companions, I'd learned a lot. Talk about information overload. Sarah was a Rhodes Scholar, shrewd and observant, kind of like me. The big difference between us was that she was also charming, totally unlike me.

Lara had confessed to being a card-carrying member of MENSA. Holy Cow. Talk about nuclear brain power. As to Cara, she hemmed and hawed about her gigantic student loans, but at the tender age of twenty-nine, she'd already published in several journals and staring at her bright future required heavy-duty shades. Sarah, Lara, and Cara. I giggled inside. What were the odds?

From the moment the women hopped in the plane, they'd slammed me with a crushing wave of friendliness that defied the loner in me. Sarah kept telling me that I looked familiar, but she didn't put two and two together, which was fine and dandy by me. Not even our pilot, Peter Drake, knew who I was. Incidentally, he was also blond, and the owner of an impressive set of surfer curls he wielded with panty-melting capabilities. I'd paid him double to fly me without asking questions and he'd been more than agreeable to bend to the will of the mighty dollar.

Anonymity was my preferred MO. Even though my face was on the Nat Geo channel a couple times a month, my job was way easier when I flew under the radar. I liked working alone and I hated when the attention focused on me instead of my work. Honestly? I wasn't exactly amiable—or particularly sociable for that matter, a tendency I'd cemented during the first shitty fourteen years of my life.

But thanks to a belated set of kickass adoptive parents who'd checkmated me into manners, culture, and higher education, these days I passed as a semi-civilized creature.

Now I just had to ignore my terror of flying, suppress the jetlagged witch I'd become somewhere over the tropic of Cancer, and do my best to fit in, even though, technically, I was the only brunette in the plane.

"Fasten your seatbelts, ladies," the pilot announced in his melodious accent—definitely sexy. "We're beginning our descent."

The little plane punched down through the clouds and hit a patch of turbulence, courtesy of some wicked afternoon thermal currents. I clutched my backpack, dug my nails into the nylon, and tried very hard to keep my lunch down.

"Look ahead," our pilot shouted. "We are officially in the reserve's air space. Over to the north, you can get a glimpse of the twin lakes that give the Pacha Ziwa Reserve its name."

I took in the glimmer of the long, finger-like lakes on the horizon, twin mirrors sparkling in the savanna's endless expanse. The headache blooming behind my eyes lifted. My spirits soared. I'd been dreaming about the Serengeti since I was a little girl. Not even the jetlag could suppress the sheer joy that swelled in my chest.

"We're in luck." The pilot shot his million-dollar grin in my direction. "Beneath us you'll see your welcoming committee, a big ass giraffe of the Maasai variety, as indicated by its distinctive starred blotches."

I pressed my nose to the window and scanned the ground. Several other giraffes appeared around the first, long necks randomly popping out from between the trees. Keeping my eyes on the bush below, I unzipped my backpack and groped for my camera. Fighting for focus, I began to shoot.

Sarah squealed. "There are like seven giraffes!"

"No, look, there's more!" Lara counted aloud. "Twenty-two to be precise."

Fan-freaking-tastic. A huge smile hijacked my lips. *Click, click, click*. This was why I'd come to Africa, to see these animals in their natural environments, to share my wonder

with the world, and to help protect the last few places on earth where the wild still roamed.

The landing strip was a grassy line carved onto a landscape of plains and brush. The pilot buzzed by the first time around, to clear the zebras from the runway. Pretty surreal. Laughter bubbled up my throat. On the second try, we landed safely, despite a couple of rough bounces. The girls cheered. Okay, fine, I cheered too.

When the plane finally stopped, I took a deep breath and combed my fingers through my hair in an effort to look presentable to the powers that be. It only took a sec. I'd gone hair-minimal for this trip, chopping off my long mane. Even then, my bangs fell right back over my brow, because that was the kind of hair I'd gotten in the hair lottery, bone-straight and dense.

I hung the camera strap from my neck, opened the door, and unfolded from my seat. My knees cracked as I climbed down from the aircraft. I felt like hugging the poor old plane and thanking it for holding itself together long enough to get me to the reserve. But I refrained from the impulse. No need to flaunt my addled brain in public just yet.

A pair of tan Land Rovers materialized from around the bend, rattling and sliding over a dirt track, pushing through the scattering herd of zebras as they drove our way. Not unlike the zebras, the girls took off, whipping out their cells and snapping selfies, with Cara leading the way and acting like the resident tour guide.

"Here comes our ring master." Peter came to stand next to me and perched his Aviators on the top of his head, tracking the Land Rovers' approach with a pair of huge brown eyes. "Lucky you. The boss himself is heading your welcoming committee. You get to meet the reserve's game warden right from the start."

I squinted at the truck, but the sun's glare prevented me from seeing the man inside. There hadn't been a lot of information about him on the website—a name, no pictures. I'd been intrigued about that.

In Africa, for many years, game wardens had been the custodians of private hunting reserves that had their roots in troubled Colonial times. But these days, the concept had evolved and at this huge reserve set aside for the study and conservation of animals, the game warden led the rangers who protected the wildlife and facilitated cutting edge research. According to my sources, during his two-year stint at Pacha Ziwa, this game warden had impressed with his performance.

“Hey.” Peter tugged on my arm and pressed a business card into my hand. “I’m here at least once a week. If you get sick of this place, if you ever need a ride, or want some cool aerial shots, I’m your guy.” He winked. “First three hours are free for you.”

God. Why did wasps and flirts always home in on me? The business card creased between my fingers. Peter was nice on the eyes, sure, and that accent had the potential to tickle my G-spot, but I hadn’t come to Africa for pleasure. I was here for work—in, out, no dudes, no complications.

With a screech of brakes, the Land Rovers parked next to us. The driver of the nearest truck stepped out, slammed the door, and sauntered toward us, scanning the airstrip and carrying a very handsome automatic rifle.

Niiiiice.

It wasn’t only his top-of-the-line carbine that caught my attention, a lovingly maintained M4 different from the AK-47 I’d expected to see on the ground in Africa. Or the way he held the weapon, pointed down in the low-ready position, both hands cradling the beauty to his chest like a pampered lover. It was the powerful vibes his body gave out and the systematic way in which he scanned our surroundings from behind mirrored shades, vigilant—focused and ready.

*Warrior alert.* My body snapped to attention. Here was a top-of-the-line soldier if I’d ever seen one. And then there was...well...the rest of him. And what a nice rest of him it was. Yes, sir. I was in the presence of hunkiness, which was

very bad news for the Jade who'd come to Africa for work. *Work*, I repeated in my mind like a mantra. *Not pleasure.*

But a girl could look, right? No harm in appreciating a prime specimen, especially as he turned on his heel and methodically inspected the grounds, giving me the benefits of 360-degree views of his fine, fit body.

The guy was tall, even for a girl as tall as I was, somewhere in the neighborhood of six-four. It was hard not to notice the definition of his flexed arms beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his tan bush shirt. It was also impossible to miss the way in which his shapely ass fit perfectly into olive cargos. From one athlete to another, I appreciated the view of his finely built glutes, especially as they were mounted on a pair of muscular thighs that also impressed.

*Work. Are you freaking listening, Jade? Not pleasure.* I'd had a little trouble with adrenaline-driven hook ups early on in my career, but now I was over my addiction to bad boys and firmly established in the thinking zone.

The man strode over to us with feline grace, confident and yet cautious, fully engaged in a multi-level recon. Oh, yes. From his style to his weapons and down to his Oakley Jury mirrored sunglasses, he fit the profile. This guy had special ops written all over.

His gaze fell on the girls wandering among the zebra herd. His lips pressed together to amplify a severe, eyebrow-clashing frown. This soldier? He liked his order.

