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## PROLOGUE

atalie stopped before the windows of the Italian bistro she and Greg often frequented, especially Greg if she was away, because he didn't feel like cooking. She'd been gone a week this time and looked forward to spending a few days at home before her next flight out. Her heart beat a tad faster at the thought of the romantic evening she'd planned. It was time they made some plans for the future and think about a family. The thought alone of the sex toys she'd bought in Europe caused her skin to prickle and a slow throb to start between her legs. Shading her eyes, she peered eagerly inside to see if Greg was there. He was, but he was not alone. Before her eyes, he leaned over to passionately kiss the blonde woman sitting opposite him. She stared, fixated, as their lips glued together, Greg's hand stealthily wandering to the girl's breast while his beady eyes glanced around to see if anyone was watching.

Her breathing stalled, her heart turned inside her chest. So the gossip was true after all. He was nothing but a two-timing bastard! Slowly she let her breath out, steaming up the window. For ten frozen minutes she stood outside the restaurant and peered at the cozy little scene. Then, as she watched Greg lean over and start kissing the woman again, anger took over. Anger and pain. For the second time in her life, a man she was seriously involved with had betrayed her. She briefly contemplated going into the restaurant and confronting the two of them. But making a scene in public wasn't her style. Abruptly she turned away, her eyes blinded with angry tears.

Hurrying home, she hardly looked where she walked. Her feet found the way automatically. A car honked angrily as she crossed the street without looking first. It didn't penetrate her troubled mind.

Today was the anniversary of their lengthy engagement, and she'd so hoped that Greg would finally agree to a wedding date. Her flight had landed two hours ahead of schedule. Because of engine problems, the pilot did not stop in Calgary, but had flown directly to Vancouver. She'd headed straight for home to surprise Greg, but he wasn't there. It was near dinnertime, so she figured he would be at their favorite restaurant just a few blocks away and happily changed out of her uniform, put on his favorite dress, and rushed out to meet him there, only to have her happiness replaced by bitterness and pain.

Once in her apartment, she threw her purse on the table, yanked off her coat and fell onto the couch. Tears streamed down her cheeks until she finally wiped them away with an angry swipe of her hand and sat up resolutely. "That's it," she said through

tight lips. "No more men for me. One broken marriage and now a broken engagement are enough to last me a lifetime. Men are all the same. From now on, I'll just concentrate on my career."

Resolutely, she got up off the couch and went to the bathroom. On her way, she picked up the bag containing the toys and threw it in the trash. After washing her face, she took off the dress, put some drops in her bloodshot eyes to hide that she'd been crying, then went to the kitchen to make coffee. Just as she turned on the percolator and started for the living room to grab her sweats, she heard the door close. Greg had returned. And the ache in her heart returned full force, and also her anger.

"Natalie? Where are you?"

"In the kitchen," she answered in clipped tones.

"My, you sound in a good mood," he said casually and leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek, his hand reaching inside her bra.

She felt repulsed by the grimy hand that had just fondled another woman's breast. She avoided it and turned her face away so the kiss landed somewhere on her hair. Trying to maintain her composure, she said, "Greg, I want to talk to you. Let's go to the living room."

"That sounds serious." He grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, his hand already inside her panties, digging between her legs.

"You might say it is," she answered sarcastically as she twisted out of his embrace. The blonde's perfume clung to him; his clothes, his face. It nauseated her.

"How about a coffee first?"

"Forget about the coffee. That's for me. I want you to pack your bags and get out," she spat. She stalked into the living room, grabbed her sweats still hanging over the back of a chair and pulled them on while she walked to the window. His gaze annoyed her. It was the same story as always, he'd want sex and that would make up for everything. She turned her back to him and gazed out the windows.

"What?"

"I'm serious. Pack your bags and get out. Our relationship has come to an end." Inwardly she trembled as she made this final decision.

"Honey, what's wrong? I love you, and –"

"Don't you talk to me about love! I don't think you know the meaning of it." Slowly, she turned to face him. "I just saw you with your girlfriend. I was at the bistro."

"Oh, so that's it – Sweetheart, let's talk about this. There's nothing –"

"Talk about it? What is there to talk about? And how can you be so casual about it? You're nothing but a two-timing -"

"She's just a friend, Natalie. You're overreacting."

She hesitated for a moment, the deep desire to talk and sort things out almost causing her to change her mind. But then the picture of him kissing the blonde and his hands all over the woman's body floated before her eyes. "Friend, my foot. And if you think I'm overreacting now, just watch me if you don't get the hell out of my apartment!"

"Okay – calm down. I'll go stay with a friend for a while until you come to your senses."

"This isn't just for a while, Greg. I'm breaking off our engagement." Promptly she tore off the engagement ring and threw it at him. It rolled silently toward his feet. Sheepishly, he bent to pick it up.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it. Plenty more where you came from and better, too!"

"Oh, you're insufferable!" Natalie shouted and walked out onto the balcony before she gave in to temptation and threw something at him. "And leave your keys!"

Gazing at the city lights with burning eyes, she heard him rummage around in the bedroom. Something plopped onto the floor with a loud thud and she smiled with satisfaction. Good. He was packing his suitcases. Yet as she heard items being thrown into the suitcases, the sound tore at her heart. The angry blood coursing through her veins seemed to wash away whatever feelings she had for him. Greg's unfaithfulness had created another void to match the one left by her ex-husband.

The lids slammed shut and the latches clicked. He walked into the living room dragging the suitcases behind him not caring what he knocked over. She winced as something crashed to the floor and hoped it wasn't her prized vase, the one that had belonged to her grandmother. "The keys!" she should over her shoulder.

She heard his keys jingle as he removed the apartment keys and the front door key. He threw them at her. They landed on the balcony near her feet.

Her anger turned into a slow simmer. It overshadowed the pain she felt at being betrayed yet again. Finally the door slammed and she waited on the balcony to see if Greg really left the building. When she saw him lugging the two suitcases to his car, she closed the balcony door and sat on the floor, her back against the cool glass of the doors. He had knocked a plant onto the floor. The pot had shattered, the scattered shards reminding her of the broken pieces of her heart, the black soil matching her mood.

Suddenly she felt very empty. The silence came at her from all sides. She was alone again. But hadn't she always been alone? Even during her first marriage she'd felt very lonely, and her relationship with Greg hadn't been much better.

Straightening her back, she scrambled up from the floor and walked to the kitchen with determined strides. "I'll just concentrate on myself from now on. The hell with men," she muttered as she poured a cup of coffee.

## Chapter One

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His publisher's proposal of switching from nonfiction to fiction aggravated him, and he'd had half a mind to tell his editor to forget about the whole thing. He'd been out of circulation so long. How did one go about romancing a woman in the little time he had before setting out on the next safari? Or at least, ask one to go with him to Africa? He glanced at her slim fingers as she placed the oxygen mask on her face. She had small hands, capable, with neatly trimmed fingernails devoid of polish. She wasn't wearing a ring, but that didn't necessarily mean she was single. Could he take a chance? He recited some sentences in his mind. *Hi, I'm Ryan Jamieson, would you go to Africa with me? I've got a business proposition* – He chuckled to himself. Too lame. What could he say to draw her attention?

The problem consumed his thoughts. Carefully, he watched her move among the passengers and deal with them. She seemed like a no-nonsense woman, just the type he wouldn't mind dealing with. But marriage? Why the hell not? It could be just a business proposition—a marriage of convenience. Convenience? He couldn't ignore the stirring in his crotch as he gazed at her.

He tried to guess her age. She wasn't below thirty, he felt sure of that. Amused, he watched as she dealt with a toddler. Picking up the little girl, her expression softened. She bounced her on her arm. Now, her blue eyes were misty and he could read a hint of sadness in them. She handed the toddler back to the mother and continued on. Returning her attention to the other passengers her face assumed a mask-like expression, professional at all times, the pasted smile somewhat forced. Her eyes were devoid of interest as if her thoughts were somewhere else.

As she passed him, her skirt brushed against his arm. The faint scent of lily of the valley drifted into his nostrils. Even the perfume she wore appealed to him. Most women wore heavy, overpowering scent. He made up his mind. Somehow, he would catch this woman's attention. "Eh – excuse me?"

She didn't hear him. He cleared his throat and wondered what to say next. "Stewardess, I'd like to ask you a question?"

She half turned toward him, until the passenger she was dealing with demanded her attention. He sighed. He'd have to wait until she served him his tray.

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Natalie automatically handed out trays and dinners. Her mind wasn't on her work. Too often of late, she'd been preoccupied with her loneliness, her broken engagement and Greg's stalking. If only he would leave her alone. But he didn't. At times she was tempted to give in to his pleading, especially as she squirmed in bed at night, so horny that even her own play couldn't satisfy her lust, but she'd pull herself together just in time.

She answered the passenger's questions automatically. They were usually the same queries, each trip. Only the little girl had stirred her for a moment. The sweet toddler had awoken forgotten longings—for a loving husband and children.

She'd been with the airline a long time. Maybe it was time to change jobs? She could easily get a job with another airline. New challenges and countries would help her to forget. And she'd have to move as well, so Greg couldn't find her anymore—

A man in the central aisle cleared his throat, then

said in a loud voice, "Stewardess, will you marry me?"

She almost dropped the tray of food on the lap of the speaker. Quickly she composed herself, set the tray on his table without looking at him, and started to move on to the next passengers.

He grinned. At last he had her full attention. "I meant it," his deep voice sounded behind her.

Pasting on a professional smile, she turned slightly toward the speaker. "Certainly, Sir. I'll get right on that. I'll buy the wedding dress as soon as we land in Vancouver."

"Damn, that was stupid," she heard him muttering softly to himself.

After she served the other first class passengers, Natalie hurried to the galley. The two stewardesses working economy class that trip were loading trays onto the trolley. "Tammy, Sarah, you won't believe this!" she said, and started to laugh softly.

"What?" Sarah prodded. "Hurry up, we've got quite a few more passengers to serve in economy than you have in quiet first class."

Natalie tried to compose herself. "A guy just asked me to marry him, and he says he means it."

"You can't be serious! Really?" Tammy's eyes widened and a big smile formed on her lips. "I'd say, go for it."

Natalie grimaced. "Tammy, you're joking, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. You're getting on, Natalie. You've been married once, engaged until recently, and had a few relationships in between that led nowhere. You might as well grab the chance while you've got it."

"Tammy, that's a rather ageist statement," Sarah said. "Natalie's hardly drawing her pension. Besides, would you marry a total stranger?"

Natalie's buoyant mood deflated. Suddenly the situation didn't seem funny anymore. "Thanks for the morale booster, Tammy."

"What does he look like, Natalie?" Sarah asked, trying to soften Tammy's blunt remarks.

Natalie shook her head. "Damned if I know. I didn't dare look at him closely, and frankly, I didn't really pay much attention to him before. Gray hair, I think."

Tammy had already left with her load of trays. Sarah picked up the passenger list and handed it to Natalie. "Which one is he?"

Natalie's finger ran along the short list of first class passengers. "That's him. Ryan Jamieson."

Sarah's hand flew up to her mouth. "Not the Ryan Jamieson?"

"What's so special about him?"

"If he's the one I'm thinking of, then he's a famous author. He wrote all those books about life in the jungle. Where did he board?"

"In Johannesburg."

"Oh man, you're so lucky to have him in your section. He's hot. Take a good look at him next time. Man, I'll swap with you. I'm horny just thinking about him. Haven't you read any of his books? They're controversial, but a good read and I found them quite educational. The man's famous you know. Maybe I'll ask him for an autograph," Sarah said as she pushed the trolley out.

"No, I can't say that I have. I'm not into nonfiction, and no, I don't want to swap with you," Natalie said loud enough for her disappearing colleague to hear.

Sarah stuck her head around the corner and grimaced. "Well, you should read them. They're really interesting and quite an eye opener. You'd hardly believe that in this day and age slavery still goes on. I'd better get this food to my passengers before it gets cold."

Natalie was about to leave the galley when Tammy reappeared to mix a drink for a passenger.

"So? Have you thought about what I said?"

"You said quite a lot, Tammy. My personal life is my business."

"You could at least tell me if you're going to take Greg back," Tammy muttered in a sulky tone.

Natalie sighed. Would Tammy ever quit? She leaned against the stainless steel cupboards and thought for a moment about Tammy's earlier thoughtless remarks. Though the words had stung, Tammy was right.

"Tammy, I don't want to get hurt again. Men are all the same. What they think of as love is concentrated in one place only – below the belt in that piece of flesh they're so proud of. If they'd put their brain where their cock is..."

Tammy kept her eyes on the trays. "Perhaps that's part of your problem, Natalie. To keep a man happy and satisfied, you need to keep their stomachs full and be a whore in the bedroom. You are rather a prude!"

Natalie groaned inwardly and fought to remain calm. Her sex life was really none of Tammy's business, and she had no right to judge a relationship she didn't know anything about. "Tammy, how would you know whether or not I kept Greg happy in the bedroom?"

"It's pretty obvious. Why did he dump you for that bimbo?"

"I dumped him, remember? She probably filled in for me while I was away. His needs were greater than mine, I suppose."

"You're finding excuses for him now."

"Tammy, it takes two to tango. I was gone a lot, and Greg was possessive and jealous. He was convinced that I was having affairs during my short stays in other countries. I think he paid me back by going out with the bimbo."

"So? Does that mean you're considering taking him back? You could always find a job on the ground if your being away was part of the problem in your relationship."

"I don't know. We've been together a long time."

Tammy sent Natalie a smirk as she left the galley.

Natalie gazed after the stewardess and frowned. What am I thinking of? I don't want him back after what he's done, and I don't want to work on the ground. I've given up on finding true love, so I might as well resign myself to staying alone. On that thought she glanced into a nearby vanity mirror, smoothed a few stray hairs back into the tight bun nestled in the nape of her neck, refreshed her lipstick and returned to the cabin to tend the first class passengers.

While she collected the empty trays she avoided looking at Jamieson. She could feel his eyes following her every move, and the more she tried to ignore it, the more awkward and clumsy she felt. During her safety spiel, her eyes had automatically skimmed over the passengers without seeing any of their faces. It was a routine that came to her now as easy as sleeping and eating. Now, she tried to remember the man who had made the absurd proposal and wondered about him.

She was busy in the galley when a buzzer went off. She glanced at the board and frowned when she noticed that it was Ryan Jamieson. With a sigh, she entered the cabin and headed for the man who, through his absurdness, had stirred her curiosity.

"Yes, Sir? Can I get you something?" she asked while she kept her eyes on a fixed point above his head.

He had a deep, vibrant voice. When he spoke, it was almost as if it contained a caress, and shivers ran down her spine. His voice sparked hidden feelings, something she'd not felt in a long time.

"Natalie Dubois, what a lovely name. Very unusual, too. Where does the Dubois come from?"

Nervously she fingered the telltale nametag. "My great-grandfather was French." The white lie emerged easily. It was none of his business that it was her ex-husband's name. "What can I get you, Sir?" This time she could not help but meet his eyes. They were brown and dotted with small golden flecks.

Right now, they seemed filled with amusement at her discomfort. His hair was not gray as she'd thought, but silver at the temples and above his brow. The rest was black and pulled back into a ponytail. It was hard to guess his age, but she figured him to be in his early forties.

"Nothing. I just wanted to talk to you and hear your voice again." An amused smile played on his well-formed lips.

Natalie attempted a smile. "Thank you, Sir, but I'm really busy and -"

"I don't see a ring on those pretty fingers. I was serious when I asked you to marry me. I need a wife."

"That's quite a presumption!"

The smile broadened into a grin displaying an even set of sparkling white teeth. "You seem like a good candidate for the job. You're attractive, well built and efficient. Just the kind of woman I need."

