

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 hunksness, 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."