"Hey, Zeke," he called out to the man climbing down from the other Rover. "Would you mind rounding up the arrivals before somebody gets kicked in the gut?"

"Sure thing." The man named Zeke took off after the women.

The game warden's polarized glasses aimed at me. "Ma'am." He touched the rim of his wide-brimmed Tilley, then turned to Peter and extended a hand as huge as a lion's paw. "Drake." His veined, sun-bronzed forearm flexed as he shook the pilot's hand with a firm grip.

"Matthias, my friend," Peter said, trying to hide a wince

behind a smile. “Good news. I have three new bushels of fresh quality grass for you today.”

*Fresh grass?* My spine snapped at attention. The cocky ass pilot could only count me as fresh grass if he included poison ivy in his botanical classifications.

*Easy, Jade.* A surly bitch lived inside of me, a highly reactive broad who’d come of age in a man’s world and had been put down one too many times for having a V instead of a dick. She wanted to have a go at the arrogant fool, but I held back and took a deep breath. I might need a triple shot of patience today.

The game warden’s perfectly proportioned lips thinned. I didn’t know the guy at all, but my bet was that he didn’t like Peter’s tone either. He looked at the card I held in my hand, leveled his gaze on the pilot, and spoke in a low, gravelly voice that reminded me of fast water tumbling over rocks. “Do I have to remind you that we’re a research outfit and not a dating site?”

“Nothing wrong with getting a jump on the crowd.” Peter chuckled nervously then turned to me. “Matthias here is the king of this jungle. He always aims for the windpipe, but his roar is worse than his bite.”

“Is that so?” Matthias glanced in my direction. “Allow me to warn you about the great predators among us.”

Man. I’d stepped right into a pissing contest and I didn’t like it. I’d served my time with dudes like these. I didn’t need a warning from anyone and I knew how to take care of myself.

“Whoa.” I fanned my hand under my nose. “This place reeks.”

“Excuse me?” Both Matthias and Peter looked at me in puzzlement.

“Testosterone.” I wrinkled my nose and made a show of grimacing. “It stinks, big time.”

“Let me guess.” The game warden’s lips twitched. “You’re the smartass who sits at the back of the class making snarky comments?”

I raised my chin and smirked. "Only when required."

He parked those shades on my face a little too long. "Why is your face familiar?"

"No clue," I said. "Why is your face *not* familiar?"

Under his hat's wide rim, his eyebrows clashed. "What do you mean?"

"No picture," I said. "On the website?"

"Ah." His mouth set into that maddening straight line.

"Not photogenic."

"Is that so?" I lifted my camera and focused on his face.

*Click.* "Problem fixed."

His eyes were hidden beneath the shades but his strong jaw tightened ever so slightly. *Oops.* I'd known the guy for three minutes and I'd already rankled him. *Way to go, Jade.*

Peter let out a shrill laugh. "Matthias, my man, I think you've just met your match. She's gonna be a joy to manage."

"Manage who? Me?" The surly bitch almost bust out of control. "Back off, buddy. That's not his job."

"Well, unfortunately, it is my job," Matthias said. "Not that I enjoy agreeing with Drake on anything, but managing people is the downfall of my job description."

"Then by all means," I said, aiming to nip whatever the hell this was on the spot. "Let's rewrite the part of it that pertains to me."

The mirrored shades lit me up. "You're a funny fire-cracker."

I sneered at my own reflection. "And you haven't seen my sparklers yet."

His well-defined lips came up in a smirk that wasn't a smile so much as a dare. It implied that his mouth had no problem adapting to his moods and was capable of great range, not to mention delicious improvisation. A tingle of excitement pebbled my skin and prickled my most contractible parts. He'd have no trouble seeing my sparklers and doubling down on his own pyrotechnics.

"I bet your sparklers would be something to see."

Matthias's smirk widened into the kind of challenge I had

trouble resisting, on account of my faulty DNA. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard the *whoosh* of a fire starting. The game warden? Not a safe bet, not if I was going to keep to my professional resolutions. I tried a mental dip in a glacial lake.

“What’s with the big guns?” Peter gestured to Matthias’s weapon. “And why are you in such a particularly ramped-up mood today?”

Matthias shades kept me in the crosshairs. Hard to know what someone’s thinking when you can’t see his eyes. Whereas I, I had no choice but to keep my chin up and my gaze leveled on him. He took his sweet time before he finally quit staring at me.

“Did you see anything from up there?” he demanded, shifting his attention to Peter. “Trucks? Helos? Tracks?”

“Nothing.” Peter sobered. “Trouble with poachers again?”

Matthias’s gaze skimmed the bush. “Somebody shot at our rhinos yesterday.”

Holy shit. I could totally understand the warden’s edgy mood now. The reserve’s black rhinos were an endangered species. I started to take mental notes right away. I’d been on the ground for less than five minutes and I already had a story in the works.

“Damn those poachers.” Peter swore under his breath. “Did they get any?”

“It ain’t gonna happen,” Matthias said. “Not under my watch. We chased the sons of bitches all the way to the reserve’s fucking boundary.” He flashed me an apologetic glance. “Sorry about my French, ma’am.”

“No worries,” I said. “I’m fucking fluent in the same kind of French.”

“Good to know.” His lips twitched again, but the smile never fully realized. It stayed smothered beneath the pile of worries that deepened the vertical lines permanently etched between his eyebrows. When I thought about the rhinos, I couldn’t blame him.

“Jesus, they’re getting brash.” Peter shook his head. “Sudanese rebels, you think?”

Matthias lifted a brawny shoulder. “Probable.”

“Those fuckers poach the animals, trade the goods, and buy weapons,” Peter explained to me as if I hadn’t done my homework before I came out. “In between, they murder, abduct, rape, and pillage.”

“I’ve heard.” The sarcasm in my tone rolled right over Peter’s head.

“I hope you get the poachers,” he said to Matthias.

“Count on it.” This time, when the game warden’s jaw tightened, a muscle twitched on the side of his face. I didn’t know much about him, but I believed him.

“Mind if I stay the night?” Peter asked.

“We’re tight,” Matthias said. “A bunk at the ranger’s camp is all I’ve got.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Then make yourself useful.”

Matthias whirled on his heel, stuck his fingers in his mouth, and let out a whistle that chiseled my brain and resuscitated my headache. At the end of the airstrip, Zeke signaled with a hand in the air. He and the women started in our direction.

Peter and Matthias got busy unloading the plane. The game warden had a lot of questions for Peter. He wanted to know what the pilot had seen from the air and if he’d heard anything about poachers in the area. I helped unload, happy to melt into the background, listening to the in-depth interrogation.

As soon as the luggage was loaded on the trucks, Peter climbed back in the cockpit, restarted the plane, and drove it over to an old metal hangar that stood nearby. Matthias rearranged the supplies in the back of the Rover, slammed shut the trunk, and turned to me. A bunch of questions glimmered in his eyes, but he didn’t get to ask them, because Zeke and the women joined us.

“Hey, Matthias.” Cara fluttered her long eyelashes, all sweetness and smiles. “Miss me?”

“Welcome back.” Matthias ignored Cara’s flirting and went straight to business. “Ladies, please, let’s get the formalities out of the way so we can get out of here before the mosquitoes come out for dinner.”

The women bunched up around Matthias, eager and excited. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and leaned against the truck, happy to speed things along. Mosquitoes always seemed to crave my sweet Spanish blood. Despite the course of preventative antibiotics I was taking, I didn’t want to test the limits of modern medicine and contract malaria or some other nasty bug during my first day in Africa.

“For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Matthias Hawking. I’m the game warden here, which makes me chief of security as well.”

“Are you American?” Sarah interrupted him right away.