"Sir! Please contain your thoughts. I don't find this conversation amusing!" Anger caused her skin to prickle all over. But while sparring with him, she realized it wasn't just anger that caused the sensation. The dimple in his cheek fascinated her, and the cleft in his chin was so deep that she could lay a finger in it. Though he disturbed her, and caused sensations within her that she had never felt before, his audacity and lack of tact ignited a spark of rebellion. "Really, Sir! I hardly consider marriage a job to be taken lightly. Now, if you'll excuse me?" she said in a softly indignant tone as she moved away from him.

He chuckled softly. "And she's got fire in her, too! What else could a man ask for?" The softly spoken remark wasn't soft enough. She was sure he'd meant her to hear it. Turning back to face him, she hissed, "A man could wonder what a woman would ask for, and it certainly wouldn't be for an insufferable individual like you."

Ryan laughed. "Mm, I've been called many names in my life, but insufferable? That's a new one!"

His throaty, infectious laugh infuriated her even more. The man was openly making merriment of her discomfort. Natalie glanced at the other passengers. The conversation had not gone unheard by them, and produced amused smiles and chuckles from the people close by. She felt embarrassment replace her anger and struggled to retain her composure.

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Ryan watched her thoughtfully as she returned to the galley. After her slim figure disappeared from his sight, Natalie remained in his thoughts. From the moment he had set foot on the plane, he felt drawn to her. There was something familiar about her, something he couldn't quite place. Even though he searched his deepest memories, he found no recollection of any woman like her. Neither did her name ring any bells. He tried to shake the feeling of familiarity. Surely, if he'd met a woman like Natalie, he would have remembered? He smiled wryly as another memory surfaced, and momentarily stopped the thoughts about Natalie.

"Ryan, it's time you got yourself a wife and settled down," Judy Harrison, his New York editor had told him. "You've got to have some romance in your life. Your style needs a change, and not such a little one. I have a suggestion; I'd like you to write some jungle romance adventures, fiction!"

He'd protested heartily but Judy had been adamant.

"Consider it a challenge. First you need to find out what the world is all about. You've spent way too much time in the jungles. Take a break. Go to the conference in Vancouver and date some women. Find out what the world of romance is like. I think it would be interesting if you could incorporate romance into your stories. Sales have gone down and we need that extra spark to bring them back up. Hopefully your research into the romance area will result in a lasting relationship for you."

The rather forward suggestion did not appeal to Ryan. His jungle adventures did not allow him sufficient time to meet young women or to date, and his travels were mainly to attend conferences or to see his publisher. Sure, he'd dated some women whenever he was in the city, but that's all they'd been, one time, sometimes two time dates and sexual encounters of the third kind. While in the jungle, he satisfied his sexual appetite by masturbating. He had no interest in sleeping with the native women offered him by the tribal leaders he'd befriended. Before he started his writing career, he was engaged, but after the acceptance of his first book proposal and his initial excursion into the jungle, he returned to Johannesburg to find her married to another man. It was a bitter blow and the pain plagued him for many years.

And now he had met Natalie. A young woman who was a total stranger, but who had the most haunting blue eyes he had ever seen. Her appearance was reminiscent of a librarian with her black hair pulled tightly away from her face into a bun, and virtually no make-up, except for lipstick. But her blue eyes didn't need any accentuating. They were the deep blue of the ocean, just as deep and mysterious and framed by a curtain of black lashes. Her movements reminded him of a slinky panther stalking its prey. She walked with feline grace and a swing of pride, the way she tossed her head to the side.

The seatbelt sign started to flash and the pilot announced that they were approaching Vancouver Airport. I've gone about this the wrong way, he thought, while glancing out of the window at the foggy city below. For moments he gazed down. It wasn't new to him. He had been to Vancouver before. *How do I romance a woman? I'm so out of practice I might as well be a teenager. Do I really want a wife? Why can't I just have a casual affair? Fancy just blurting out to her that I wanted her to marry me. I must be out of my mind to think that any woman would seriously consider such a proposal* –

He buckled his belt, took his travel bag from the empty seat next to him and pulled out his latest novel. He opened it and wrote on the inside cover.

Dear Natalie, I'm sorry I came across so uncouth. Can I make it up to you by taking you out to dinner tomorrow evening? I'll be atHe chewed on his pen for a moment trying to remember the name of the restaurant he liked so much the last time he had been in Vancouver. It eluded him for a moment until Natalie checked the passengers then took her seat. She seems so prim and proper, he thought. Almost like a nun – The name of the restaurant came to him then. Quickly he continued to write.

Monk McQueens at 7 p.m. See you there. Ryan Jamíeson.

After the plane landed and he'd gathered his gear, he lay the book neatly in the middle of the seat and hoped she would find it. He paused to watch the hustle and bustle of the other passengers as they scrambled for their belongings, each eager to leave the plane in anticipation of waiting relatives, friends, or simply anxious to conclude a business deal. He could almost feel their stress emanating like a palpable fog. It was one of the reasons he hated big cities. People always seemed to be in a hurry, their expressions permanently tense. Heavy traffic and pollution did not help to endear city life for him. He agreed to attend the convention for promotional purposes, but with reluctance. It was a while since his last excursion into the jungle, and he was eager to leave hectic city life behind and return to nature where he felt one with all that surrounded him.

Natalie stood near the side of the exit and said goodbye to the passengers as they filed out. She could not

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help but glance down the line of passengers and watched Ryan make sure he was last to leave the plane.

"Ms. Dubois, this is the most pleasant trip I've ever made," he said noting that she refused to look up at him and gazed doggedly at some spot on the floor.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that she was glad to see the last of him but she stopped herself. Having Ryan Jamieson on board had actually made the trip less boring. "Have a pleasant stay in Vancouver, Mr. Jamieson," she replied softly without looking at him, then turned away quickly to walk back into the empty cabin.

She checked all luggage compartments and seats. When she came to Ryan's seat, she noticed the book that lay forgotten. For a moment she considered leaving it there for the cleaning crew, then couldn't help her curiosity. She picked it up and after quickly stuffing it into her flight bag, left the plane with the other stewardesses. She would return the book later to lost and found.

"So, did he ask you out, Natalie?" Tammy asked eagerly.

Sarah giggled. "Did you finally have a good look at him? He's not bad looking, do you think?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, girls. He didn't ask me for a date and even if he had, I would have refused. I don't go out with total strangers. Also, I don't like men with long hair. They remind me too much of outdated hippies with too much testosterone."

The two younger women pulled faces as Natalie stalked away, her heels ringing on the ceramic tiled

floor. The side of her flight bag was lumpy, the book's sharp corners poking into her thigh while she walked toward lost and found. Determined to get rid of the book and the memory of Ryan Jamieson, she strode purposefully toward the lost and found. But, his image remained engraved in her mind.

The girl behind the desk cleared her throat. "Can I help you?"

Natalie pulled the book out of her bag. It slipped from her fingers and as it fell on the floor it opened. The scrawl inside the cover gazed up at her. Blood rushed to her face causing her to feel uncomfortably hot.

"Madam?"

Quickly she snatched the book from the floor, slammed it shut and stuffed it back into the bag. "I'm sorry. I thought I'd lost something," she muttered and walked away, the offending item still in her bag. Soon as she was home, she'd toss it into the garbage and that would be the end of Ryan Jamieson.

## Chapter Two

atalie threw her flight bag into a corner of her apartment living room, kicked off her shoes and peeled off her uniform. It always felt good to be home again, though after four days off, she was always glad to go back to work. Her relationship with Greg had not been the greatest over the last year. He demanding, domineering had become and complained about her absences constantly. Their love life had become stale now for months and when she'd finally found out about the blonde, she knew why. He was getting his jollies elsewhere. Now that Greg was gone, coming home meant peace and quiet. That's if he left her alone –

She checked the messages on her answering machine while she pulled the pins from her bun, and let her hair flow freely down her back.

Three of the messages were from Greg. Natalie could hardly believe her ears when she heard him beg her to come back to him and asking her forgiveness.

"Babe, I love you so much. Please believe me? It was all a big misunderstanding. I was lonely. You're gone so much. I only love you. Please take me back? Don't throw away all our years together, my love. I'm begging you. Forgive me?"

Natalie frowned as his voice droned on and on. "Damn you, Greg. You're the one who ruined our relationship, and you're the one who was dipping your wick in another woman's pussy and still are. What the hell makes you think I'll come running?" she muttered while she yanked at the hooks on her bra. The other two messages were from her mother asking her to meet her for lunch during her four-day break.

After rewinding the tape, she listened to Greg's messages again. Stabs of pain shot through her heart while she listened to the voice of the man she'd lived with the last eight years. The pain wasn't so much at losing him because she realized that her love for him died some time ago, but how he could have betrayed her so? She cranked up the volume, then walked to the bathroom and turned on the water to fill the tub.

While she returned to the answering machine, she took off her panties and threw them in the laundry basket with the rest of her clothes. Greg's whining finally stopped and her mother's voice echoed through the apartment. After she listened to the messages six times she hit stop, then pushed the erase button. She knew she was torturing herself, should forget the jerk and the eight years of her life he'd wasted. "He's not worth it," she told herself angrily.

Rummaging in her flight bag, she took out the dirty clothes it contained. She also pulled out the book. Fingering it for a moment, she glanced at the garbage can, but she couldn't help her curiosity about Ryan Jamieson, the writer.

She poured a glass of wine. Book under her arm and her glass of wine in her hand, she walked into the bathroom and saw with consternation that the bubbles were threatening to cascade over the tub. Setting the glass on the edge of the tub she quickly turned off the taps and let some of the water drain.

After placing the book and the glass on the stool beside the tub, she stepped into it and floated in the hot water for a while, playing with herself. For some reason, her libido had waned since the breakup with Greg. Yes, she missed being with someone, having a man's hands fondle her, suck her nipples, but it was almost as if the pain she'd felt and still did, had killed that part of her. She rubbed her clit for a while and closed her eyes while conjuring up an image of her favorite male movie star, but it didn't work. The one thing it accomplished was a complete feeling of relaxation and she felt the tension in her body release with the foam that gradually subsided. She reached out for the glass of amber wine and sipped slowly before she picked up the book.

She studied the title and cover. *Modern Slavery* by Ryan Jamieson. The cover was artfully drawn. The jungle foliage almost looked real, and so did the pictures of the slavers and the black girls they had captured. The back cover had a picture of Ryan and a short biography of his life. It showed him leaning against a tree in the jungle. She studied it closer, but it was not a large picture. The biography told her that he was forty-two, born in Central Africa, was educated by his missionary parents then orphaned at a young age and placed in an orphanage. He became a teacher. During his teaching years, he started writing his first novel about his experiences as a youth, though the memoirs remained unpublished to this day. He gave up teaching to pursue a writing career and made his first excursion into the wilds of Africa. When he was not on location for research, he lived in the city built on gold, Johannesburg.

Natalie took another sip of wine, then opened the book. His large scrawl stood out boldly black against the white of the first page. Her eyes widened when she read his note. "The audacity of him! He just presumes I'll meet him at that restaurant!" Angry that the man was so sure of himself, she slammed the book shut, and threw it on the floor next to the tub.

The glass of wine dulled her anger, and after she'd scrubbed off the weariness and washed her hair, she got out of the tub, wound a towel around her hair and another around her body and retrieved the book. "I'll glance through your book, Ryan Jamieson, because I'm curious to see how you write, but I damn well won't meet you for dinner tomorrow night!" she hissed at the picture on the cover. "You're just too cocky for me."

Still angry at the man's presumptuousness, she toweled her hair dry, brushed it, then put on her baggy, comfortable, pink flannelette pajamas. Greg had hated them, so wearing them now was almost a form of defiance.

With her glass of wine refilled to the brim, she relaxed on the overstuffed couch. Making sure she turned past the first couple of pages so she wouldn't see his arrogant scrawl again, she started to read the introduction and noted the list of his books already published. They were all about Africa—about the inhabitants, some about wildlife. One was devoted entirely to elephants.

Halfway through chapter one, her eyes didn't skim over the words anymore but read each sentence fully and intensely. At two in the morning, she could hardly keep her eyes open, but she had read half the book. Suddenly the man with the ponytail and goldflecked brown eyes became a person, and she wondered sleepily what he was really like before the book slowly slid from her fingers and her eyelids closed.

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Natalie struggled to open her eyes. They felt as if someone had dropped a pound of sand in them. Still dazed, she let the object that had woken her ring and let the answering machine click in. The message that followed brought her back to reality.

"Natalie, darling, I need to talk to you. I know you're home. Don't be so stubborn and pick up the phone." A pregnant pause. "All right then, if you insist on being stubborn, just listen to this. I love you. I want to marry you. Meet me tonight at six at The Grill and we'll talk. I'm sorry, Natalie. I really am. I'll see you tonight, then?" The answering machine beeped and clicked off.

Slowly, Natalie sat up. She groaned. Her position on the couch had not been the most comfortable and she did not feel rested. Each muscle in her body ached. Greg's message registered in her mind, but she dismissed it with a grimace. Quickly she pushed the delete button, and went to the bathroom to have another bath to ease the ache out of her muscles.

After putting on jeans and a shirt, Natalie grimaced at her image in the mirror. Dark circles tainted the fine skin under her eyes, and they were bloodshot from her intense reading that night. While she put drops in her eyes to soothe them, it brought back the memory of Ryan Jamieson and his book. Anxious to read the other half of the book, she quickly made a piece of toast and a cup of tea, and returned to the couch.

Before opening the book, she glanced at the picture on the back cover again. "What made you ask that silly question on the plane?" she asked softly. "Was it just a joke? You know something, Ryan Jamieson, you anger me, but you also interest me. Maybe I'll keep that dinner date this evening." Shocked at her own words, she opened the novel with a frown and looked for the place she'd left off the night before.

Several times she had to tear herself away from the phone. Resenting the answer the story to interruptions, especially by Greg, she let the answering machine take further phone calls and put the volume on silent. Uninterrupted now, she read until late afternoon. Finally, she closed the book with a sigh and placed it face down on the coffee table.

His picture stared up at her. Though the photograph was small, his brown eyes seemed to follow her through the small apartment as she set about doing the usual chores after a long flight.

By six p.m., she had made up her mind. Greg's constant calls, his slimy messages on the answering machine, pushed her into a decision. She had to get out, escape this harassment. She would meet Ryan Jamieson for dinner, if only to hear more about his books and what motivated him to explore life in the jungle and to write his novels.

While she was hunting through her closet for something suitable to wear, the phone rang several times. Again she ignored it. Her choice finally fell on a simple suit. It was a deep rose. Its simplicity made it elegant, the color being its main feature. She wore a white, sleeveless silk blouse under the jacket with a small stand up collar of handmade lace. Fine lace adorned the front from the shoulders down to gradually form a V to her waist. After she put on matching shoes and retrieved the matching purse from a drawer, Natalie inspected herself in the mirror. Quickly she pulled her hair into the usual bun, put on some lipstick, then called a taxi. Just as the buzzer rang, as an afterthought she sprayed some cologne in her neck.

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Ryan sipped from the cocktail he'd ordered and glanced at his watch. As always, he was impatient. He was very prompt himself, and liked other people to be the same. "Ten past seven. I guess she's not going to show up," he said softly to himself, and gazed out over the water at a passing boat. I'll give her ten more minutes, he thought. If she hasn't shown by then, I guess I'll have to find another woman. Damn that publisher. I haven't got time to be romancing women. Especially the younger ones. Natalie fits the picture. She seems closer to my age and down to earth. He tried to squash a sense of disappointment. It troubled him. After all, this was just another business proposition.

When her soft voice sounded behind him, he turned around, startled, and was surprised that she showed up after all.