“I am.” He inclined his head. “I’m from Montana.”

“Yay.” Lara clapped her hands. “Viva the USA. Love the rugged west.”

“What’s a guy from Montana doing all the way out here?” Sarah asked, demonstrating curiosity that matched mine.

“Can’t a guy get a job in Africa?”

Not for anything, but he sounded a little defensive to me.

“Ex-military,” I spoke my thoughts aloud, not one of my finest habits. “Muscle for hire?”

His mouth curled into a sneer capable of freezing the tropics. “So now you think I’m a goddamn mercenary?”

“Just a theory.” My spidey senses were all agog. “But I’ve heard you’re doing a good job here. Care to clarify your bio?”

“Not really.” He turned his attention to the other women. “I’d like to introduce you to my associate, Zeke Logocho, one of the best rangers in Africa.”

He slapped a paw on his companion’s shoulder, a tall, dark, muscularly lanky fellow sporting high cheeks, a bony, meandering nose, and a wide, benign smile. One could’ve

driven a small truck through the gap in his front teeth. Zeke was talking to someone on his headset, but he waved at us.

“If I’m not around, Zeke is your man.” Matthias grabbed a tablet from the Rover’s front seat and tapped on a list, eyes shifting from the screen to the girls standing next to me. “So, right, introductions. You must be...Sarah Stevens from Cal Tech?”

Sarah’s blue eyes brightened. “That’s me all right.”

“Welcome to the reserve.” He shook her hand and moved on to the next woman. “And you have to be Lara Quinones, from Harvard.”

“Glad to meet you.” Lara pumped his hand, back straight, tight curls shaking around her head with enthusiastic vehemence.

Matthias turned to me. I was pretty sure he’d left me for last to punish me for giving him attitude. I would’ve preferred to have this particular conversation in private, but his stare was fixed on his tablet and he never saw the request in my eyes.

“That means that you are...let’s see...” Matthias took off his glasses, scrolled down his list once more and looked up in triumph. “Pat Schumer, from Stanford.”

Those eyes. The color. They were so unusual. I guess they could be called hazel mostly, but a rim of bright amber speckled with darker flecks surrounded the black pupil like a ring of fire. The gold in his irises echoed the reddish glint in the closely-cropped, straight-trimmed stubble that edged his jaw, adding power and intensity to a sun-bronzed face that needed absolutely no help in the power and intensity department.

Next to me, I felt the wind shift as the girls gasped in unison. Then his gaze met mine and the women disappeared, and so did the airstrip, hell, the whole of Africa vanished from my map. *Direct hit.*

The fire in his stare went straight to the center of my brain, overloaded my logic circuits, and connected. My body clenched in all the right places and his body pulled on me

like a freaking magnet. It wasn't a one-way thing. He stared at me as if I were a particularly delicious ingredient to the twelve-course meal he was planning.

Oh, no. No way. *Cool it Jade*. No more bad boys in my future. I'd made that mistake before, because—as my true mom liked to theorize—I'd learned my sexual habits from some very bad examples. My blood ran hotter than the pits of hell, and the scalding flow plunged me straight into the no-thinking zone. It wasn't as if I believed in love at first sight. That was a bunch of fried baloney. But lust at first sight? Yeah, it happened. To me.

But I'd learned my lesson and this new and improved version of Jade didn't react to a pair of hazel eyes as if she'd been stricken by a bolt of lust, or act on her body's hyperactive sexual cues, or engage in gratuitous erotic exploration. She didn't toe the line to the point of disaster, mix personal with professional, or sleep with strangers, either.

*Heads up, Jade*. I tried to blink Matthias off my retina. Eyes like his should be strictly prohibited on a face like that. *Get it under control*. Enough with the hunkeness already.

"She's not Pat," Sarah said before I could speak up for myself, something I was usually very good at. "Pat's flight got delayed in Amsterdam. She won't be arriving until tomorrow."

His stare returned to scan me. Whatever warmth I imagined I'd seen in his eyes was gone, transformed into cold, calculated intensity. "If you're not Pat Schumer, then who the hell are you?"

Uh-oh. Somewhere, somehow, somebody had dropped the ball. "Your director didn't tell you?"

His eyebrows clashed over his nose. "Tell me what?"

"Her name is Jade," Sarah volunteered in an obvious bid to try to help. "Jade, you know, like her earrings?"

She caught one of my earrings between her fingers, a green jade stone carved into the stylized figure of an elephant. The antique pendants had been a gift from my parents on the cataclysmic occasion of my adoption at the

ripe age of fourteen. My parents had “Jade-proofed” the earrings, commissioning a custom-designed mount capable of withstanding “Jade-force winds.” Since then, I’d worn them almost every day of my life, even while I was out in the field.

“J-a-d-e,” Sarah pealed. “Easy to remember. Her earrings match the color of her eyes.”

Matthias’s gaze lingered over my face before he decided on the spot that I wasn’t supposed to be here. “I’m gonna tell you right now.” Aggravation whetted his voice. “We don’t do tours of our research facilities and you need special permission to be here.”

“I have authorization,” I said, hoping and praying I was right. “Call your director.”

“Answer me first.” He’d rather give orders that take them. “Who are you?”

No way around this. I stuck out my hand. “My name is Jade Romo.”

“Hang on.” Matthias blinked blankly several times, but he didn’t take my hand. “Did you say Jade Romo?”

“Yes.” I dropped my hand to my side and dug my nails in my palm.

“From Mission Protect,” he said flatly. “*The* Jade Romo?”

“In the flesh.”

The girls gasped in unison. Zeke stared, his mouth slowly expanding into a silly grin on his face. My hopes for negotiating some sort of anonymity clause with the station’s powers that be died under their gawks. The tension that straightened Matthias’s mouth and sparkled in his eyes anchored the most intimidating scowl I’d ever come across. Something curdled in my stomach and I felt a little sick. His stare was all steel and fire as he uttered the word that shoved him to the top of my shit list.

“Goddamnit.”

This was going to be a wild ride.

*Matthias*

I should've known the instant I laid eyes on her that she was a disaster waiting to happen. I should've realized during the first ten seconds that she was a menace to my plans. But hell, this woman had sneaked up on me while my radar was focused elsewhere. She'd hit me like a smoke grenade and clouded my horizon with the shock of her landing. But now the smoke was clearing and my threat assessment radar recalibrated. My brain ramped up and went into full SEAL assessment mode. I backtracked to catalogue my first impressions of her.

Long legs. Tight ass. Olive skin, smooth like a baby's bottom. Eyes green, cool, and sparkling like Montana's glaciers. Small breasts that pressed against the buttons of her shirt when she huffed at Drake, which she'd done often. Tight ass. Hell, I'd already noted that. *Move on, soldier.* High quality gear. Regulation grade combat boots, weathered, sturdy, capable, dark desert tan, a shade that had grown on me.

The impressions kept coming. High cheekbones. Wide mouth. Small nose, like an afterthought. And yes, she'd been familiar from the start. I'd seen her face somewhere.

The contrast between light eyes and brown skin stunned.

Distinctive. Exotic. Striking. Tall, taller than most women. Long-limbed and elegant. Her body's construction reminded me of the Makonde's exquisite woodcarvings. Standing against the background of the plains as the sun did a slam-dunk on the horizon, she looked like a rare and mysterious creature, like one of the Serengeti's most striking mirages.

A mirage, damn, that kind of poetic crap is what happened when a guy didn't get any and for a while. No time for that right now. *Boots on the ground, Matthias*. Like every person who worked at the station, she had just come under my protection. Off-limits. Out of bounds. Don't even think about it.