With quick appraisal his eyes scanned her from head to toe and took in her appearance, noting the quiet elegance of her rose suit and for a moment imagining her hair loose, cascading down her back. He gazed at the fine lace on the front of the blouse and wondered if she wore a decent bra or a sexy one-or maybe none at all? Was that cleavage he could see spiderweb material? He through the shifted uncomfortably as at that thought his cock rose to the occasion. "Good evening, Natalie. I'm glad you decided to join me for dinner. You look very nice." His words caught in his throat. Another feeble comment, he silently admonished himself. She looks beautiful, so why didn't you tell her so?

Remembering his manners, he stood to pull out the chair for her, but the waiter had beaten him to it.

"Good evening, Mr. Jamieson. Your book was a good ploy. I'm afraid it's the culprit of my decision to meet you for dinner. I found it very interesting and I'd like to hear more about your writing." Natalie replied while she sat opposite him and took in her surroundings. The romantic atmosphere made her slightly uncomfortable. The restaurant was decorated completely in black and white. Tall white candles in silver candelabras flickered lazily, adding to the romantic setting. Each black table was set with silver cutlery and white place mats, a single red rose in a small crystal vase, adding a touch of color. She felt his eyes on her as she avoided looking at him and gazed out at the Bay, at the boats that passed by slowly.

"Would you care for a cocktail before dinner, Natalie? And please, call me Ryan?"

"I'd like a Perrier, please?" Natalie smiled at the waiter, then finally looked at her companion. "Ryan, your book was most intriguing. Tell me, these excursions into the jungle, are they dangerous?"

He smiled. "Yes, of course. Moving around the jungle is always dangerous. I don't know how much you know about Africa, but there are many tribes who are not friendly. And then of course, there are the wild animals. We have to be alert at all times."

His deep dimples fascinated her when he smiled. "We? Your wife accompanies you?"

The smile broke into a full grin. "I'd hardly have asked you to marry me if were I married to someone else now, would I?"

Natalie quickly sipped from the glass of Perrier to hide her embarrassment. "I thought you were joking."

"No, I wasn't joking, but perhaps a little awkward by putting the question to you so bluntly. You see, on my next excursion I'd like to take a companion along. Eh-sort of to ease my loneliness and help me with my notes." "For your next book?"

"Yes, for the next book."

"Then why not just hire a secretary?"

"Now that's an idea." She had just given him a brilliant thought. He could work romance into a working relationship without having to commit to marriage. "How are you at taking notes?"

"I was a secretary before I became a stewardess. I hated the dull office life, so I changed careers."

"Do you like your present career?"

"Yes. It has given me opportunity to see much of the world, though it has rather inhibited my personal life."

"You never married? There is no boyfriend in the picture?"

He was prying into her personal life, and she didn't like it. "I have no boyfriend, and my personal life is hardly any of your business."

Ryan raised his glass and the dimples appeared again. "Touché, Madame! Your previous statement invited the question."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I don't speak to strangers about my personal affairs."

"I was hoping to remedy the stranger situation. How would you like to accompany me on my next excursion into the jungles of Africa as my secretary?"

Natalie almost choked on the mouthful of Perrier. Carefully she set the glass down and played with it while she answered. "You don't give up easily, do you? I'm not into such wild adventures. I think you'd better look for someone else, Ryan."

"Why don't we order and then discuss it further,"

he suggested. "Wouldn't you like some excitement in your life?"

"I don't see that there's anything to discuss," she snapped. "I met you for dinner so I could hear more about your writing, not to listen to more silly proposals," then clamped her lips together when the waiter arrived to take their orders.

They ate in silence for a while, until Ryan put his knife and fork down on his plate and leaned back in his chair with the glass of wine in his hand. "Now that's just it. The reason I'd like you to accept the job is because you're older, very efficient, and you don't come across as the type who would squeal at every little spider or insect. Neither do you wear tons of make-up, and your fingernails are well manicured, but not too long nor painted, so you wouldn't spend hours moaning and groaning about the fact that your make-up was ruined or you broke a nail. My gut feeling tells me you're a down to earth woman. Now, if you have no responsibilities to tie you down or a boyfriend whining in the background, I'd really like you to consider my proposition."

He'd stunned her. Slowly she raised her eyes to meet dancing lights in his. His obvious merriment at her shocked face only served to increase the anger he provoked within her. For moments her fork and knife were suspended in midair before she let them sink to the plate. Daintily she folded the serviette and placed it on the table before she spoke. "Mr. Jamieson, this conversation is not exactly what I had in mind. Obviously this dinner with you was a mistake on my part. Thank you, and if you'll excuse me?" She pushed the chair back and started to stand but he stopped her with his next words.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I've been out of circulation for so long that I don't know how to deal with a woman. My associations have mostly been with men over the last twenty years. Please accept my apology? I'll try and be less outspoken if you prefer."

Natalie stared at him. Slowly she sank back into her chair. "Men?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

He chuckled. "No, it's not what you think. Jungle life has not permitted me to actively pursue the fairer sex. No female has ever accompanied me on my excursions."

"Why change that now? And why me?"

Ryan looked at her thoughtfully and rubbed his chin. "I thought it would be a nice change to have a female assistant. Due to the close proximity of traveling and camping in the jungle, I thought marriage would be in order. Just as a business arrangement, mind you, to make whoever goes with me feel more comfortable. However, I see your hesitation in that area and I understand. It was a stupid idea to start with, but the only one I could think of on the spur of the moment. A secretary would be the more obvious solution, and I thank you for pointing that out to me. And I already told you why you're the perfect choice. Since my next novel will be longer and needs more research, I require an assistant. Preferably a female."

"You're absolutely serious. There are plenty of male secretaries around just as efficient."

"I'm very serious, and no, I don't want a male

secretary. Since I'm changing my style, I feel the input from a woman would have greater value."

"Mr. Jamieson, you seem to forget that I have a job."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Quit your job. I'll pay you twice your present salary."

The proposal was ludicrous. It was so absurd that suddenly it tickled her senses and she burst into laughter. "I'm sorry—" Natalie couldn't stop. To gain control she picked up her glass and took a few gulps of the Perrier. Holding the glass firmly between two hands, she continued. "I'm sorry. Perhaps you can find another woman to accept your offer, but I value my years as a stewardess. You forget, should I quit my job, I lose my pension and free travel the company offers its employees."

"I fail to see the humor of it all, and I will pay for all your travel expenses. This job I am offering you is not temporary. I'm a writer and plan to write books until the day I die. My publisher has requested that I change my style. I aim to move from nonfiction to fiction. The transition will be a difficult one, and therefore a woman's assistance, input and advice, would be of great value."

"If you're planning to write fiction, then why do you have to travel to the jungle to do it?"

"Because I want my fiction to be realistic. It will be based on real life events. This next novel will also, like the last one, be about the slave trade that exists, but the characters have to come to life so that the reader can live the story as though they were there themselves." "That sounds interesting, though I enjoyed the book you gave me. It was most enlightening."

"The genre will be adventure." *And romance,* he thought, but he didn't want to put her off any more than what he already had.

"Why change your style now, after so many years?"

"This last book didn't sell so well. The publisher advised me that it was time for a change. I suppose I need to move with the market."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jamieson. I appreciate your offer, but I can't accept it. I barely know you and the idea of traipsing through the jungle with a stranger really doesn't sound that enticing."

Deliberately he swirled the wine in his glass. He did not look at her when he spoke again but kept his eyes on the wine. "Strange. I had a gut feeling you would welcome adventure. I guess my feelings betrayed me for a change. You're not the type to leave your safe environment and boring job."

Irritated, Natalie pushed her chair back again. "Mr. Jamieson, you don't know me at all. I would hardly call my job boring, since I've visited many countries and cities, and I meet the most interesting people each time I fly."

"Please don't leave," he asked with a smile. "I promise I won't touch the subject again. My offer stands. I'm staying at the Pan Pacific Hotel, room 604. I leave in a week. Should you change your mind, you can contact me there. Now, tell me about yourself, Natalie."

Slowly, she thawed, and actually found herself

having a good time. His conversation was more than interesting. He was witty and made her laugh more than once. While he talked and told her about his many adventures, she took time to study him. The way he rubbed his chin constantly made her think that he was not used to a clean-shaven face. He didn't show his forty-two years. If she had looked at him more closely on the plane, she would have guessed him to be in his early thirties. It was the gray at his temples and above his brow that fooled her. Though he was not what she would consider handsome, he radiated a magnetism that probably attracted many women, including herself, she had to admit.

"So tell me, Natalie, have you ever trod the matrimonial path?"

"Eh, no." I have, she thought, but it's none of your business.

"I see a white tanning line on your ring finger suggesting that you've recently removed a ring."

"Mr. Jamieson, I don't ask you questions about your personal life. I'd appreciate it if you didn't probe into mine." She glanced at her watch. "It's getting late and I'm still suffering from jet lag. Thank you very much for dinner, Mr. Jamieson, and the interesting conversation. I hope you have a pleasant stay in Vancouver."

Ryan frowned and cursed himself for being so insensitive. "I'll take you home. If you can just wait for a few minutes while I pay the bill, I'll—"

"Thank you, but I'll be fine. Good-bye, Mr. Jamieson. I wish you success with your next novel."

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He watched as she briskly walked away from their table and disappeared from sight. "Damn you, Ryan," he cursed softly. "You've scared her off. I guess I'll have to find someone else."

Absentmindedly he handed the waiter his credit card and thought, but she intrigues me more than I care to admit. I also can't get rid of that gut feeling that I've met her before. But that's impossible. The times I've attended a conference in Vancouver I've never flown with that airline. I don't want to look for anyone else – I want Natalie –

## **Chapter Three**

atalie paid the cab driver, got out of the taxi, and started walking toward the lobby doors of her apartment building. A car door slammed, but she didn't take any notice. She'd almost reached the doors when a hand grabbed her arm in a vice grip and spun her around.

"Where the hell have you been, Natalie? I've been waiting here for hours."

"Let go of my arm, Greg. You're hurting me," she hissed softly, as he pulled her away from the doors and pinned her against the wall.

"Not until you tell me where you've been. You've obviously been out with another guy."

"If I have, it's none of your business. Now let go of my arm before I scream for help." Pinning her hands above her head, his knee wedging her hard against the wall, he deftly unbuttoned her jacked and ripped the front of her blouse open. His alcohol-laden breath, his hand on her breast, repulsed her so much she felt nauseated.

"Natalie, I love you. Marry me-marry me now? Fly to Vegas with me? Tonight?" "I'm afraid you're a little late with that. Had you asked me a month ago, the answer would have been yes. Go back to your blonde bimbo and leave me alone. I want nothing more to do with you. Let go of me, Greg!" Her voice became louder, and she struggled to get away from him.

His ruddy face turned a deeper shade of red and his eyes were bloodshot. The alcohol fumed into her nostrils, face just inches away from hers. His hand left her breast and yanked her skirt up. Within seconds his fingers were prying the lips apart and entered her, twirling, moving inside her. She shuddered and he mistook it for desire.

"I'm sorry. I was a fool. I realize that now. I love you and want to marry you. Please, Natalie? I know you want me, even though you won't admit it," he pleaded.

When two tenants came home and looked at the couple curiously, his grip on her wrists loosened. She lashed out at him, her fist landing on his nose. It caused him to yank his fingers out of her and let her go, his hands now on his bleeding nose.

Quickly, she squirmed away from him and while gathering her jacket to hide her naked breasts, followed the two people through the door. It clicked shut softly behind her and she ran toward the elevator that the man held for her. Just before the elevator doors closed she saw Greg pummel on the glass doors with his fists.

"Maybe you should call the police, Miss," the man advised her gently.

"He'll go away." Then she added with a grin,

"Thanks for the rescue."

Soon as she was inside her apartment, she took off her suit and ran to the bathroom to wash the feel of his hands on her body away. Even as she was vigorously scrubbing her crotch, she heard the banging on the door. Greg hadn't gone away. She knew he must have slipped in with tenants. He was loud and verbal. Several doors opened and her neighbors told him to go away. One of them swore at Greg and threatened with the police.

"Man, am I glad I didn't marry that jerk. After wasting eight years with him, I can't believe I never found out about his temper. I must have been deaf, dumb and blind—" she muttered as she put on her sweats.

Natalie was about to call the police herself until she heard the supervisor's voice and another male in the hallway. Within minutes, Greg was gone and she stepped out on the balcony to check if he left the building. Carefully she looked down and saw Greg lean against his car, a cigarette hanging from his lips. His eyes were riveted on her apartment. Quickly she stepped back into the living room and drew the drapes.

She'd have to find another apartment. She was gone a lot, but certainly didn't want to be hounded by Greg between flights. "Damn—he'd find me no matter where I move. He knows too many of my friends."

Sleep would not come easy. Several times she got up to peek out of the window and saw his car still parked out in front. The phone rang several times, but she let it ring. The answering machine caught Greg's messages—sometimes sweet as honey other times threatening.

"If you don't let me in, I'll kick in the doors! Natalie! Pick up the damn phone!"

Finally, she couldn't stand listening to his whining voice and turned both the answering machine and the telephone off and went to bed.

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The next morning the angry buzzer woke her. It was as if someone had a finger glued to the button, because it wouldn't stop. Furious at Greg, she jumped out of bed and ran to the intercom. "Greg, if you don't stop bothering me, I'll call the cops!" she shouted into the speaker.

"Natalie, it's me. It's Mom. Let me in."

Natalie sighed. "Just a minute, Mom." After she'd checked the street and saw no sign of Greg's car, she pushed the button to let her mother into the building.

Her mother's soft knock sounded on the door. Natalie opened the door, but the welcoming smile froze on her face when Greg walked in behind her mother. "Greg, how dare you. Get out of my apartment now!" Natalie yelled.

Leslie kissed her daughter on the cheek and said, "Natalie, calm down. He just wants to talk to you. What is your problem? A month ago you were heartbroken and now he wants to marry you and you act in such a strange manner."

Natalie glared at Greg. "I suppose you called her to

come over here and did this on purpose so you could get in?" When he took a step toward her, "Don't come near me. Don't even think about touching me. You're nothing but a repulsive swine!"

"Natalie, I just want to talk."

"Then say what you have to say, and get out," she snapped back.

Her mother had gone to the kitchen to make coffee. Exasperated, Natalie paced the floor and listened to Greg's petulant voice. She glanced at him briefly, and saw him through clear eyes for the first time. His face was homely. It always had been, but she'd gotten used to the pasty look of it. Now, she noticed the sulky droop that marred his expression and the excess weight that gave him an unpleasantly fleshy appearance. His eyes shifted as though afraid to look at her, his hands constantly fluttering like nervous birds. Her lip curled with distaste at the sight of him. Strange, I never noticed that he was such a spineless wimp, she thought, while his words drifted over her head and right out of the window. What did I ever see in the guy? Why did I stay with him for so long? I never really loved him. I thought love would grow, but instead he became a habit that was hard to break. Someone who was there when I came home from flights, a companion someone to fulfill my sexual needs... For something to do, she picked up the book from the coffee table and fiddled with it, while he continued to beg her to marry him.

"How about it, Natalie? I told you I was sorry and your reasons for breaking off the engagement were unwarranted. It was a foolish decision on your part to just throw away all our years together. I don't know why I went out with another woman. I was lonely and she was available. I'm too old to be dating young girls and I guess Sherry had my head spinning for a little while," he bleated.

She barely listened to his pitiable sniveling. Her anger slowly started to come to a boiling point. "I broke off the engagement because of that little blond bimbo. You were already seeing her while we were still together. Don't come at me with all those other pathetic reasons, and now that your Barbie doll stewardess has tired of you, you want me back?" She felt like throwing the book at him and raised it slowly, only to have Ryan's picture facing her. Slowly she lowered her arm, then said in a deliberate tone of voice, "I'm moving away, Greg. Far away. Now please leave?"

He jumped up. His face became a mottled red and he shouted, "Where were you last night? There's someone else, isn't there? Admit it, Natalie!" In a fury he slammed his fist into the wall, then walked toward her flight bag and threw it across the room.

She laughed softly, hardly caring about the hole he'd just put in the wall, or the cost to have it fixed. "Yes. There's someone else. Now go, but before you leave, please put that bag back where you found it." She heard her mother muttering in the kitchen. The argument was loud enough for the whole building to hear. Clamping her lips together, she turned away from Greg and went to the kitchen to help her mother with the coffee.

"What's wrong with you, Natalie? I really thought

you and Greg would marry soon. Now you've jeopardized all of that."

Natalie swiveled and left the kitchen. The last thing she needed right now was to have her mother on her case too. She watched Greg toss the bag nonchalantly back on the chair. "Greg, please leave," she said in a firm voice.

Her mother returned from the kitchen with coffee for the three of them. Greg started to take his mug off the tray but Natalie was a step ahead of him. She quickly grabbed both mugs. "No coffee for you. You're not welcome here. Leave my apartment before I call the cops and have you removed!"

"Natalie, aren't you being a little unfair to your fiancé?" Leslie asked carefully.

She noticed her mother's brown eyes were filled with concern but she was too angry. "Mom, stay out of it please. And he's not my fiancé anymore."

Greg seethed. He trembled from head to toe in a feeble effort to control his temper. "Leslie, I told you she was having an affair, and it's true. She's got another man."

"Is that true, Natalie?"

"Mom, please don't interfere or I'll ask you to leave, too. Yes. There is another man in my life and I'm going away. Greg, get the hell out of my apartment. *Now*!" she shouted when he made no effort to go. "Fine! I'll call the cops!" She had the phone in her hand ready to dial.

He hesitated, then finally walked to the door, opened it, sent her a murderous look and slammed the door shut. From the hallway he yelled, "You haven't heard the last of me, Natalie Dubois. No wonder your ex husband took off on you!"

"Thank God he's gone," Natalie said while she sat on the couch and picked up the mug of coffee. "I'm sorry, Mom. I shouldn't take it out on you, but he makes me so angry."

Leslie brushed a stray, silver lock from her forehead. "Nattie dear, I don't understand you. I thought you loved Greg. And who is this other man?"

Natalie looked at her mother's worried face and sighed. "Mom, I don't love Greg anymore. I probably haven't for a long time, but I realized it in full force last night and today. Whatever love I still thought I felt for him died a sudden death. We were used to each other. Love became a habit, and so the engagement dragged on. And there is no other man." Natalie knew when her mother referred to her childhood nickname she was trying to get on her good side.

"But you said – "

"I know what I said, Mom. There is no one else in my life, but about going away – that is true. I've made up my mind."

"Where are you going to go? What about your job as a stewardess?"

"I've been offered another job. I'm going to Africa." There—she had said it. For a moment her heart beat faster at the sudden decision she made that morning.

"Africa? When are you going, and what kind of job is this?"

"It's as assistant to a writer. Sort of secretarial, I guess. I don't know exactly yet what it entails, but the

money is good." She thought it better not mention the jungle to her mother because there would be no end to argument.

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm not sure. I think in a week."

"But that's so soon! Your cousin is getting married in two weeks and you should -"

Natalie sent her mother a wry smile. "Mom, Cindy can get married without me. I never hear from my cousins unless there's something going on. I'll buy a gift for the bride and groom and will give it to you before I leave."

"Nattie, I have a doctor's appointment in half an hour, but will you come over for dinner tonight? This is all so sudden. I've hardly time to understand any of it. Perhaps you can explain it better tonight. I don't like the idea of you going to that country."

Natalie knew her mother's reservations about Africa and sighed. "Yes, Mom. I'll come for dinner tonight. I have a lot to do today. Mom, I'm keeping the apartment. I'll give the supervisor twelve months postdated checks, but will you come and water the plants and sort of keep an eye on things?"

"Yes, I'll do that for you. Africa is so far away, are you sure you want to do this?"

"Why ever not? You moved to South Africa once, remember?"

"That was different. Your father had died and I needed diversion to get my thoughts off my pain. We were gone less than a year because I wasn't overly impressed with the job or the problems in that country." "This is no different, Mom, and it's years later. Times have changed. South Africa has changed. Because of the turmoil in my life and the present situation, I need diversion too. It's time for some adventure in my life before I'm too old. I'll be back. Don't worry about me, I'm a big girl now."

"But I do worry about you, dear. You're my only child." Leslie sighed. "I wish you'd settle down once and for all. Your first marriage failed and now you've chased Greg out of your life and -"

"Mom, stop it. You know damned well that Allan Dubois was an alcoholic and a womanizer and Greg has shown himself to be of the same caliber. I'm tired of men walking all over me and playing me for a fool. And you needn't talk. You've been single for how many years now?"

"I know, Nattie. Allan was bad news, but Greg seemed genuinely sorry. You could give him another chance, and don't pull my life into this. I was very happy with your father. He was the love of my life and I've never wanted anyone else. Regretfully, you've never found that kind of love."

"I'm sorry. Daddy was the world to me too. But as for Greg—no more chances for him. Mom, I don't think I ever loved Greg. He was convenient. I became used to him as one does to a piece of furniture. The last year of our relationship wasn't that great and his fling with that blond bimbo did it for me. Please stop trying to change my mind."

"Okay, dear. Whatever you say," Leslie said wistfully. "I'll see you tonight then?"

After her mother had finished her coffee and left

for the doctor's appointment, Natalie looked for the phone number of the Pan Pacific Hotel. Quickly she dialed it. When the clerk answered and she asked to be put through to room 604, he told her that Mr. Jamieson wasn't in his room. Natalie left a message and her phone number.

Her boss was not impressed when she called him with the news. "I'll have my written resignation on your desk today, Mr. Harold."

"Natalie, do you realize that you're giving up your pension, your retirement fund, and everything you've worked for? If you gave proper notice as required, at least you could take leave of absence and then in a year or so reconsider coming back. You're one of our best stewardesses. I'm sure we'd find an opening for you."

She considered this for a moment. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harold, but I've quite made up my mind. I can always reapply later, should this job not work out. I know it's short notice, but circumstances require that I make a decision about this new position quickly."

"Please consider your choice carefully before you bring me the letter."

"I already have considered it, Mr. Harold. I'll be there in an hour to give it to you." And it was true. Even if the job with Ryan didn't work out, she'd not go back to her old job. For a while now she'd considered a career change.

When she hung up, her heart beat wildly. What if Ryan has changed his mind? she thought. He must be at the convention. I'm doing all this without even talking to him first. No, it'll be fine. His offer was quite firm. Surely he won't have found someone else overnight? Then again, he offered me the job out of the blue. He could do the same to someone else, some prim and proper woman at the convention...Ha...prim and proper...if only he knew...

After she had a shower and dressed in a pair of jeans and sweatshirt, she typed the letter of resignation, put it in an envelope and sealed it. Before she phoned for a taxi to take the letter to head office, she turned on the answering machine, erased all the messages and left the volume on high.

Mr. Harold was not in his office when she dropped off the letter. She left it with his secretary and hurried back to the waiting taxi. *I've done it. I can hardly believe it. I've really done it. I'm off to Africa.* Wild feelings coursed through her body—excitement, fear of the unknown, and sudden insecurity that she possibly now had no job.

The day went by too slowly, and the phone only rang with unwanted messages from Greg. His whining annoyed her, but she dare not turn the volume down on the answering machine in case Ryan called. She kept herself busy by making a list of things she had to do and people she had to call before she left the country. In a way, she regretted her impulsive decision to hand in her resignation before she'd talked to Ryan. Fear, that he'd changed his mind gnawed at her and increased steadily throughout the day.

He did not call until 6:30 p.m. The deep timbre of his voice boomed through the apartment, causing her flesh to tingle and her skin to pucker, and her heart do a somersault. Quickly she pushed the stop button and picked up the phone. "Mr. Jamieson, you got my message."

"Yes. I'm sorry I couldn't call earlier but the conference lasted all day. You've decided to accept my offer."

It was a statement not a question and for a moment she felt irritated by his confidence. "Yes, if it is still open?"

"Definitely. We'll have to meet within the next few days to discuss everything. When are you free?"

"Whenever you like, Mr. Jamieson."

"Let's quit with the Mr. now. Please call me Ryan. We'll be living in close proximity for many months."

"Mr-eh-Ryan, what do I need to buy to take with me?"

"Nothing here in Canada. We'll go shopping and buy everything you need in Johannesburg. I suggest you travel light. You don't need pretty high heels and dresses in the jungle."

"Jeans?"

"Yes, you could bring jeans, but don't forget we pack light."

After she'd agreed to meet him for dinner the next evening, she put the phone down and gazed at it for a moment trying to deal with the flutters of insecurity that crept into her stomach. "It's a sure thing now. Too late to back out. I must be crazy," she said softly, then started to giggle. "Natalie, you're off to the jungle. This promises to be the biggest adventure of your life."

## **Chapter Four**

reg swore softly under his breath after he slammed the door behind him and rubbed his sore knuckles. Now what would he do? At least he'd manipulated the situation so that he could get the stuff from the bag. After he'd thrown it across the room, knowing full well she'd order him to pick it up and put it back because he'd gone that route before whenever they had a heated argument, he'd slipped his hand underneath it and pulled a small package out of the false bottom. Natalie had been too angry to notice and had her back to him. But now he had to face his boss. Another shipment was waiting for them in Johannesburg and the blonde wasn't as gullible as Natalie, so he couldn't use her. How could he win Natalie back? His thoughts raged as he got in the elevator and left the building.

"You're a bloody fool, Greg Walker," Dennis Lane growled. "You'd better win her back. We need that next shipment from Johannesburg, so find out fast where she's going," His pockmarked, round fleshy

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face was twisted with anger and he ran an exasperated hand over his balding head.

"I told you. She said she was moving away," Greg said, his voice echoing through the derelict warehouse, which was the latest meeting venue. She didn't exactly go into detail."

Dennis' feline green eyes narrowed. "And you believed that crap? She'd never give up her cushy job. She'll be on that flight to Johannesburg next week. Mark my word. Let your contacts in Johannesburg know."

"I'd hoped that the blonde was a good prospect, but she almost caught on, so I had to dump her." Greg shuffled uncomfortably back and forth, his eyes straying to he shadowy corners of the warehouse.

"Then stick with the librarian, you stupid bastard. She's never caught on yet and you've been using her for years," Dennis said impatiently.

Greg gestured in frustration. "She won't take me back, Dennis. I tried, dammit! I even told her I'd marry her right now and that was painful for me."

Dennis took a threatening step toward Greg who slunk back against the wall, terror in his watery blue eyes. "Do you think she's on to us? Is that why she won't take you back? You'd better become friends with her again, asshole, cause she's been the best carrier we've ever had. She's never suspected a thing. How did you get into her apartment today to get the stuff?"

"Don't even ask me," Greg said softly. "Okay, I'll try but I can't give you any guarantees. We may have to look for another carrier." Dennis produced a gun from the pocket of his battered leather jacket and poked it into Greg's pudgy neck. Greg winced at the feel of cold steel against his skin. "Another carrier could blow open our little operation. You get back in the librarian's good books, or you won't live to find another carrier. Understood? And when you're back with her, you get on the phone to make the arrangements for the next shipment. And if you don't, you can kiss your sorry ass good-bye and we'll get the stuff ourselves. Now, be a good little boy and find out her schedule."

When he left the warehouse, Greg quickly looked from side to side to see if all was clear. Dennis never met him twice in the same place, but one could never be sure if someone hadn't ratted. Quickly he got into his brand new red Corvette and started it, wistfully thinking about the monthly payments. If he couldn't get the diamonds into Canada, he could kiss his car as well as his ass good-bye.

While he drove back to his apartment, Greg tried to figure out a way to find out about Natalie's plans and if she'd spoken the truth that day. He didn't really want her back, but he had no other option. He'd tired of their relationship a long time ago. Natalie only knew about the blonde, but there were others and they were younger and much more exciting. They expected nothing from him, as long as he spent plenty of money on them, which suited him fine. A commitment was the last baggage he wanted in his life, but now Dennis was pressuring him and his only course of action was to get Natalie to marry him. "Damn, I don't want to marry the bitch. I'm not the type to play Mr. Suburban Husband," he muttered. "I have to find out when Natalie is leaving. Leslie—I wonder if she'll talk," he said softly. He turned on his cell phone and dialed Leslie's number. He was relieved when she answered after the second ring.

"Leslie? Hi, this is Greg. Listen, I'm sorry about that episode today. I know I acted like a jerk."

"Greg, you just missed Natalie. She was here for dinner and left seconds ago. I understand your frustration, dear. Natalie is acting very strangely."

"I love her so much, Leslie. Is it true what she said today? Where is she going?"

"I don't know if I should – Well, perhaps I can help patch things up between you. She leaves for Johannesburg in a week."

"A week? Do you know the flight number?"

"No, not yet, but I can find out for you. Call me back in a couple of days, Greg, but in the meantime keep a low profile until she's calmed down. Right now there's no talking to my daughter."

"Thanks a million, Leslie. You're a good friend."

With a satisfied smile he turned off the cell phone and pulled into the underground parking of his apartment building.

## Chapter Five

Wan saw Natalie enter the restaurant and watched her walk toward his table. She was dressed in an elegant cream pants suit and a red blouse. Her hair was drawn back tight from her face into the familiar bun and her face was devoid of make-up, yet she looked the picture of elegance, and could have easily graced the cover of a fashion magazine. A flurry of excitement caused his heart to speed up. When her warm, melodious voice greeted him, it sent his blood racing faster through his veins and to his cock. It had been many years since any woman had made him feel this way. Not that he was never horny, but this was completely different. This was the kind of desire he'd felt in his youth.

"Good evening, Ryan."

His name rolled off her tongue easily, as if she'd called him by his first name all her life, and it caressed him like honey. "Natalie, you look lovely." He waited till she was seated then spoke to the waiter. "Waiter, I'd like a bottle of your finest champagne, please."

"Ryan, I don't think –"

"Tonight we celebrate. You came by taxi, didn't

you?"

"Yes, but I need to keep my thoughts clear. I made a big decision today."

"And so you did. I'm glad. I didn't relish the thought of hunting for another assistant in such a short time."

Natalie couldn't help herself. "Or wife?" she added sarcastically. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. Do you really need an assistant that much?"

"You're forgiven. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Yes, like I told you, for this particular book, I do. And if this one is a success and I can change my style, I'll need one for all my books in the future."

Natalie pulled a face. "That doesn't sound like a very secure prospect for me. If this one is a success?"

He smiled a warm lazy smile that sent shivers down her spine. "It will be. Especially with you as my secretary slash assistant. And if this one isn't, there will be others. You don't have to worry. I'll not dump you if this book bombs."

"My secretarial skills are rather ancient. I hope I'm up to the job."

"I've hired you, so it's too late now to backtrack. I haven't asked you yet, Natalie. How old are you?"

"I'm thirty-eight." She looked down at the sparkling cutlery on the table while she waited for his response and wondered silently if her age would make a difference.

"You certainly don't look it. Now that you're my employee, may I ask you a question?"

"That depends what it is. You do tend to get rather personal, Ryan."

"Mm. Your decision to take the job, does it have anything to do with that missing ring on your finger?"

*Man, he's shrewd,* she thought. *It's almost as if he's psychic.* She hesitated for a moment. "In a way it does and in a way it doesn't. You made me realize that even though I've traveled far and seen many places, there's really been no adventure in my life at all, no excitement. I've always counted on the stability of my job and taken everything for granted."

"I see. I don't need any irate ex-husbands or lovers interfering with my work. Please make sure you keep your destination to yourself."