And then she opened her mouth. Attitude. Too much of it. Couldn't blame her at first. Drake was a royal dick. Brains. She knew what questions to ask. Not a tentative bone in her body. She was smart, feisty, frisky. Boldness. Check. Arrogance. Check. Insolence. Damn. Who the hell was this hurricane wearing boots?

Jade Romo. She was the hippest, hottest thing that had happened to wildlife conservation in a while. The founder of Mission Protect, not much was known about her personal background. Word was she didn't talk about herself, only about her work.

Nobody knew where the hell she'd come from, only she'd skyrocketed on to the scene to raise awareness and funds to save wildlife from extinction while managing to grab the attention of a new generation. She used social media to fuel her fires. If there was such a thing as a celebrity in the conservation world, she was the closest thing to it, which explained why the new research assistants, Cara, and Zeke were staring at Jade, eyes wide, mouths slightly open.

"Oh, my God." Sarah grinned and put her hands together in little claps. "That's why you looked so familiar. Your hair is short now, but you *are* Jade Romo!"

The hair, yeah, it'd thrown me off too. I'd seen several of her documentaries. She was good, no question about it. It's

why she'd landed a regular segment on Nat Geo's most popular show.

"I love Mission Protect," Lara said. "And I read your blog every week."

I read her blog too. Sometimes. When I had time. Okay, not often, but I'd watched many of her segments. She had guts and she was fierce. A little reckless too, if the stories I'd heard about her stay in Montana were true. Something about a face-to-face with a grizzly. She filmed on her own, no crew, no support team. She'd written a book. And she took good pictures. My dad, who was a veterinarian, was a huge fan. He had one of Mission Protect's calendars on the fridge.

But man, she attracted trouble. And publicity. I couldn't afford the attention right now. One rogue tweet and all hell could break loose. As if I didn't have enough shit piled up on my plate. I couldn't have her here, not now and never at the station. Her work was usually based out of the Americas. She liked Alaska too. What the hell was she doing on my side of the world?

"Are you gonna feature the station?" Cara asked, eager, hopeful. "Can I be in your segments? So good for my resume. I bet you I'd look good on TV."

Jade's face flushed in a way that betrayed she was clearly uncomfortable with the attention, a trait I found unexpectedly charming. "Look," she hesitated. "I...yes, I want to feature the work you do here, but I'm not sure how I'll do that yet."

People didn't typically impress the tough, cynical operator I was, but this woman? She showed potential, projecting a unique combination of competence and modesty. *Eyes on the mission*. I might like the woman, but I couldn't have her anywhere near the reserve.

"This can't happen," I said too strongly, startling not only the research assistants but Zeke as well. "I'm gonna get Drake to fly you back to Arusha."

"I'm *not* leaving." She planted her damn boots on the

ground as if she were gonna grow roots. "I've traveled across the world to be here."

Having Jade Romo at the station was dangerous. For the mission. For me. The acid churned in my gut. I had to make an effort not to growl. "You might be used to getting your way wherever you show up, but I'm in charge here, so what I say, goes. Is that clear?"

"Like a window washed with vinegar." She cranked up the glare. "You sound like a self-appointed king. Go ahead, call your director. I'm here to stay."

"The hell you are," I grumbled to myself.

Stalking away from the group, I snatched the cell from my pocket and clicked on the director's number. Zeke just stood there, looking worried, black eyes shifting between Jade and me, while the women huddled together and murmured excitedly.

"Good afternoon, Matthias," Ari answered the phone in his perfect English, his voice muffled against the background noise of a crowd. I could almost see him in my mind, wearing his white linen robe and cap, a dark, devout, small man who had a giant vision for conservation in his homeland.

"I'm at the airstrip," I reported. "I've got a woman who says she's Jade Romo, as in Jade Romo from Mission Protect? She claims she's authorized to be here, but I'm happy to send her on her merry way with your compliments."

"So she's arrived." The director's long sigh crackled in my ear.

I cupped the speaker with my hand and lowered my voice. "You knew she was coming?"

"Yes, I knew."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only found out this morning and as you may remember, I'm not at the reserve. I'm in Dar es Salaam for a conference." He paused before he continued. "I tried calling you, but you were out of range. I didn't know she'd be here this soon."

“Ari?” I said. “This is a very bad idea, a dangerous one—”  
 “So is denying Ms. Romo permission,” Ari said softly.  
 “Don’t you think?”

Fucking hell. He was right. Refusing a permit to a Nat Geo Explorer with a global profile as high as Jade’s would’ve raised all kinds of flags and maybe even endanger our funding. At the same time, we didn’t need anyone coming to check us out in detail, especially not right now.

“You and I will talk when I get back tomorrow.” Ari was right about not wanting to tackle the specifics over the cell. “We’ll sort this out. Surely, we can find a solution to this...predicament.”

It was Ari’s diplomatic way of saying I’d have to find some other way to deal with the problem. He knew what was at stake. I bit down the nasty string of curses that wanted to burst out of my mouth, hung up with Ari, and turned around to face the little group. The acid in my stomach roiled as if I’d just downed a dozen sour lemons.

Jade’s glittering stare fell on my face. “Well?”

She should’ve been called Jade Defiance Romo.

“You’ve arrived at the worst possible time.” I scoured my brain for a quick out. “I don’t have a place to put you up.”

She lowered her chin and leveled those sparkling green eyes on me. “Why can’t you put me up wherever you were going to put Pat Schumer, or whatever her name was?”

“Because Pat Schumer wasn’t going to take up any available room, given that her father, Doctor Schumer, and her mother, also Doctor Schumer, are the lead researchers for our rhino program and already reside at the station. Do you want to spend the night with Pat Schumer’s parents?”

Her lips quirked. “Not really.”

“Yeah.” I said. “I didn’t think you would.”

“I can stay pretty much anywhere,” she said. “I can bunk with the rangers.”

“Did I hear that right?” Drake grinned like the jackass he was as he rejoined us, carrying an overnight bag. “Jade at the bunkhouse? What a great idea.”

“Negative, no.” Drake’s leer ramped up the acid in my gut. “Jade, you will *not* be staying at the rangers’ camp and that’s final.”

Her hands fisted by her sides. Judging by the furious gleam in her eyes, she wanted to clobber me. Part of me wanted to slap myself, because she was gorgeous, even in anger—especially when her eyes flashed with green lightning. She was also brave as hell to defy an intimidating son of a bitch like me. Problem was, I liked brave. I had a thing for brave. But no, goddamnit, this wasn’t about me. It was about something greater than me: the mission. And it was gonna get done.

“It’s okay, Jade.” Petite Sarah eyed me crossly, stood on her toes, and put her arm over Jade’s shoulder. “You can stay with us.”

“Yeah,” Lara agreed, closing ranks around Jade. “Wherever we stay, she stays.”

Cara, Drake, and Zeke stared at me, gazes expectant. Well, damn me. Solidarity was all good and well and I liked a squad that watched each other’s back, but I had to put an end to this shit show and fast.

“The two of you are staying in a quad currently sleeping six,” I said. “It’s tight. Ask Cara. She lives there.”

Cara’s forceful nods confirmed the overcrowding situation. I’d never liked Cara as much as everyone else at the station did, on account of a private misunderstanding we’d had when she first got to the station. But she’d been fine after we straightened that out. Right now, I was grateful for the assist.

“On the other hand,” I went on, flicking my gaze between Sarah and Lara, “If you ladies want to camp out on the deck, that could work. You just have to watch for the mambas. They’re as poisonous as cobras.”

The women shuffled nervously on their feet. They didn’t look so certain anymore. I didn’t blame them. I avoided snakes too. The look that Jade gave me was as lethal as a mamba’s bite.

“Thirteen is vacant,” Zeke put in.