She laughed then. "Except for Johannesburg, I don't even know where we're going. The jungle itself is a rather vague destination. If I told any of my friends I was going to the jungle, they'd declare me insane and have me committed."

"Good. Keep it that way, then. What did you do during your stopovers, Natalie? I'm sure you must have met many interesting people."

"Usually if there was time I'd visit museums, tour the city a little, go and see interesting places and rest. Yes, I've met some nice people, but unlike the other stewardesses, I never accepted invitations for a date, if that's what you're wondering. I wasn't much into love adventures and one night stands. When do we leave, Ryan? I need to make arrangements. I've decided to keep my apartment for at least a year in case the job doesn't work out."

He frowned. "I don't see any reason why it wouldn't work out, but if you feel safer by doing that,

then by all means waste the money. Since I can't access any banks in the jungle, I'll pay you six months wages up front."

Natalie thought about it for a moment. It did seem rather a waste just to have her apartment sit empty all that time, but she needed that security behind her. "That sounds good. What do I need to pack? When do we leave?"

"I already told you. Pack light. Preferably just a toothbrush and toothpaste."

She giggled. "I think a woman needs a few more items than that."

"We'll stop in Johannesburg long enough to pick up supplies and suitable clothing for you."

"I can't believe I'm going to go through with this," she said softly while her eyes remained on the salad the waiter had just served.

"No second thoughts, I hope?" Ryan asked. "If you want to change your mind, you have to do it now. I can't afford to waste more time because I'd have to look for someone else in a hurry." He noticed a flash of anger cross her blue eyes.

"I still wonder about the crazy marriage proposal you made on the plane." She was almost sorry she brought up the subject because it caused the golden flecks in his eyes to dance with merriment. His amusement at her expense caused her defense mechanism to jump into action. "You're laughing at me. I fail to see the humor in this conversation."

Ryan chuckled. "I'm not laughing at you. I'm just slightly amused. That proposal still bothers you? Come now, Natalie. You're not a teenager to be shocked so easily. I thought it to be the perfect solution since not many women will go traipsing off into the jungle with a strange man. But now that I've gotten to know you better, I see you're not at all afraid of spending so much time alone with a crazy writer, and you're obviously not looking for a new relationship. Well, neither am I. So, put your mind at rest." Deep down, he knew it was a lie. He was just a bit more than interested in her.

"I don't believe you. Why offer marriage if you're not interested in a relationship of any kind?"

"That was a sorry mistake on my part. To be honest, the prospect of marriage did not really appeal to me and I was glad when I came up with the other solution because I found a woman who fit the bill."

"You came up with the solution?" she asked with raised eyebrows. "I hope I won't disappoint you."

"Sorry. You came up with the idea. I'm sure you won't disappoint me, Natalie." He was fascinated by the changing expressions in her eyes. At times they were mysterious, other times he read excitement in them, anger, but also a hint of fear. "Be assured that this is purely and simply a business proposition. I need an assistant. I've needed one for a long time actually, but could never be bothered with the hassle. I'll get your ticket tomorrow. Our flight leaves at nine a.m. on Wednesday morning. I'll meet you at the airport at seven a.m."

"Ryan, when you're not on an expedition, do you live in the city? In Johannesburg? Natalie asked.

"I have an apartment in Johannesburg, or 'The Witwatersrand' as it's commonly called, meaning 'White Water Reef,' the white water being the gold."

Natalie listened with interest as he talked about Johannesburg. She already knew it was a vibrant bustling city but now he painted a different picture. He talked about the mines that were slowly coming to an end, the problems that still existed among the people, and the uprisings that she heard about on the news.

The evening flew by. Before she realized, they were the only customers left in the restaurant. Again, Ryan offered to take her home but she gracefully declined. The last thing she wanted was a confrontation by Greg with Ryan present.

That night when she arrived home, Natalie was gratified not to find Greg waiting for her outside the building. The answering machine only had one message on it from her mother.

Once she crawled into bed, she could not get Ryan out of her thoughts. His face drifted through her mind, before her eyes, and she shifted uncomfortably in bed as shivers ran down her spine. She'd not felt this horny in years and wriggled out of her panties. Pulling her legs up, she stroked her clit, feeling the small nub harden, throb under her fingers. Fleetingly, she thought about the toys she'd discarded the day before, but she'd already taken her garbage to the dumpster. Oh, how she wished for that dildo now... All she had were her fingers, and they were hardly satisfactory. Reaching out, she turned on the light next to her bed and her glance fell on the candle. She took it out of the holder and after spitting on it, rubbed it up and down her clit. It felt cool at first, but soon it took on the heat of her body and she inserted it into her vagina. It wasn't really big enough, but it reached deeper than her fingers could and she rotated it to get that feeling of a man's dick inside her, then swiftly moved it back and forth. Her other hand played with her breasts, her fingers tweaking her nipples. She squirmed as the waves of ecstasy reached a peak and her juices soaked her clit and fingers. She'd found some release at least for this onslaught of desire, but when sleep finally did come, it was not restful. Her dreams were haunted by Ryan's eyes, and alternately by a lad she'd not thought about for a long time, Robert Lowell.

## Chapter Six

atalie's anxiety and anticipation increased as the days flew by. She had arranged with the bank to transfer money each month from savings to checking, wrote postdated checks to cover her rent and utilities, and she ordered the phone disconnected at the end of the month.

The day before her departure, she had dinner with her mother. She paid the taxi, got out of it and walked to the white picketed fence. She stood for a moment to gaze at the familiar small cottage. Rather than sell it, because of the happy memories it held for them both, her mother had rented it out while they were away in South Africa, just like she was doing now, leaving a home behind to come back to.

After they returned to Canada they moved back into it and she'd spent many happy years there. Even after she graduated she stayed with her mother for some years until she got married.

Natalie shivered. Smoke spiraling from the chimney suggested her mother had a cozy fire going. She hastened to the front door and quickly went inside. Her mother was busy in the kitchen. Natalie smiled. Leslie wouldn't be Leslie if she weren't bustling about. "Hi, Mom."

Startled, Leslie almost dropped the pot she was ready to set on the stove. "Goodness, child. Creeping up like that could give one a heart attack."

"Dinner smells good, Mom. Anything you want me to do?" Natalie asked, taking off her coat and draping it over a chair.

"No, Nattie. Grab something to drink and go to the living room. I'll be with you in a minute."

Natalie poured a glass of orange juice and went to the living room. The fireplace had a blazing fire in it. Her mother had just piled it with fresh logs. It crackled and its flames sent a cozy glow throughout the room. She sank down on the couch and gazed around as if she were seeing it for the last time. The furniture was worn but her mother refused to get rid of it. Natalie didn't mind, because she grew up with the overstuffed couch and chairs and they were like familiar friends. The floral design of the covers lent a country cottage atmosphere to the room. The large poppies had faded from bright red to a dusky rose and the arms were becoming threadbare.

She stretched out and put her feet up on the back of the couch. Closing her eyes she tried to let her mind go blank and just enjoy the peace of the moment.

Leslie had cooked a special dinner. Chicken Cordon Bleu, Natalie's favorite, peas and carrots, mashed potatoes, and apple pie for dessert, but she had very little appetite. Excitement and fear of the unknown and at her wild, impulsive decision coursed through her body. "Mom, can you please remember to water the plants?"

Leslie smiled. "Yes, dear. You've asked me that a thousand times already. And I'm not to tell anyone that you're going to be away for so long, though I don't understand why. And how come you can't give me an address? Why all the mystery?"

"You know why, Mom. I do trust you, but Greg has a nose like a bloodhound. And I'll be traveling around too much and I won't have a steady address."

"But what about poor Greg?"

Natalie bristled at her mother's persistence. "Mom, don't mention his name again, please? Poor helpless Greg will definitely survive. I'm sure he'll find another blonde to help him along." Suddenly she had a strange feeling that her mother wasn't telling her everything. She looked her mother straight in the eyes. "Mom, he hasn't been calling you, has he?"

Leslie avoided her daughter's eyes. "No. Of course not, dear."

Natalie didn't totally believe her. "Don't tell him any of my business. I want you to promise me that on Dad's memory. Will you?" When Leslie didn't answer, Natalie prompted, "Mom, will you promise me?"

Leslie hesitated. She thought about the phone call she had just prior to Natalie's arrival and that she told Greg that Natalie was leaving on the nine a.m. flight to Johannesburg. "I promise, honey." The promise didn't matter because the damage had already been done, but it still didn't alleviate the guilt she felt at betraying her daughter's trust.

When Natalie said good-bye to her mother, Leslie broke down. Embracing her daughter, her words came in broken syllables. "I'll miss – miss – you – so – much – Nattie – "

"Come on, Mom. I'll be back before you know it and I'll keep in touch. You'll be fine. You've got your friends, your bingo, your sisters, and you didn't see that much of me anyway because I was gone so much."

Leslie dried her tears and hugged her daughter again. "But you're my only child. I so hoped you would marry and settle down. Perhaps give me the grandchildren that I've longed for."

Natalie laughed. "Heaven forbid, Mom. I'm getting too old to have kids." Her mother had touched a raw spot. She'd wanted a baby so much when she was married to Allan. Only, it never happened. She never found out why. Though she had seen the doctor and tests proved everything normal, Allan had refused to see a fertility specialist. She'd never discussed children with Greg. He had avoided the subject of marriage like the plague, and her career as a stewardess hardly afforded her time to have a baby. She would have had to quit her job, and Greg's income, as a vacuum cleaner salesman, was not steady. At times he earned a tidy sum, but most of the time she was supporting both of them. After she'd turned thirty-five she put all thoughts of having a baby out of her mind. Time had passed by too fast and now it was too late. It wouldn't be fair to have a child so late in life.

Leslie frowned. "You're not too old, Natalie. You're not even forty, for goodness sake. Nowadays more and more women have children when they're older."

"Mom, that may be, but since there's no man in my life, it's senseless to even mention it. It is kind of hard to do it on my own, you know."

Leslie dropped the subject. She knew Natalie was partly right. Since she'd broken up with Greg, it could take time for her to find another partner, and by that time she could be in her forties. Silently, she hoped that by telling Greg Natalie's flight number and time of departure, she'd be instrumental in bringing them back together. "Natalie, what am I going to tell the family?"

"Just tell them I'm gallivanting around the world, like I always do. They won't find it strange," Natalie chuckled.

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Just as she arrived home, the phone rang. It was Ryan. "Are you all set, Natalie?"

"Yes. I'm packed and ready to leave," she said in a tremulous tone.

"Scared?"

"A little," she admitted reluctantly.

"Don't be. I'll see you tomorrow morning then. Good night."

Before she went to bed, she checked her flight bag and suitcase one last time, made sure all the windows and the sliding doors were secured, watered her plants and finally crawled under the comforter. For a while, she stared at the ceiling, mentally tackling an array of doubts, concerns and second thoughts until she fell into an uneasy sleep.

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When the alarm went off at six, she jumped out of bed with a start. Her heart beat fast as she hurried to get ready to leave for the airport. She'd chosen a navy blue pants suit and white blouse to travel in, and wondered for a moment if jeans wouldn't have been more comfortable. Glancing at the clock, she decided it was too late to change into jeans. The taxi would arrive at any moment. She drew the drapes, checked her apartment a last time, slung the flight bag over her shoulder, lugged the suitcase out of the apartment and double locked the door.

On the way to the airport, it seemed as if she were just going to work and not about to take off on the adventure of her life. But as they entered Richmond and the turn-off to the airport, butterflies fluttered in her stomach. The taxi windows were partially fogged. She wiped her window clean with an arm and looked out at the downpour. "Bye rain. Hello sunshine," she said softly.

Ryan was waiting for her near the doors of the International terminal. "You're right on time, Natalie. Are you alone? No one to see you off?"

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him and looked into his eyes. "Good morning, Ryan. I preferred it this way. My Mom tends to become emotional, so I said good-bye to her last night. Most of my friends don't even know about this trip."

"Won't they wonder where you are?"

"Not really. They're all married with families and lead busy lives. They're used to me being away all the time anyway."

"Well, let's get rid of our luggage and go and have a decent coffee before we board." He glanced at her suitcase. "My, you did pack light for a woman, although it's probably still too much. Never mind, you can leave whatever you don't need in my apartment. You see, when we go for our little picnic, all we take are backpacks."

His words caused Natalie to stop in her tracks. He might make her blood run hot, but on the other hand, he also irritated her to no end. "Ryan, you can be intolerably rude. You seem to forget that I've never been on one of your little picnics."

He swung around to face her. "Can't take it, huh? Not too late to change your mind, Natalie."

"You're a typical male chauvinist. I don't know if I want to 'take' it, as you put it. As you've told me yourself, your years away from society have made you forget your manners. Your behavior almost makes me think that it's you who has had a change of heart. If so, then tell me now."

Ryan saluted her. "Aye, ma'am. I apologize. And no, I've not changed my mind."

Natalie hesitated, but only for a moment. When she read the merriment in his eyes, she made up her mind. She had no idea why this man wanted a female companion and assistant so suddenly, when he'd done well without one all these years, because he obviously did not think a woman could handle a journey into the wilderness.

Without a further word, she started to walk briskly to the ticket counter and took her place in the line up.

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Ryan walked behind her. She's hit the truth, he thought. How did she pick up on my feelings that this whole venture is ridiculous and I wanted to stop it at the last minute? All because of my publisher! Who cares if I never publish another book? I've made enough money for two lifetimes and if they don't like my future work, who gives a damn? What the hell do I know about romance novels? I'm more than attracted to this woman. If only I could have met her under normal circumstances – and even then, I'm too out of practice to be chasing anyone. Perhaps I should tell her the truth. If I do, she'll go running home and that'll be the end of it. I'll just tell the publisher that I couldn't find a woman who was willing and able.

"Excuse me, Sir? Your ticket and passport please?"

*Too late,* a little voice in his mind screamed. *It's too late. She's quit her job, and it's all your fault.* "I'm sorry, Miss. I guess I was lost in thought for a moment." He quickly handed his ticket and passport to the young woman behind the counter.

Natalie didn't know the stewardess who greeted her as she boarded the plane. She was glad the woman

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was a stranger. All she needed right now was one of her nosy colleagues plaguing her with questions. It felt strange to board as a passenger. "Would you like the window seat, Ryan?" she asked while she handed him her flight bag to put in the compartment above.

"It doesn't matter to me. You can sit near the window if you prefer."

She took off her jacket and wondered at his clipped tone while she sat down and fastened her seat belt. "It feels odd to sit here as a traveler. I feel like getting up and doing something. It's been such a regular routine for years."

"I can imagine. You've never used your free flying time to go anywhere then?"

"No. Because I saw so much of the world on a regular basis, my idea of a holiday was to take a tent and camp somewhere quiet."

"So that's how you spent your holidays?"

"No. I said it was my idea, not that it was ever put into practice."

"I see. A dream never fulfilled."

"Dreams are seldom practical. I've always been a very practical person." That amused smile played on his lips. It was as if he toyed with her.

"Then what made you make this very impractical decision, Natalie?" he asked softly, so soft, she could hardly hear him.

"Perhaps it was time to experience something different. My life has always been very organized and lately—" Quickly she changed the subject. "Ryan, you ask all these questions about me, but you speak very little about yourself. Do you have family? Do they live

in Johannesburg?" He didn't reply immediately and she thought she saw a fleeting hint of pain in his eyes when he finally answered.

"No. I don't have any family. I lost my parents when I was very young and was raised in an orphanage."

"I read the bio in your book. My mother and I-" she stopped. She was about to tell him about the year that she spent with her mother in South Africa just after her father died. Her mother heard via a friend about the nursing job in an orphanage in New Canada, Transvaal. Leslie had applied, been offered the position and taken it. She wanted to forget about the pain the loss of her beloved husband caused and thought this was the way to do it. The nursing job lasted less than one year and they returned to Canada. Ryan's personal information just brought back all those memories of their time in the orphanage. Natalie was the only little girl among sixty boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Matron allowed her to have one young friend in that orphanage and he claimed he'd marry her when she grew up. Robert Lowell – whatever became of him? she thought. I wrote to him, but he never wrote back. That ogre of a matron probably never gave him the letters or maybe she never mailed the ones he did write to me. She pictured him for a moment. He'd already been tall for a twelve-year-old lad and showed promise to grow into a handsome man. He had very dark curly hair and brown eyes, just like Ryan's. She looked at the man next to her and wondered which orphanage he had been brought up in.

Ryan wondered why his words had caused her to sink into far away thoughts. "Yes?" He prompted her. "Your mother and you –?"

"We're about to take off, Ryan. You'd better fasten your seatbelt."

Natalie closed her eyes until they reached the desired altitude, then looked down at the country she'd lived in most of her life. "So long, Canada," she whispered softly. "I'll be back."

"But not for a long time." Ryan said. His sharp ears had picked up the whisper.

Natalie swung back to face him. "You said the job was a permanent one, but I am not so sure I want to leave city life behind and spend the rest of my life in the jungle. I've told myself I'll give it twelve months. If I don't like it, or find it impossible to work with you, that will be the deadline. I also never agreed to become a permanent resident of Africa. I love my homeland."

"You should have told me that before you agreed to take the job. Very well. Twelve months trial it is, but you must promise me you'll not quit before then." He chuckled. "Though you'd find it pretty hard to make your way back to civilization on your own. And I stand to correct you. It's the concrete jungle we'll be leaving behind. In the real jungle, we'll be almost living as God intended us to."

"Almost?"

His smile broadened and the dimples appeared. "I draw the line at a fig leaf. Too many insects in the jungle!"

She had to suppress a giggle at the thought of the

two of them traipsing through the jungle wearing only a fig leaf, although as she pictured his naked body in her mind, she couldn't help wondering what was behind the fig leaf...

## Chapter Seven

Dirk Verbeek waited impatiently for the passengers on the Vancouver flight to exit. Usually, the stewardesses and pilots arrived last. His fingers nervously fingered the leather pouch in his pocket in an attempt to look inconspicuous in the bustling terminal, behaving as if he were just another relative waiting anxiously for the passengers to appear. He knew Natalie well. He'd slipped a pouch into her bag so many times. He cast a furtive glance around to make sure no one was watching him. His left eye twitched and he knew it would pull into the corner as it always did when he was nervous. Uncomfortably he shuffled away from an older woman who eyed him suspiciously.

He almost jumped when he saw Natalie arrive with the other passengers. Beside her walked a tall man. "What the hell? She's not in uniform. She must have changed before getting off the plane. What's going on?" he muttered softly to himself. "Shit, how am I going to slip the stuff into her bag now?"

His eyes never left the couple. "Maybe she's latched onto another guy. Greg said he was having

personal problems with her," he concluded while trying to figure out a way to slip the contraband into her flight bag.

Finally he had a chance when the man walked away to hail a taxi and Natalie turned away from the luggage to look at a billboard. Quickly, he ran to the luggage, ran his fingers along the edging, found the mechanism concealed within the fine leather tubing and squeezed it. Lifting the bag slightly he slipped the pouch into the false bottom. Just as he finished, Natalie turned around. He had to act fast and sprawled across the luggage, knowing his weight would seal the compartment again.

"Sir, are you okay?" she asked. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Dirk pasted on a contrite expression. "Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going," he mumbled and scrambled up. "I'm fine," he said and brushed off the helping hand she offered.

Natalie shrugged her shoulders as Dirk merged into the crowd. "Strange character," she mumbled and looked to see if Ryan had found a taxi yet.

Ryan waited for Natalie to get into the taxi, then joined her on the back seat. "Would you prefer to stay in a hotel, Natalie? My apartment is quite large and my housekeeper is a reliable chaperone. I have plenty of guest rooms, but perhaps you'd feel more comfortable if I put you up in a hotel until we leave."

"Your apartment will be fine, Ryan. After all we've both agreed that this is to be a business relationship only, so I have no fear that you'll be chasing me all over your place. We leave in a week, don't we?" "Yes. Perhaps less than a week. Don't worry. You'll be perfectly safe under my roof." He added with a sardonic smile, "I'm sure Mamete will keep a close eye on us."

Natalie, annoyed at his cockiness, pressed her lips together and gazed out of the window at the busy streets. Just like at home, people always seemed to be in a hurry, rushing in and out of stores or office buildings. She always marveled at the architecture of many buildings. Johannesburg was a beautiful city of brick and masonry, though right now her thoughts were on anything but sightseeing.

Finally they pulled up in front of a tall apartment building. It was fairly new, Natalie noticed. A tall, black man, in red livery, rushed to get their luggage. Ryan greeted him with a smile. "Abraham, nice to see you," he greeted.

Abraham smiled from ear to ear, sending Natalie a curious glance. "Good to have you back, Mr. Jamieson." He reached for the suitcases. "I'll get those. You go on up to your place."

Ryan greeted the elevator attendant and handed him a small key that the attendant inserted into a slot. The elevator opened right into his apartment. It acted as his front door. When Natalie stepped out of it and walked into the expansive living room and faced large picture windows that overlooked the whole city, she exclaimed, "Ryan, you call this an apartment? This is a penthouse! Is it yours, or do you rent?"

"I own it."

"It's beautiful. The view is magnificent."

"If you think the view of a concrete jungle is

magnificent, then I guess in your eyes it must be. I prefer a more natural habitat but this is convenient. It's just a place to come back to and finish the final drafts of my books."

Just as he completed the sentence, a stout black woman entered the room. She was dressed in an orange sarong wound tightly around her body. It reached almost to her ankles. A multi colored shawl graced her shoulders and a matching bandana her head. Large, gold hooped earrings dangled from her ears. Friendliness and warmth shone from her coal black eyes and her round ebony face beamed.

"Ah, Mamete, please take Ms Dubois' suitcase and bag to one of the guest rooms. Natalie, this is Mamete Musango, my housekeeper. Mamete has been with me for many years. Natalie has come all the way from Canada, Mamete, to be my assistant."

Mamete's ebony face beamed from ear to ear. "Please to meet you, Missie. Welcome to Johannesburg." She shook Natalie's extended hand then turned to Ryan. "Glad to see you home again, Master Ryan. How long are you staying this time?"

"Only a week, Mamete. How are the kids? Where is Tomy?"

"The kids are fine, Master. They're grown up now so they've moved out to live on their own. Tomy is out in the garden." She picked up the suitcase and held out her hand for the flight bag. "I'll show you to your room, Missie Dubois."

Natalie followed the stout figure of the housekeeper and wondered about the garden. When she entered her room, she found out what Mamete had meant by garden. The sliding doors opened up to a large patio, which was surrounded by riotously blooming potted trees, shrubs and flowers. Natalie stared entranced at the idyllic scene.

"Do you need anything else, Missie?" Mamete asked.

"No, thank you, Mamete. I'll be fine now."

Mamete sent her a disarming smile. "Missie, you are the first woman Master Ryan has ever brought home."

"Really? I'm just his secretary, Mamete."

"Yes. Master Ryan is a fine gentleman. He deserves a good woman in his life," Mamete said while sending Natalie a knowing look.

"Perhaps he'll find such a woman one day, Mamete."

"If you need anything, I'll be in the kitchen, Missie."

"Thank you," Natalie said, and waited for Mamete to leave her room.

While she took off her traveling clothes and put on a long cotton skirt and a tank top, she gazed at the wealth of flowers draping the roof. Ryan had managed to make at least part of his concrete jungle into a miniature park.

Barefoot, she wandered out of the open sliding door and onto the patio. She noticed that it wound all the way around the penthouse and exotic flowers thrived in abundance everywhere. A sweep of verdant green and a wealth of color concealed the dull gray cement. She'd never seen such huge Azaleas or Hibiscus.

A path of gray flagstones led her to the patio near the living room windows where she found Ryan, who had changed into shorts. He was sipping a drink and lounging on a white lawn chair. She took in his appearance in a glance. He wore nothing on his feet, like her, and no shirt. He seemed totally different from the man she had accompanied. Goose bumps covered her arms when she noted his tanned body, his muscular chest and arms. A mat of black hair covered his chest. His long legs were stretched out, his feet resting on another chair. As her eyes raked his body she felt the blood rush to her face at the thoughts that entered her mind, to rake her fingers through that mass of curls on his chest, to explore what was hidden inside those shorts... Quickly she composed herself before she joined him.

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"I see you've made yourself more comfortable, Natalie. Care to join me in a drink? I plan to spend the remainder of this day just relaxing. Tomorrow we'll start shopping for supplies." Through narrowed eyes he'd watched her approach. Several times she stopped to admire and smell a flower. He sucked in his breath as the sun behind her outlined her body through the thin material of the skirt.

When she sat opposite him, the white tank top revealed clearly that she was braless and he marveled at the perky breasts that faced him. The white material did not hide her large nipples very well, or the dark aureole that surrounded them. His heart pumped faster. Long forgotten desires attacked his loins and a spark started to ignite the embers that had smoldered dormant for years. His fingers suddenly itched to pull out the pins that held the wealth of dark hair still neatly tucked into the bun at the nape of her neck. Quickly he took his feet off the chair and sat up straight to hide his feelings. He glanced at his arms and chest, sure that the hair on them stood to attention.

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It was quite hot and her throat was dry. "I would love a drink. You've made this roof into a miniature park. It's beautiful, Ryan."

"Thank you, but it's mainly the work of my gardener, Tomy, Mamete's husband."

"Do they live here?"

"Yes, they have their servant's quarters just on the other side of the roof. I've made them quite comfortable and they've stayed faithfully with me, I guess, for about eighteen years now." He handed her the Margarita he'd just poured.

Natalie frowned. Some of her stewardess excursions to Johannesburg had resulted in invitations to dinner at different houses and she saw some of the servants' quarters. She wouldn't have let a dog live in them.

Ryan saw her frown and stood up. "Come with me. I'll show you how my servants live. I'm not like the average South African."

She followed him to the back of the penthouse.

Like so many well to do families had in their back yard or on the roof, there was a row of rooms, built from cement, but these had been painted a bright white and sported red-tiled roofs. The long building was also surrounded by lavish gardens. The small windows were adorned with frilly white sheers and the doors painted a cheerful red.

"I'd show you inside but I don't want to invade Mamete's and Tomy's privacy. They are my only hired help and this building is their house. Inside, I've had a bathroom installed and I've furnished the rooms. The floors are carpeted and they have a proper kitchen. They are paid appropriate wages and I helped to educate their two children. My servants lack for nothing."

"I'm sorry. I thought—"

"I know. Many are still taken advantage of. I suppose I'm not like the average house owner who has servants. I do have a heart. They are God's people, just like us and deserve to get paid a decent wage and have appropriate living quarters."

Natalie had just seen a side of him she never expected. It bothered her. The arrogant, obnoxious Ryan, she could handle. His sarcasm and cynicism helped to quickly squash any feelings that coursed through her body. But now she saw a man with compassion, a man who was not as hard as he seemed—

On the horizon, the sun painted the sky a vivid, pinkish orange. To still her heart and mask the blush she felt rush to her cheeks, she quickly walked to the railing that separated the penthouse gardens from the rest of the roof and leaned on it. "Look at the sunset, it's beautiful."

He came and stood beside her. When he leaned on the railing, his arm touched hers and the touch of his skin on her bare arm caused her to shiver with excitement.

"Just wait until you're out there in the jungle with me," he said softly. "You'll see sights that will make you forget all about the city, or that there's even a world outside the wilderness." His tone became bitter. "It's a shame that the world can't leave the jungle alone and leave God's nature as it was intended. Do you realize that we share this planet with thirteen million other species and many of them are threatened? I get so angry when I think about the millions nations spend on space projects to explore unknown territories, when their own world is in so much need."

"And you're trying to make a difference, all on your own," she murmured and looked up at him. He straightened and turned to face her. For the first time she noticed how much taller than her he was. He towered over her. Her face barely reached his chest. She was so close to him she could almost touch that black tantalizing hair on his chest. Heady scent from a pot filled with lavender flowers drifted up and teased her nostrils. The moment was suspended in time as she gazed into his eyes.

His large hands reached and held her by the shoulders. The touch sent shivers down her spine, into her groin and down her legs. She felt a sudden urge to crawl into his strong arms, nestle against his chest, and let her fingers play with those tiny black curls that covered it, but she squashed the desire and stood immobile, feeling the crotch of her panties get wet.

"And you're going to help me let the world know exactly what goes on." His slim fingers tilted her chin up to face him. "Right, Natalie?"

For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her and her heart almost stopped, her skin puckering at his touch, but then he abruptly let go and stepped back. "I believe Mamete has dinner ready for us. Are you hungry?"

## Chapter Eight

he days following their arrival in Johannesburg passed by so fast that Natalie hardly had time to think. Ryan took her to specialty stores and bought her everything she needed for the long trip. Rather than have her wear jeans, he purchased khaki pants, shorts and shirts, tank tops and a pair of sturdy boots that reached up to the knee. He insisted that the boots were a size too small but when she tried on a larger size, her feet swam in them. She ignored his advice and was determined to get her usual size. A wide rimmed khaki hat completed the outfits. He also bought a lightweight backpack and her own small tent.

It was the day before they were due to leave, and Ryan had patiently shown her the best way to pack her things. Suddenly he stopped and looked uncomfortable. "Eh, Natalie—there's something else you need to buy."

"I thought we had everything. What else is there?"

"Ah – I made some inquiries and – "

"Yes?"

He was kneeling on the floor next to her backpack.

Suddenly he stood and walked to the open sliding door and gazed out at the city. "I believe there's a cup on the market that can be used on a monthly basis."

Natalie frowned. "A cup?"

"Eh—yes. You can't pack all those boxes of tampons and pads you bought. There's no room."

She felt the blood rush to her face. "My flight bag –

"Stays here. Whatever you take has to fit inside the backpack. Don't forget, we'll be on foot and have to carry everything."

"Oh, now I know what you mean. I've heard of those cups—and if there's no water to wash them, what do I do then?"

"Buy several, and plastic bags. Apparently the cups are quite discreet. Anyway, I always make sure I stay close enough to water and if we're not, we carry a water supply with us."

He drove her to a drugstore so she could buy the necessary items. When they returned home, she took the cups out of the boxes and stuffed them into the bottom of the backpack.

Just as she was finished, Ryan knocked on the door and came in. He looked at her toiletry bag that still had to fit and the neatly folded flannelette pajamas. He chuckled. "Don't bother packing those, Natalie. You won't need them. We sleep in our clothes."

He bent down, picked up the pajamas and threw them on the bed, then helped her roll the sleeping bag into a tight roll and attached it to the backpack. "Are you almost set now?"

"I guess so."

"Good. In half an hour Kwame and Basilio will be here to join us for dinner and we'll discuss our route afterward. Do you want to phone anyone before we leave? Perhaps your mother?"

"Yes, that would be nice. What time do we leave? And who are Kwame and Basilio?"

"My guide and interpreter. Surely you didn't think we'd be traipsing through the jungle alone? We leave at four in the morning. We'll have an early night tonight." His eyes fell on the flight bag she'd also packed full. "You can't take that. Just the backpack, Natalie."

Gratified they wouldn't be venturing through the jungle alone, she wondered at her own stupidity to even think he'd leave without a guide. "I'm taking it. The backpack doesn't hold enough. The bag just hangs over my shoulder and it isn't heavy."

He looked at her stubborn chin and determined eyes and shook his head. "You'll be sorry."

After he'd left the room, Natalie dialed her mother's number. It rang quite a few times before Leslie answered.