I glared at him with all I had.

“What?” He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s true.”

Zeke was an outstanding ranger and he knew the stakes, but he hated conflict and his instincts always skewed amiable. Plus, he was a huge fan of Mission Protect. In fact, he was the one who’d insisted we incorporate some of Jade’s documentaries in our ranger training.

Jade flashed a dazzling smile in Zeke’s direction, making me jealous as hell. *Jealous?* Hell, I was trudging on a slippery slope. *Stick to the mission, Matthias.*

“Thirteen is out of commission,” I said. “The place is a goddamn wreck. Maybe you should fly back and wait in Arusha for something to open up. Hell, maybe you can just take your pictures in Arusha and spare us the trouble altogether.”

“I don’t think so.” She flicked her long bangs away from her face. “I’ll stay in thirteen.”

This woman was gonna be a handful. She had the potential to wreck my world. But I couldn’t turn her away for no reason, so I postponed her eviction until tomorrow and threw my hands up in the air. “Suit yourself, but don’t complain and—whatever you do—don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Oh, you’ve warned me all right,” she bit out between gritted teeth. “Too many times. So I’m going to warn you now. About me.”

Fucking hothead. Sexy as hell. She was provocation in the flesh. The way she was looking at me right now? Had I been a total caveman, I would’ve dragged her into the bush and mauled the breath out of her.

I sucked in some air and counted to ten, grappling with the part of me that was getting out of control just thinking about it. I needed to find a way to blow off some steam. I was hopped up with a twelve-month supply of horny and busting at the seams. Yeah, that explained this clusterfuck. Big time. *Nip it in the ass, soldier.* Keep it official.

I opened the Land Rover's doors one after the other and gestured toward the truck. "We need to be back to the station before dark." The poachers were most active at night. "Drake, Cara, with Zeke. New arrivals, with me."

Drake grabbed his duffel and mounted the other truck, followed by Cara and Zeke. The new research assistants crammed into the backseat, leaving only the front seat available. Jade climbed in it without saying a word, launching a surly glance in my direction. I deserved it. I hadn't exactly been a warm and fuzzy welcoming committee. But what the hell was I supposed to do?

I came around the vehicle, sat at the wheel, and buckled my seatbelt before I switched on the ignition and started down the cratered road. If only we had a few extra dollars to improve the infrastructure around here. And more rangers wouldn't hurt either, to expedite the poachers' send off to hell. I shifted gears and the wheels gained traction in the mud. We sped on the rough trail, bouncing and rattling, followed by Zeke and the others.

"Okay, pay attention." I half-yelled, speaking over the roar of the truck's engine. "Your orientation begins now. We run an organized, safe research station at the reserve. We're not a vacation destination. We're a workhorse. The bulk of the money goes to research. It's my responsibility to keep everybody at the station safe. That also means you. Understood?"

In the rearview mirror, the girls nodded in unison. I gave them the usual speech. Rule number one, nobody went out in the field alone. Rule number two, all research parties had to be authorized by me. Rule number three, everyone stuck to the compound and circulated through the elevated walkways to minimize animal encounters. That's how you kept people and animals safe when you shared habitats.

As I spoke, I glanced over at Jade. She was ignoring me, or at least making a show of it. She lowered her window, closed her eyes, and inhaled big gulps of warm African air. Her small nostrils quivered with her breaths, and her chest rose and fell as she took it all in. Recalling my own arrival to

Africa, I identified with the joy she must've been feeling inside.

I'd grown up hiking Montana's rugged ranges and exploring the wilderness with my brothers. During my years in the Navy, I'd traveled all over the globe. But there was no other place on earth like the Serengeti, where humans were contained and beasts roamed free, where battles raged every day for the soul of the planet and warriors like me traded blood for service and service for life. This is where I'd come to put in my time, pay for my sins, and battle for my soul. This was my prize and punishment and for the precious lives here, I went into combat every day.

"It's my job to keep the wildlife safe," I explained, although I wasn't sure if Jade was listening. "Mostly from poachers, but also from the local tribes, tourists, researchers, and yes, even from you, well-intended people. So bear that in mind when I tell you no."

Jade glanced at me and flashed her ferocious smirk.

"Something funny?"

"Hail to the great Matthias." Her smirk widened.

"Carry on."

I glared at her, because I was in command around here, but I had to smile inside. If I'd wanted peace and quiet I would've stayed home. Although I appreciated a soldier who followed orders, yes people never lasted long on my teams. I liked folks who spoke their mind and lived their lives with integrity, who were not afraid of showing who they really were. Watching Jade eyeing the plains with a greedy gleam in her eye, it hit me. She was like that, wild, free, and fierce. She belonged here.

Hell, this was just getting harder. I stomped down on the accelerator. I didn't want to like her. No sense in admiring the grit of the spitfire I was gonna vanish from the Serengeti ASAP.

"Oh, my God, look, giraffes!" Somebody yelled in the backseat, unleashing a squealing festival. "Are these the same ones we saw from the plane?"

“Probably.” I braked to allow the herd to cross the road.

The giraffes were spectacular animals, tall, majestic, and elegant as they strolled across the road. We had a lot of giraffes in the reserve, and yet I never got tired of watching them. Jade whipped out her camera. After uncapping the lens and adjusting the focus, she started to shoot. Oblivious to the trucks, the animals glided across the road and headed west, paralleling our route.

As soon as the herd crossed, I shifted into gear and stepped on the gas, negotiating the craters that puckered the dirt road. The late afternoon light conditions turned from good to ideal. Jade shot lots of pictures, tracking a particularly tall individual through her camera lens, a male, judging by his size, his median lump, and his bold, bony antlers.

“My God.” She hid a huge grin behind her camera. “That’s a phenomenal specimen, *the* Channing Tatum of the giraffe world.”

I almost burst out laughing. It was one thing to see these animals in a zoo, surrounded by people and fences. But seeing and photographing them in their environments, interacting with their peers, and free? Phenomenal.

Jade’s eyes were light and luminous with discovery as she looked through her viewfinder. I’d been doing this long enough to recognize that her passion for wildlife was an authentic force. Her energy was contagious. No wonder she inspired others with her work. I could get used to riding in my truck with her sitting beside me. If only I didn’t have to get her out of here, STAT.

The giraffes moved away from the road, sauntering into the bush, stopping only to snack on the tops of the acacias. The big fellow became an outline against the sunset. Jade leaned out the window, brown hair rippling in the wind as she adjusted her lens to keep track of the tall male in the distance.

A crack rang in the air and echoed through the bush. My gut went cold. I knew that sound too fucking well. A flock of birds took to the air. I stiffened in my seat and stepped on

the brakes. The truck screeched to a stop. On our tail, Zeke's Land Rover braked as well.

"What was that?" someone asked from the backseat.

The sound rang again, followed by several others.

"Firearm," Jade said. "High caliber."

She pressed her eye to the viewfinder and turned the ring between her fingers, zooming in. I stuck my head out the window and craned my neck, until I caught a glimpse of that very long neck as it wobbled in the air before it leaned over and disappeared with a crash that resonated in the bush.

Jade's gaze met my stare, wide and liquid. "He's down."

*Jade*

“I need you out of the truck,” Matthias ordered, before he clicked on his radio. “Code 99, I repeat, code 99. ADW in progress. Zone 3. All units, code 17. I repeat, all units, code 17. My current position is...” He checked the GPS mounted on the console and rattled off our coordinates. “I’m moving to intercept.”

The radio crackled with activity. Several voices responded, spitting out codes. I assumed the replies came from ranger patrols scattered throughout the reserve. My heart had stopped and my butt was glued to the seat. I’d known that there was a war going on in Africa, a battle between humans and beasts, existence and extinction. But nothing could’ve prepared me for the sheer shock of watching that magnificent giraffe topple like a centenary tree, inexplicably stricken.