"Mom? I can barely hear you. It's Natalie."

"Natalie? My dear, where are you?"

"In Africa, Mom. You know that."

"But, Greg said –"

Natalie bit the retort on her lips. "I see he's been calling you again. Mom, I asked you not to talk to him. He has no right to harass you like that."

"But he was so angry that you weren't on that return flight. He wants to know where you are. He said you had something of his that he wants back." "Mom, I don't have anything of his. I don't know what he's talking about and I'm in no mood to hear any more of his lies. Mom? Are you there?" The line went dead for a moment and when her mother spoke again it was distorted by loud crackling.

"He says—in—flight bag—Nattie, I thought you—were joking about—staying away—"

"No, Mom. I was serious when I said I'll be gone for a while. Can you hear me?" The line finally cleared again and she could speak softer. "Mom, I won't be able to call you for a few months. Please don't tell Greg anything. Don't even talk to him."

"But Nattie – "

"Mom, I'll send you postcards. Okay? I love you-"

Just as she put the phone down, Ryan stood in the doorway. "Greg? So that's his name. Mm, he's been bothering your mother, has he?"

"Mom is upset. She never believed that I'd be gone longer than three or four days. I'll write a stack of postcards and ask Mamete to mail them for me on a regular basis. That will keep her happy."

"Just be sure not to put this address on them, please? Your Greg can stay nicely where he is. Our fellow travelers have arrived. Would you like to join us for dinner now?"

"He's not my Greg, thank you. I'll be there in a moment," she snapped, still irritated that Greg had the audacity to bother her mother. *I have something of his? What the hell is he talking about? I gave him back the ring*, she thought. *What else could it be?* 

Before she joined Ryan and his guests for dinner,

she searched through the flight bag, but found nothing that could belong to Greg. With a shrug of her shoulders she left the bedroom and entered the dining room to join the men.

Ryan stood up, took her hand and introduced her to his two guests. "Kwame, Basilio, I'd like you to meet our new travel companion. This is Natalie. Natalie, Kwame Hiza is our guide and Basilio Bandele our interpreter. I guarantee he knows every native dialect in the country. Both of them are very experienced and Kwame has a medical background. We'll be quite safe in their hands. Kwame's roots are in Tanzania and Basilio's in Nairobi, but they were both raised in South Africa. They've accompanied me on my excursions ever since the first one."

"A woman?" The taller of the two black men said. The other man only grimaced.

Ryan grinned broadly. "Kwame, I told you I'd have a surprise for you. Maybe we'll enjoy some decent cooking for a change."

Natalie felt dwarfed by the tall man who rose from his chair to greet her. He had to be at least six foot six inches. His dark eyes scrutinized her from head to toe. She thought she read resentment in them but wasn't sure. She shook Kwame's hand, then Basilio's. Basilio was shorter than Kwame, but not by much. Both men looked to be between thirty and forty. She found it difficult to guess their age because their bodies were lithe and strong like young men. Only the fine sprinkling of gray in their short-cropped black hair suggested they were older than they looked. Basilio too seemed to regard her with suspicion, causing her to feel uncomfortable.

After she'd greeted the two men, she turned to Ryan and snapped, "You hired me as a secretary, not as a cook."

Kwame started to laugh. "A secretary? Since when do you need a secretary in the jungle, Ryan?"

Basilio didn't think it so funny. "If you can take a woman along to satisfy your needs, then we should have that privilege, too."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, calm down. This was at my publisher's suggestion. You've embarrassed the lady. I've hired her as secretary and assistant. We hardly know each other."

"I'm sorry," Basilio said, but his black eyes flew from Ryan to Natalie. He'd already sensed the attraction between the two and knew that once they were in primitive environment, it would not be long before they would realize the chemistry themselves.

Ryan raised his glass of wine. "Gentlemen, Natalie, here's to our excursion. May it be successful and may we arrive home again safely."

## **Chapter Nine**

t was still dark when the two Jeeps left the sleepy city of Johannesburg behind. Natalie was too excited to feel any effects from the lack of sleep she'd suffered the night before. They drove in silence until they passed the koppies.

Ryan broke the silence by commenting on the large mounds of yellow sand. "I guess you've never been outside Johannesburg this far, Natalie. Those mounds of sand you see are called koppies. They are formed from the sand that comes out of the mines."

"I know," Natalie said.

"Oh, sorry. I wouldn't have thought you had enough time to travel any great distances in between flights."

Natalie thought back to the huge mounds near New Canada where she and her mother lived so many years before—and to a little boy who climbed them. The lad sunk deep into the sand, and by the time rescuers got to the little boy he had suffocated. She was never allowed anywhere near the koppies. "Eh—I read about them in the tourist flyers we get stuffed in our hands when we land." She didn't want to mention that her mother and she spent almost a year at the orphanage in New Canada, because she wasn't sure if it would bring back painful memories of his own youth.

"So now you've seen the real thing. Impressed?"

Natalie glanced at him. "Not really. They just look like huge mounds of yellow sand. I'd rather see mounds of diamonds."

"Do you like diamonds?"

"Doesn't every girl?"

His eyes remained on the road. "That's answering a question with a question. Your engagement ring, did it have a diamond?"

"Ryan, what difference does it make? It was a cluster of rubies."

"Did you love him, Natalie?"

"Why all the questions, Ryan? You're digging into my personal life again. I don't like it. How about you? Have you ever loved a woman?" Her eyes remained glued to his profile, but all she could see was a twitching muscle in his neck, and his lips set in a firm line.

"Yes, there was once a woman in my life. We'll stop for a coffee break at the next service station."

Natalie gazed at the dusty road thoughtfully. *I've hit a raw spot,* she thought. *He wants to know everything about me, but he's so closed about his own life. Some woman has hurt him badly in the past.* "I could stand a coffee. Matter of fact, I'm rather hungry."

They drove on in silence for some time. Ryan was busy with his own thoughts about the forthcoming expedition and Natalie just gazed at the scenery that flew by. Soon, they were passing through arid plains. Sparse vegetation and long dry grass dotted the dry, sandy soil. Sometimes they passed small groups of natives trekking toward Johannesburg, possibly looking for work at the mines, or they simply couldn't survive in the harsh desert conditions. It fascinated Natalie how the women could carry a baby on their backs, bundles in their hands and at the same time balance large baskets atop their heads.

They gassed up at a lonely service station. Natalie waited patiently while the men were busy filling the Jeeps. She gazed at the few houses that surrounded the station and wondered how anyone could stand living out here in such dry conditions with virtually no vegetation to speak of. It was a stark, lonely landscape. "I guess it's a way to make a living," she murmured.

Ryan returned to the Jeep carrying the two thermoses filled with fresh coffee. He handed them to Natalie. "We'd better get going. Do you need to use the ladies room before we take off?" he asked, a slight smile forming on his lips.

"No, not at this time," she said while pouring coffee into their cups.

"Are you sure? We won't be stopping now until we get to Pretoria."

"Yes. I'm sure."

A couple of hours later they drove through Pretoria. Natalie was awed at the Jacaranda trees that lined the streets and their sea of purple blooms. She had heard about Jacaranda City as it was nicknamed, but she'd never been there. "What a beautiful city, Ryan," she commented.

"Yes. I'll drive by the Parliament buildings. Their gardens are a sight to behold," he said.

And they were.

They stopped for a brief moment so Natalie could take pictures. The Parliament buildings were high, built up against a mountain. The gardens led up to them in tiers, planted with an array of shrubs and flowers all in bloom. In their center, steps led up to the building. "That's quite a climb," she commented to Ryan.

"So it is. You have to be in pretty good shape to climb those," he grinned. "We'll stop at a café to have something to eat and then we'll head for the border. Once we're finished with this book, I'll take some time off to take you on a tour of these cities."

The scenery hardly changed as they continued on. They passed through towns, which were surrounded by almost barren desert land. Natalie looked in amazement at the strange-looking trees that now spotted the otherwise barren landscape. Their trunks were huge and strangely shaped, almost alien looking, and they had long tapering branches. They looked as if they had their roots sticking out in the air.

"Those are weird looking trees, Ryan," she said.

"They're called Baobab trees. Many people call them grotesque but I prefer to call them majestic and impressive. They're also called Adansonia. Their flowers have a marvelous scent and their fruit—well, let me stop and show you," he smiled at her and pulled off to the side of the road.

Natalie followed him to one of the trees and

examined the egg-shaped fruit he handed to her.

"Many animals, especially elephants, and natives love this fruit. Its seed is rich in vitamin C, potassium and tartaric acid. The leaves are very high in vitamin A and C and are often used in soup or eaten fresh in salads. The natives use them to treat all kind of ailments. The fruit contains a white pulp that when mixed with water makes a refreshing drink. Here, let me make some for you," he said and walked back to the Jeep.

Reaching into the back he took some water out of their water container and poured it into a cup. Then he squeezed the white pulp from the fruit into it and handed it to Natalie.

Hesitantly she took a sip. "Mm, this is refreshing. Maybe we should take some of the fruit along in the car," she said and drank the rest of the juice. Thoughtfully, she watched Ryan stride to the trees and pluck some more of the juicy fruits. "You're a strange man, Ryan. I wonder if I'll ever penetrate that shell you've crawled into," she said softly. Again she felt strange sensations as he walked back to the car and to her. Without thinking, she leaned against the hot metal and yelped as her bare arm touched it.

"You're in Africa now, not in Canada. I'd be careful touching the cars when we've been driving in the hot sun for hours," Ryan advised.

"We do get some sun in Canada, I'll have you know. I wasn't thinking," Natalie retorted, annoyed at her own stupidity.

"Well, you'd better learn to think, or it could cost you dearly while we're on our safari." "Ryan, your condescending attitude is getting to me. You're not talking to a schoolgirl."

"Regrets already?"

She could have slapped him for the smirk, which accompanied his sarcastic remark. On the other hand, his brown eyes drifted lazily from her toes to her head and back again and caused palpitations. For a moment she met his eyes and drowned in their depths. Basilio honked impatiently and snapped her out of it. "Do I look like I have regrets?" Without waiting for his answer, she opened the door and got back into the vehicle.

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Ryan put the fruit on her lap. His hand brushed her arm as he withdrew his hand to start the Jeep. The touch of his skin on hers was charged with electricity such as he'd never felt. He started the vehicle and honked to tell Basilio they were on their way. It took great effort for him to say the next words. He wasn't accustomed to apologies, much less to a woman. "I'm sorry, Natalie. You'll have to get used to my wry sense of humor. I was joking." He meant to tell her he felt awkward dealing with a woman, but that was just too hard to admit.

"Boss, I told you, I don't know where she is and that imbecile mother of hers won't tell me anything," Greg whined through split lips. His head snapped back

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sharply when another blow landed on his jaw.

"Then you had better get it out of the woman, asshole," snarled Dennis, his round, puffy face red with anger. He rubbed his balding head in an agitated manner and paced back and forth, his huge belly blubbering with each step like a bowl of jelly. "If she didn't come back, then obviously she stayed there for an extended vacation. So when you get the information, you're on the next plane to Africa. Those diamonds have to be in our hands by the end of the month or we can all kiss our asses goodbye." Dennis' beady eyes slitted as he shoved Greg so hard that he fell hard on the cement floor of the warehouse they used for their meeting place. Like a wounded dog Greg started to crawl toward the door. "You've got four weeks to find the girl and get the diamonds. To be on the safe side, I think Bill and I will go with you. I don't trust you."

Greg stood up and rubbed his jaw. He didn't like Bill, one of the mob's more unsavory characters and a killer. "Boss, that's not necessary. I'm sure Natalie will be back before then. You know you can trust me."

"Shut your mouth. Get out of here, you bastard!"

Greg slunk out of the dark warehouse with his tail between his legs and headed for his vehicle. Now that he was out of earshot, he felt braver and cursed Dennis. "Asshole! Jerk!" he said loudly as he got into his car.

While he drove to Leslie's house, Greg dabbed at his cut lip. "Damn you, Natalie. You weren't kidding when you said you were moving far away. Why the hell did you have to screw things up for me?" he muttered under his breath and pulled into Leslie's driveway.

Leslie was already in her pajamas and robe when she answered the door. Frowning at the insistent ringing of the doorbell, she left the chain on and opened the door a crack to see who it was. "Oh, it's you, Greg. It's rather late. I was just on my way to bed."

"Leslie, let me in. I need to talk to you urgently."

With a sigh she took the chain off and opened the door to let him in. He slammed the door shut behind him and grabbed her. When he twisted her arm behind her back and held a knife to her throat, she gasped, "Greg-what-don't do-this-let-me go-"

"Tell me where Natalie is," he hissed softly near her ear and loosened his hold a little.

"You're hurting me. Let me go – please – "

"Where is she, Leslie? Talk, or you'll never speak another word."

The point of the knife bit into her skin and she felt blood run down her neck into the collar of her pajamas. "In Johannesburg, but I don't know where. I honestly don't. I got a postcard yesterday and -"

Greg shoved her away so hard she almost fell. "Get it," he hissed.

Her body shook from head to toe as she walked into the living room and picked up the postcard that lay on the coffee table. "Here it is, but there's no address and -"

He shoved her roughly onto the couch. "Shut up.

Just sit there and don't say a word."

Greg looked at the back of the postcard and saw she'd been telling him the truth. "You've talked to her. I know you have. Where in Johannesburg is she? With friends? When is she coming back?"

Leslie cried softly. "Not for a long time. She has a job there. She's -"

"And she wouldn't tell her own mother where she's staying? Stop lying to me, Leslie or -" he held the knife under her chin.

Leslie's eyes widened with fear. "I'm not lying," she gasped. "She said there's no way I can get in touch with her where she is. Greg, please don't do this. I don't understand – why are you – "

"I should kill you, but for now I won't. So she's not coming back?"

"No, not now, but—"

"She must have told you something. What is the name of the friends she's staying with?"

"Greg, please – You're hurting me." She couldn't take any more of his abuse. "Natalie quit her job and is working for a writer now."

"A writer?" He laughed sarcastically. "What's his bloody name? I knew something fishy was going on."

"Ryan Jamieson. That's all I know. I swear on my dear husband's grave."

"Very well. I'm going to leave now, Leslie, but if you call the police, or breathe one word to anyone about this, you're dead and so is your darling daughter. Don't worry, I'll find her."

The door slammed so hard it caused a picture to fall off the wall. With trembling hands Leslie picked

up the phone and dialed 911. "I need the police – "

"Is this an emergency, madam?"

"Yes, I mean no— Oh, it doesn't matter." Quickly she put the phone down again when she thought about his threats. "Natalie, what have you got that belongs to him that has made him so desperate?" she wondered softly. "You couldn't be involved in anything dangerous. Not my girl. If only I knew how to get in touch with you..."

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Greg chuckled when he pulled away from the curb. "I knew she'd break. Now to find out information about Ryan Jamieson. That shouldn't be too hard. I'll find one of his books and contact the publisher pretending to be a reporter. First thing in the morning I'll get on that."

The next morning he went to a bookstore, bought a copy of Ryan Jamieson's latest novel, and returned to his apartment. He looked at the inside cover and saw that it was published by Dell Publishing. It had an address but no phone number. Quickly he dialed zero for the operator. The girl gave him the phone number for Dell Publishing in New York. He dialed the number and asked for the editor named in the credits, Judy Harrison.

"Ms Harrison? I'm Jim Wallace, a reporter for the Vancouver Sun in Canada and I wonder if I could set up an interview with Ryan Jamieson. I'll be in New York next month and I thought—"

"Mr. Wallace, I'm sorry but Mr. Jamieson is

presently working on another novel."

"I hear he lives in South Africa. Can he be reached there for a possible interview?"