“Why are you still in this truck?”

Matthias’s voice startled me out of the shock. I wasn’t the only one. The girls sat frozen in place, eyes wide and mouths gaping. Matthias stuck his arm out the window and motioned for Zeke to drive his truck alongside ours. He then

addressed us with the factual, professional coolness of a veteran of many wars.

“Move out,” he ordered, voice tight and controlled. “You will board the other vehicle immediately.”

Something about his tone worked, because the women sprang their doors open and obediently scurried out of the truck.

I swallowed a dry gulp. “Let me come with you.”

“What?” he snapped, then quickly regained his control. “Negative, that’s a no.”

“Look at me.” I met my reflection on his sunglasses. “This is why I came.”

He cursed under his breath. “What part of ‘get out’ don’t you understand?”

“I’m good to go.” My fingers tightened around my camera. “I can do this.”

“You are *not* getting hurt under my watch,” he spat between clenched teeth. “Every second you delay means another bullet in the air. Is that what you want?”

No, it wasn’t what I wanted at all. Despite my fervent wishes to the contrary, more shots echoed on the plains. I considered another round of discussion, but Matthias’s face settled into a steel mask. He wasn’t budging. There could be more giraffes dying out there. I grabbed my backpack and jumped out of the truck.

“Secure the station,” Matthias said to Zeke through the window. “Get them out of here.”

He slammed on the accelerator and peeled out, cutting across the clearing and barreling into the bush. Sixty seconds later, those brakes screeched again. I was shocked and upset about the giraffe, but I was also reeling from the fact that the game warden had kept me from doing exactly what I’d come to do.

“Jade?” Peter called. “Come on, we need to get out of here.” Oh, yeah. I needed to get the hell out of here all right.

More shots rang in the bush. They didn’t sound that far

away. I slung my pack over my shoulders, checked my bearings, and estimated the distance between me and the nearest brush. What was it? Fifty meters maybe?

I was no Usain Bolt, but I kept form and I could run a pretty decent mile. I looked down at my smart watch, activated my GPS, and marked my location before I gripped the camera hanging from my neck and met Peter's eyes.

"Oh, no," he said, reading my mind. "No, Jade. Stay, Jade. Jade!"

My muscles bunched up and a burst of energy exploded into movement. I bolted away from the road, my feet pumping over the uneven terrain, my eyes scanning the way ahead in the dearth of the setting light. I'd never been anyone's dog and I wasn't about to start now. I had skills and I'd educated myself on the perils of the African bush.

I leaped across a ditch and swerved around a termite mound, knowing full well that the truck couldn't follow me on this trajectory. I made it to the bush before Zeke could turn the Land Rover around. Then I lost sight of the truck, as I jogged, roughly, on a northerly heading in an attempt to intercept the route that Matthias had taken.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, I found the truck's fresh tracks and followed them. My breath came in gasps. My lungs burned. Along the way, I was very quickly reminded of some of the things I'd learned during my research phase. The African bush wasn't friendly to human skin. The acacia's thorns tore at me and left a set of impressive scratches on my arm.

Thank God I'd worn long cargo pants and boots. I slowed down and picked my route with more care, trying to avoid further shredding. Ten minutes later, I spotted Matthias's Land Rover, parked in a clearing. The truck was empty. His Tilley hat lay abandoned on the front seat.

He was out there. Without backup. Crap. I surveyed the area. The light was waning quickly. The shots had stopped. I understood the risks of entering a battlefield. I considered backtracking, but only for a second. If I could catch the

poachers in action, I'd have pictures and a hell of a story to tell.

I knelt on the ground, pulled out my gear from the backpack, and forced myself to go through my standard equipment check. The hum of mosquitoes buzzing around me in a dense cloud reminded me to find my repellent and drench myself in it, dispelling the gathering. Back to my gear. I strapped my prized body camera to my shoulder and flipped it on. I checked my Nikon DSLR, inserted a new memory card, and adjusted it to low light setting. With my equipment ready, I secured my pack to my back and advanced cautiously, following the imprint of Matthias's fresh tracks on the ground.

Once in the bush, it was hard to make out shapes, especially with the light ebbing. I kept at high alert. Twice, I startled some kind of fowl from its cover among the undergrowth and once I almost stepped on a warthog. It huffed at me before it took off, tail in the air. What else was crammed in the woods along with me?

I stopped and listened. It took a little while, but I caught a break. Voices. Somewhere to my right. Sound carried far on the Serengeti, so I stole silently toward the noise. As the sun sank beyond the fiery horizon, I caught a glimpse of a clearing in the distance. There was a bulge on the ground. I zoomed my lens and looked through my viewfinder, taking advantage of the last vestiges of light. I clamped down on my lip. The giraffe.

Flashlights came on. I counted eight men huddled around the dead animal. The giraffe had already been gutted and the poachers were hard at work skinning the animal with expediency that suggested a professional poaching crew.

I gulped around the lump in my throat. Tempering my adrenaline, I crept along a dry creek that sheltered me from view. It led me to a small gap in the bush overlooking the larger clearing. Poachers had a reputation for being a nasty bunch and what I'd learned so far indicated that these merited some extra care. I crawled up the dusty bank, took

off my backpack to ensure a low profile, and concealed myself in the grass. Night had fallen and a full moon was quickly rising, showering the bush with a silvery sparkle that accentuated the shadows around me.

I adjusted the body cam on my shoulder. Flash was out of the question. Under the moonlight, I'd need a longer exposure to capture any images. I braced my left arm on the ground, steadied my DSLR against my forearm, and began to shoot a combination of pictures and footage, hoping to capture at least a few clear images.

The moonlight and the zoom lens allowed me to see the men working on the giraffe. They wielded power tools, wore military fatigues, and were well armed. Some of the men were covered in blood as they worked to skin the animal. A grunt startled me. The rustle of several large bodies passing nearby had me on the alert for an unfriendly animal encounter. I tried not to think about Africa's great predators. *You wanted to come to Africa, Jade? Well, there you have it, girl. Enjoy your visit.*

I took in a deep breath. My lungs filled with the scent of ash-covered loam and grass, dung, urine and blood. The mosquitoes buzzed by, but they weren't biting. I was stretched out on my belly, propped on my elbows, clicking away, minding my own business, when the elephant stepped on me. At least, that's what I thought happened for a whole ten seconds, when I couldn't breathe under the crushing weight that squashed me to the ground like a turd smashed under a giant foot. Of course, the fact that elephants have no hands should have been a dead giveaway, since a massive hand clamped down over my mouth.

"Quiet." A voice rasped in my ear. "Not a word. Understand?"

I froze and nodded. The pressure over my mouth eased. When I didn't scream, or move, the hand retreated and the crushing weight lifted.

The murmur came again. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Funny how I'd only heard that pebbly voice today for the first time and yet I knew exactly who it belonged to.

"I'm doing my job, kind of like you," I whispered, glancing at Matthias, who now sprawled on his belly next to me, eyeing the poachers. He'd ditched his sunglasses and had his carbine with him as well as a sidearm I hadn't seen before. I caught a sparkle of fire in his eyes before repositioning my camera over my arm and jockeying for my next picture. "How did you find me?"

"You sounded like a rhino coming through the bush."

"Did not."

"Quiet." He lifted a pair of state of the art thermal binoculars that I'd love to own. "My men will be here soon."

"I thought the poachers were after elephant and rhino," I whispered. "Why are they poaching a giraffe?"

"That's a magnificent specimen for any collector," Matthias said in hushed tones. "And giraffe meat is an expensive, exotic treat in China. They'll make a good chunk of change on that kill. Now, you're gonna backtrack to the truck and wait for me there."

"I will do no such thing."

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that?" He cursed under his breath. "You're out of here the minute we get out of the bush..."

I don't think he was done by any means, and I sure had some things I wanted to say, but the *click* of a weapon cocking behind us silenced us both. We exchanged wary looks. *This is all your fault*, his eyes said. Worst part? He could be right.

"Follow my lead." He placed his weapon on the ground and rose with his hands in the air.

I set my camera on the dirt and rose to my feet, hands up. Two men dressed in green camouflage faced us. One was taller than the other by a good foot, but both men were armed with AK-47s and both weapons were centered on us.

My stomach plummeted to my feet. Had I really gotten us caught? No way. I had skills. I was good. It hit me like a Mack

truck. These poachers had set up a trap. They'd actually lured us in with their kill. These two must have been holding back to ambush first responders. Were they out to kill the reserve's rangers?

My knees buckled a little. I forced myself to breathe and focused on the two men. *Think, Jade.* I hadn't seen this kind of action in a while. *Assess, adapt, overcome.*

Eyes wide, the shorter man of the two pointed a fat finger at Matthias. "*Kifaru?*" he said, in Swahili.

"*Ndiyo.*" The taller man's smile widened and he motioned for the other man to approach us from the right before he shifted into perfect, British-accented English. "I think we just got ourselves *the prize.*"

Since the taller man seemed to be calling the shots, I labeled him as T-man in my mind. Short man became Pot Belly, for obvious reasons. T-man and Pot Belly approached us with their weapons pointed straight at our chests. At this range, a single bullet could do the trick.

T-man eyed Matthias and spoke in a deep baritone as he continued his approach. I didn't understand a word he said, but I'd witnessed enough conflicts in my life to recognize the tension in the air, the winner giving orders to the loser, saying things, probably nasty things, judging by the way in which T-man's eyes kept deviating in my direction.

If I had gotten us into this mess, I had to get us out of it, and fast.

Matthias could've been a block of granite next to me, a sculpted rock sticking out from the earth with zero expression on his blank face.

"What's he saying?" I muttered between stiff lips.

"You don't wanna know," he muttered back.

"You got a plan?" I kept my stare on the two approaching thugs.

His voice was barely audible. "It doesn't include you."

Great. Peachy. Fantastic. He wasn't a team player. I swallowed a dry gulp.

T-man came to stand next to me. His breath blustered

over my cheeks as his black eyes inspected my face. Sweat glimmered on his narrow forehead, pooled above his lips and shone over his razored skull. My heart, which was already beating hard, revved up. I pressed my lips together and forced myself into assess mode.

With a swipe of his hand, T-man ripped the body cam from my shoulder. The straps of my harness broke, but the yank left me smarting all the same. Next to me, Matthias flinched, but he held still when Pot Belly came around and pressed his gun to the back of his skull.

T-man extracted the memory card and dropped it in his pocket before he slammed my body cam on the ground and stomped on it several times. The little camera crumbled beneath his boot with sickening cracks. I cringed. Great. There went another cutting edge, pricy toy. If I survived today, Hannah was going to kill me.

T-man hung his weapons from his shoulder, seized my arm above the elbow and dug his fingers into my flesh.

“Kneel,” he said to Matthias. When Matthias didn’t follow his order, T-man pulled out a nine millimeter from his holster and pressed the muzzle against my temple. “Kneel and clasp your hands behind your back or she dies.”

Reluctantly, slowly, Matthias bent his knees and knelt on the ground. His eyes never left T-man’s face. Pot Belly grabbed Matthias’s hand gun from its holster and stuck it in his belt. Matthias’s glare could’ve incinerated everyone in the clearing.

“So you are the great Matthias Hawking?” T-man studied Matthias. “You don’t look so great to me right now, kneeling on the ground. I had my hopes, but I didn’t think you’d venture out here on your own, when most of your men are chasing ghosts on the other side of the reserve.”

The cavalry might be coming, but apparently, not soon enough.

T-man barked something at Pot Belly, who snapped into action. He pulled out a tattered map from his front pocket, unfolded it, and laid it on the ground before Matthias.

“Where’s the ivory?” T-man said. “Where are the elephants?”

My belly went cold. The thug was looking for the reserve’s elephant herds. I’d learned about the herds before I came. They represented millions of dollars on the ivory black market. At a time when some of the greatest herds of Africa had been decimated, Pacha Ziwa’s elephants not only survived, they thrived. They had developed a survival strategy against poachers that included an uncanny ability to seemingly disappear from the landscape. Where they went was a mystery. For the safety of the elephants, the scientists who tracked them kept the secret. But now the poachers were closing in and the herds were in extreme danger.

Matthias stared at T-man. His gaze never once wavered. Not a single word made it through his tightly pressed lips. I let out a slow breath. If anybody knew where the herds were, it would be the reserve’s game warden. The poacher’s plan began to make sense to me. Bait and trap the rangers to find the elephants. But Matthias made no move to help these thugs. I liked that about him. Now I just needed to come up with a plan to get us out of here. Nothing like a gun to the head to stimulate the brain.

T-man squeezed my arm and confronted Matthias. “This here your girlfriend?”

“I’m most certainly *not* his girlfriend,” I said, feigning indignation. I didn’t think it would help if T-man thought we were an item and frivolous conversation seemed like the best start to my plan, which so far, mostly consisted of smoke and mirrors, delay and distract. If I could keep us alive until the rangers got here, we had a fighting chance.

“I don’t believe you, girl.” T-man’s gaze shifted between Matthias and I. “I know he likes you. Watch this.” In a sudden move, he put me into a chokehold. “Yeah, he likes you. See? His whiteass face is getting all red.” He let out a mocking cackle as Matthias’s face flushed even redder, along with his ears. My heart was going a million miles an hour, but so was my mind.

“And why wouldn’t he like you?” T-man scoffed against my ear. “You are all woman. You’d make an excellent lay. Sweet ass.” He squeezed my butt, dipped his nose in my hair and inhaled. “You smell good, like a mare in heat, like you need to be fucked really hard.”

I held my breath against the spicy tinge of his sweat and the smell of pot that scented his breath. His nearness made me sick to my stomach. But I wasn’t going to panic. Instead, I stomped on his foot, hard, and tried to twist out of his clutch in a bid to test his strength. My findings weren’t encouraging. He had a good hold of me and his body was built of marble-like muscle. He pressed his forearm around my neck and cut off my breath until polka dots began to dance before my eyes.

“Feisty zebra you got here.” He laughed his unpleasant cackle. “I’m going to enjoy breaking her in.”

“Leave her alone, Kumbuyo.” Matthias finally spoke. “Your problem is with me.”

“You know my name?” The man eased his chokehold and I could breathe again. “How?”

“Kobe Kumbuyo.” Matthias flashed a ferocious smirk. “I know who you are and where you come from. I know you work for Lamba, although I can’t figure out why you’d work for a son of a bitch like him. My advice? Get the fuck away while you can, take your goddamn poachers with you, and don’t come back.”

It was a bold warning for a man who was currently unarmed and kneeling on the ground with the muzzle of an AK-47 hovering in the vicinity of his head. Not only was I shocked, I was impressed, because the man that Matthias had just defied was no small time poacher.

The name Kobe Kumbuyo threatened to turn my leg bones into mashed potatoes. I locked my knees and tried to reason through the fear. I’d come across Kumbuyo’s foul credentials during my research. He was part of an infamous rebel group that border-hopped throughout Central Africa, trading tusks and prized animal parts to buy weapons. He

worked for Francoise Lamba, the bloody leader of the Lord's Liberation Army.

Lamba was wanted for crimes against humanity. His army raided villages, killed the men and elders, and abducted the women and children. He raped the women and turned them into slaves, which he trafficked for money. He forced boys into his so-called-army and drove them to kill their own people.

But Lamba's reign of terror had been concentrated in Central Africa, Uganda, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Until now. The fact that Kobe Kumbuyo was here, at the very edge of the Serengeti, was very bad news for Tanzania. Wherever Kumbuyo went, Lamba followed and massacre occurred, for wildlife, sure, but also for people.

"I'm warning you," Matthias muttered, from his place kneeling on the ground. "Get the fuck out of Pacha Ziwa."

"Shoot him," Kumbuyo said to Pot Belly with the casual ease of someone who'd given that exact same order a thousand times.

Matthias's eyes turned to his would be killer. There wasn't a trace of fear in his stare, only fierce, pure defiance and rage that tensed his coiled body. Pot Belly pressed the muzzle of his AK-47 against the base of Matthias's skull and put his finger to the trigger. A warning screamed in my mind. *Adapt, adapt, adapt!*

"Don't shoot him." My voice startled everybody. "Those elephant herds? He's the only one who knows where they are. Who's going to tell you where to find the ivory if you shoot him?"

Matthias's head snapped up. His eyes focused on me. It was as if he was seeing me for the first time. Pot Belly looked to Kumbuyo in confusion. Kumbuyo's narrow forehead crumpled and his lips puckered in an angry pout. I don't know what made him madder, Matthias's defiant glare or his own lapse in logic.

Kumbuyo hesitated for a moment, then grabbed a fistful

of my hair and hurled me across the small clearing, pitching me against the trunk of a nearby tree. I whirled around. When possible, I preferred to face my opponent. I found Kumbuyo's eyes fast on me and his handgun aimed straight at my chest.

"Don't do this, Kumbuyo," Matthias rumbled. "If you hurt the woman you'll have the Americans trailing your ass in no time. Lamba won't like that much. Let's make a deal. You let her go and I'll take you to the herds."

"No way," I said. "The herds have to be protected."

Matthias's stare clobbered me. "How about you keep quiet for a change?"

"You're going to tell me where the herds are," Kumbuyo said, towering over Matthias. "You're going to tell me right now or you're going to hear her scream."

Matthias started. "If you hurt her—"

Kumbuyo struck Matthias's face with the back of his hand, a hard blow that twisted Matthias's head on his neck and sent him teetering to the ground. I gasped and started to go to him, but Kumbuyo's gun cased me again, persuading me that moving would be a really bad idea.

Matthias caught himself with one arm, straightened on his knees, and wiped the blood trickling from his nose. He stared at the crimson blotch on his hand and smiled, a flash of fangs. Slowly, deliberately, he lifted his head and fixed his glare back on Kumbuyo.

"The elephant herds?" Kumbuyo said.

Matthias gave him nothing. I had to give the guy credit. He had the balls of a bull.

And then Kumbuyo cocked his gun and aimed it at Matthias's head.

*Keep adapting.* I had to do something.

"Excuse me?" I curled my index at Kumbuyo. "May I have a word with you, in private, please?"

Kumbuyo's stare shifted to me. "Now what?"

"I might know a few things that may interest you."

Kumbuyo's eyebrows raised on his forehead. "And what would that be?"

"About the elephants?"

Matthias's voice came in a low growl. "She doesn't know shit."

"I do too." I tried to sound convincing.

"She just got here," Matthias said. "Fresh off the plane."

"I know some things," I said defensively. "And I'll share, *If* you give me what I want."

Kumbuyo chuckled. "Do you think you're in position to negotiate with me?"

"Allow me to explain," I said, thinking on my feet, grappling to come up with something that might sound plausible without giving up my true identity, because that would only complicate a bad scenario and make it worse. "I'm here on assignment. I'm a photojournalist. In the States. I came here to get the story behind the story. I'm interested in talking to people like you, people who are in the forefront of Africa's civil wars, freedom fighters like you."

"Is that so?" The man flashed a contemptuous grin that confirmed my ruse wasn't working. "You must think I'm an idiot if you think I'd fall for that one." Kumbuyo eyed Matthias. "You were about to talk elephants?"

"No, I wasn't." Matthias flashed his insolent smirk.

He was trying to mess with Kumbuyo's mind. Anger often led to mistakes and mistakes offered opportunities. But Kumbuyo was a seasoned fighter, and he had his own mind games to play. He sneered at Matthias and kept his gun on me.

"I suppose you need to be persuaded." Kumbuyo turned to me. "Take off your shirt."

My stomach hit the ground. "Excuse me?"

Kumbuyo barked. "Do what I say."

"Um..." I hesitated. "I'm not very good at that."

Kumbuyo pulled the trigger.

The shot rang loud in my ears. The impact rattled my knees. Was I hit? I glanced down at myself, heart hammering

in my throat. No blood. No pain. I looked to one side, where the moonlight illuminated the tree bark, chipped by a bullet, not three inches from my head. I took a breath and then another. I was alive and so was Matthias, whose face echoed the moon's pale light. Kumbuyo had proven he was beyond dangerous. He wouldn't hesitate to kill us.

"Next time I'll punch a hole in the middle of your pretty forehead," he said. "I won't ask again: Take. Off. Your. Shirt."

My brain was in full gear. I was dealing for our lives. Matthias's jaw clenched so tight that a muscle twitched on his face. One of the poachers who was working on the giraffe came to investigate when he heard the shot and lingered at the clearing. Now there was another armed thug flanking Matthias. Crap. It was time to adapt some more, to the extreme if necessary.

"All righty." I swallowed a huge gulp of fear and tinkered with my buttons. If my delay and distract tactics were going to work, I needed to convert my weaknesses into strengths and play up whatever assets I had available, which were not many at the moment.

I steadied my voice and let out a little huff. "How about a new trade? You don't have to be such an asshole, you know."

Kumbuyo's eyes narrowed. "What did you call me?"

"An asshole," I said, matter of factly. "The asshole is that part of your anatomy from where you—"

"I know what it is!" He snapped. "You don't call me names, woman!"

"Oh, come on." I batted my eyelashes like a shameless flirt, my fingers progressing slowly down my buttons. "You don't have to be all mean and grumpy all the time."

He snarled, a soul-freezing sound. "What?"

"You." I said a little prayer in my head and stuck to my plan. "You're not a bad looking guy. In fact, you're kind of attractive when you smile, which by the way, is not nearly often enough. If I'd met you at a bar in, say, Arusha, and you would've bought me a drink or something, I may have let you take me upstairs, if you get my meaning."

Kumbuyo's eyes widened.

Matthias rumbled. "Jade..."

"I'm not ashamed to admit it," I said over Matthias's voice. "You're an attractive fellow. You're big and strong and brawny. I'm a sucker for brawny. And I do love big." I let out a flirty chuckle. "You give me an interview? I'll make you a very happy guy."

I let my gaze roam over his body, lingering over the bulge rising between his legs. I batted my eyelashes some more, pouted a bit and, having captured Kumbuyo's complete attention, chose that moment to part my shirt. His knuckles tightened around his gun but his arm fell to his side, along with his gun. He stared at me, lips slacked, eyes centered on my body.

I was a shock-and-awe kind of girl and a true believer in the tactical element of surprise. So I slid my arms out of my sleeves, dropped my shirt on the ground, and reached behind my back. Following one crazy feat with another, I unhooked my bra and tossed it aside, as casually as if I were taking off my sunglasses.

And then I was naked from the waist up, bared to the elements and exposed to the feral stares aiming at me, proving that I could shock the shit out of anyone, including my wildest self.