Judy Harrison chuckled. "Not for some time, Mr. Wallace. Research is very important for Mr. Jamieson's novels. He roams the jungles and writes his books while he does his research. He'll be gone at least four months, if not more."

"Could you at least give me his phone number there so that I can contact him personally when he gets back?" he tried.

"I'm sorry. That is privileged information. You can contact us in about six months, Mr. Wallace."

"Thank you for your time, Ms Harrison."

"You're welcome. If you call back in six months, perhaps I'll be able to set up an appointment for an interview then."

Greg slammed the phone down. "Now what do I do?" he hissed. "The guy is on safari and I guess Natalie has gone with him? That's crazy. What would make her do such a thing?" He shook his head. "Jesus, the boss is going to flip." He retrieved the book and flipped to the introduction. With a frown he read about the locations mentioned in the book. When he finished reading it, he picked up the phone and dialed Dennis' number.

"Boss?"

"So have you found out where she is? If you haven't don't even bother opening your trap."

"She's on safari."

"What?"

"You heard me. She's on safari with some writer.

Somewhere in Africa. I finally got some information out of the old lady and then I called the guy's publisher."

"You mean to say that the diamonds are out there somewhere in the jungle? Get your lazy ass on a plane and get after her. I want those diamonds. To be safe, I'll send Bill with you."

"But, boss – "

"Did I just speak Chinese? You heard me."

"Boss, how the hell do I know where they've gone? I bought the guy's last book and it mentions a few locations but they could have gone to different regions. Plus, I've got no money."

"You screwed up big time, asshole. You'd better damn well get those diamonds back here in a hurry. Just remember what will happen if you don't."

Greg rubbed his ear when Dennis slammed the phone down. "How the hell will I ever find her?" he muttered. He stood up and in a panic started to throw his clothes into a suitcase with all intentions to take off and disappear. Perspiration dripped off his forehead as he tried to cram the lid shut. His finger caught between the snap. The sudden pain made him curse and jump back. Stuffing the injured finger in his mouth, he stared thoughtfully at the overfull suitcase. They'll find me, he thought. I can run, but they'll still find me and I'll be just another unidentified corpse for the cops to puzzle over. Damn-if I hadn't started an affair with that blonde. I'd still be with Natalie and she wouldn't have done this. I'll call Dennis and ask if he'll give me an advance on this take – if I ever find it – man, if Natalie is carrying this stuff through the jungles, God knows what could happen to it. I need the man's address in Johannesburg. That's it - I'll book a flight, charge it to my visa, and find out where the guy lives. He's rich and bound to have servants – Surely they'll be able to tell me how to find them –

## Chapter Ten

A table wiped the perspiration off her brow. They had been on the road for two weeks and each day she marveled at the changing scenery. While they traveled through Zimbabwe, she noticed many small farms. Ryan told her the natives grew maize and tobacco, which they sold in the cities. At dusk, the sky turned blood red. She was enthralled by the msasa, a native plant that formed a filigreed silhouette against the fiery sky. Her stack of full films was slowly growing. She hoped all the pictures would turn out, especially the ones taken at sundown. Carefully she packed the rolls of film in their containers and then in a Styrofoam container Ryan had advised her to take along for that purpose to avoid the film being ruined by the hot sun.

The people of Zimbabwe were happy natured and quite relaxed with the foreigners who passed through their land.

Occasionally they stopped if they saw a small restaurant and would eat a hearty meal, sometimes consisting of just a meat pie. One little restaurant they stopped at served them a complete meal. Natalie gazed down at the huge carrot on her plate and pricked it with her fork, but it was cooked. Large chunks of pumpkin, potatoes dripping in gravy and sausages completed the meal. She only picked at the food, as it was too rich for her taste.

The rest of the time they ate in the car while they traveled through Zimbabwe. Most of the time they drove through desert lands, passing small villages, farms and wildlife stations and many medical clinics. Usually their meals consisted of sandwiches and fruit that they picked up along the way. Sometimes she wondered what they would eat in the jungle but didn't worry about it. Ryan had made twelve of these trips and survived them all, so she presumed that he packed food to take along, though she couldn't imagine it lasting six months.

The three men had taken turns driving so they could continue through the night. Conversation was mostly limited to Ryan's past excursions and the books he had written about them. As the drivers exchanged, she slowly got to know Basilio and Kwame better. Both men had known Ryan since he wrote his first book and accompanied him on each trip. Their tales kept her amused and made the time pass quickly.

The Jeeps drove slowly along a winding dirt road. Suddenly Natalie spotted a herd of giraffes in the distance. "Ryan, stop!"

"No, we can't stop here."

"But I want to take a picture of the giraffes."

"My dear, you'll get plenty of opportunity to take pictures, but if you look ahead of us, there's a lion, lioness and cubs just beside the road. They're munching on their lunch so best not to disturb them. They could get angry."

She leaned forward to peer through the dirty windshield. "Ryan, if you cleaned these windows occasionally, I could at least see enough to take pictures through the glass."

He chuckled softly. "Typical woman. We're almost due to arrive at our last stop. We're close to the Zambian border. We leave the jeeps there and continue on foot from that point on."

"On foot? What about the lions?"

"If we don't bother them, they won't bother us." He grinned, but kept his eyes on the road. "I hope."

"You hope? Do you have a gun?"

"Yes, we carry rifles but we only use them to kill for food or if we're in danger. So far, I've had to shoot no wild life. Not even a snake."

Natalie shuddered. "What do you kill for food?"

"Whatever we find. A wild rabbit, a pheasant, sometimes we fish if we're near water and the water is untainted."

"You weren't kidding when you said that we'd be living as God intended us to live, were you, Ryan?"

"No, I wasn't."

"What about fruit and vegetables?"

"Wild fruit grows in abundance in the jungle. Roots and vegetables, too. You'll see."

"How do we cook? I didn't see you pack any pots and pans. What about water?"

"We cook on a spit over an open fire. We've got our canteens. We'll have to be careful with our water supply until we reach the first village."

The scenery slowly changed until dense forests on both sides flanked them. After they rounded a corner, she saw a large patch of cleared ground with some buildings on it and a single gas pump. As they pulled into the clearing, she noticed a store window. The store and two sheds were old. The stucco looked as if it was once painted, but age and the hot sun had bared the house of all paint. The iron roofs looked rusty and warped. "This is where we get off?"

"Yes, from here we continue on foot and head toward Malawi."

"Do you think I could have a shower here before we start?"

Again that low chuckle, as if everything she said amused him. "My dear, I'm sure the store keeper will let you use his shower. Enjoy it. It'll be your last for quite a few months."

Ryan leaned against the jeep and watched her walk toward the store. He shook his head slowly and said softly, "I don't know if you'll last, Natalie. You're still so citified. This will be the toughest trip you've ever made. As for the romance that my editor wants well, I'll have to use my imagination. I don't see a spark of interest in those blue eyes of yours."

"What are you mumbling about, Ryan?" Basilio joined him, then followed Ryan's gaze.

"Oh, I'm just making observations about the lady," Ryan grinned.

Basilio shook his head. "Man, if you had to take a woman along, why didn't you pick one that could rough it? This one, I don't know about her. She's too dainty."

"I agree." Kwame had joined them and heard the last words. "I think we should leave her here. She can go back with the next supply truck that comes through. She'll be nothing but trouble. Guess what she just asked me?"

"What?"

"Where she could dry her wet clothes!"

Ryan grinned. "Well, why don't we park the Jeeps and go buy our last supplies. We'll soon find out what the dainty lady is made of."

Natalie introduced herself to Poppie, the proprietor's wife. The woman was almost a head shorter than Natalie, and as wide as she was short. She had a plump, pleasant face, reddish complexion and round blue eyes reminiscent of a doll's.

"It's so nice when travelers pass through," she told Natalie. "Most of our customers are natives who pass through on their way to trade in the city. Sometimes they trade in our store – their crafts in trade for flour and other groceries. Ryan is a regular."

"You've known Ryan a long time then?" Natalie asked.

"Yes. Ever since his first excursion into the jungles." She added proudly, "I have all of his autographed books."

"Do you mind me using your shower, Poppie?"

"No. Not at all. Ryan and his guests are always welcome."

"Guests? He's had other people accompany him into the jungle?" Natalie asked.

"No. Just Kwame and Basilio. I call them Ryan's

guests but I suppose they're more like colleagues."

"Do many travelers pass through here?"

"Some. Usually they come in busloads." Puffing, Poppie led Natalie up a wooden flight of stairs and opened the door to her home. Walking through the small living room, Natalie wondered how anyone could live under such conditions. Their living space was cramped. Too much furniture crowded the room. Off the living room she noticed three doors. Poppie opened one of them. "This is the bathroom. I'm afraid it isn't much, but the water is warm." Poppie handed Natalie a towel and washcloth. "Take as long as you like."

"Poppie, do you mind if I ask you what your name means in English?"

Poppie smiled from ear to ear. "It's an endearment and it has kind of stuck. My real name is Marie. Poppie means dolly. My husband tells me I remind him of a big cuddly doll."

"Oh, I see," Natalie said trying to suppress a smile.

Poppie left Natalie to herself in the bathroom. Quickly she stripped off her travel clothes, glad to get out of them. They almost felt stiff as she ran the wash basin full of warm water and stuck them in it to soak.

The shower had very little pressure but she didn't care. She stood under it for a long time. Even when she ran out of hot water, the water was still warm enough and refreshing. When she finally stepped out of the shower stall and wrapped herself in a towel, she wondered what Ryan was up to. When Ryan walked into the store, the storekeeper greeted him with a wide smile. "Welcome back, Ryan. Research for another book?"

"Yes, Jan. Did the lady go upstairs?"

Jan, an older man with gray hair and twinkling blue eyes, nodded.

"Yes. Poppie is looking after her. She's very pretty. Is she yours?"

"Not yet," Ryan grinned, "but she will be even if she doesn't know it yet."

"Well, good luck. It's about time you settled down and had a family."

"Hey, take it easy. Who said anything about a family? This is just an experiment."

Jan shook his head thoughtfully. "The lady doesn't look like the experimenting kind. Better be careful."

"She's just my secretary, Jan."

"Right," Jan said with disbelief written all over his face. "But you have ulterior motives beyond her secretarial duties. You just told me as much."

"She is very adamant about keeping our relationship strictly business. I may never get that far. Anyway, it was my publisher's decision, not mine. I might as well try to make the most of it. As for marriage? No, that's for people who want to settle in one place. I'll have the jungle any time and no woman will settle for that."

"True, but you've made a mistake with this gal. Mark my word. She's the marrying kind."

"So everyone keeps telling me. Not that she's the marrying kind, but that I made a mistake to bring her

along and that she won't last. Well, I'll prove you all wrong. By the time we return you'll all see that even though she's just a slip of a woman, she's tough and I'll have her tamed."

"You'll have who tamed?"

Ryan spun around. He had not heard the usually creaky door or Natalie come down the wooden stairs. "Eh—a monkey that I've befriended during my excursions. I want to take her home." His eyes took in her fresh appearance. "I hope you enjoyed the shower."

"It was cold, but it washed the dirt off, thank you. Poppie made me very welcome. You have a lovely wife, Jan."

Jan beamed. "Thank you. We have been happily married for more than thirty years now."

"That's quite an accomplishment. Do you have children?" Natalie asked.

Jan shook his head. "No. We were never blessed with children, but Poppie has many protégés and she often takes care of the native's babies."

"She is a kind woman."

Ryan interrupted the conversation. "And that she is and she cooks a mean meal. I wish we had time to stay and visit but we should get going soon. We'll visit when we come back, Jan. Tell that chef of yours to keep the fires burning!"

"I'll tell Poppie. How long are you planning to be in the jungle this time?" Jan asked.

"As long as it takes, Jan. I'm writing a different kind of book this time, so my research won't be as extensive," he said with a knowing wink. "Oh, I see," Jan said glancing at Natalie. "How much biltong can you pack away?"

"Quite a bit."

Jan packaged strips of what looked like beef jerky.

Ryan grabbed one of the packages off the counter and handed it to Natalie. "This is biltong. It's salted meat that is dried in the wind. It will help still your hunger and give you the nutrients your body needs if we can't catch anything. Let's go and fill our canteens with fresh water and load up."

His eyes raked her from head to toe. She looked immaculate in her khaki short-sleeved shirt, matching pants and high black boots. The floppy hat sat crooked on her head and gave her a jaunty appearance. Again, she looked ready to be photographed for the cover of a magazine. His pulse accelerated when she walked toward him and he quickly turned away from her to call out to Kwame and Basilio. "Shall we go? Kwame, Basilio, are you done?" The small white bundle in her hand did not escape his notice.

Ryan hauled Natalie's backpack out of the Jeep. The flap was open. He presumed she left it open after taking out clean clothes. "Natalie, if you'd like to put your stuff in your pack, I can close it and put it on your back."

"Eh-they're wet."

"Mm, we'll see what we can do about that." With deft fingers he closed the flap, then held the backpack up so she could put her arms through the straps.

"My purse, it's still in the Jeep. And I want my other bag."

"My dear, you'll hardly need a purse where we're going, but if you insist—" He reached into the Jeep to retrieve the purse and handed it to her. "I suggest we try and put it in your backpack. You'll need your hands free. And for God's sake, leave that silly flight bag here. What do you have in there that's so important?"

Helplessly she held out the wet undergarments. "Just things. These, too?"

"No. Here, give them to me. We might as well make you noticeable enough so we don't lose you."

Natalie stood still while he stuffed her purse into the backpack, then wondered what he was doing with her wet panties, bra and socks. "What have you done with them, Ryan?" She twisted to see the bra, socks and panties stuck between the metal bars of the pack. "You can't do that. I'll look like an idiot," she snapped at him.

"You want them dried, don't you?" he grinned. "They'll be like a flag. If you get lost, we'll find you easily. And as for looking like an idiot? Who's going to be there to laugh at you, except us? The monkeys?"

This produced a roar from Kwame and Basilio who had just strapped on their backpacks. "You'll have a pack of monkeys in tow, Natalie! They love bright things," Kwame quipped.

"Oooh, I don't believe this!" Angry, she tugged at the bra, but Ryan had fastened it so tight that she couldn't get it undone. When she noticed the men walking toward the dense forest, she gave up, slung the flight bag over her shoulder and followed them quickly.

## Chapter Eleven

ill and Greg waited impatiently for their luggage. "Okay, we're in Johannesburg. Now what do we do?" Bill asked.

Greg waved Ryan's book in front of Bill's face. "We find the jerk who wrote this stupid book, idiot."

"Oh! And it's that easy!" Bill shouted.

Curious faces turned towards them.

"Shut up. People are staring at us," Greg hissed.

"I don't really give a damn. Where do we start looking?"

"The phone book is always a good start," Greg said sarcastically.

"As if the guy is listed!"

"Look, the guy writes non-fiction. It's not as if we're trying to locate Stephen King or Danielle Steel. He's not that famous. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Their duffelbags appeared on the luggage carousel. Quickly, they grabbed them and headed for a restaurant. They ordered coffee and doughnuts and asked the waitress for a phonebook.

When she returned with their order, she carried a phonebook under her arm. "Can I help you at all? Are you looking for someone in Johannesburg or in the suburbs?" she asked.

"None of your business!" Bill snapped.

Greg felt uncomfortable at Bill's rudeness. He didn't want to attract any unnecessary attention. "I'm sorry. We're just tired after the long flight. We're looking for someone in Johannesburg. I think we can manage fine on our own," he said apologetically.

The waitress smiled. "I understand. Where are you from?"

"Canada."

"That's a long flight," she commented.

"Yes, it is."

"Enjoy your coffee and doughnuts," she said with a smile and left them.

"You moron," Bill growled. "Why did you tell her we were from Canada?"

"Hell, who cares? She doesn't know us from Larry. How many Canadians arrive here every day?"

"Well, just keep your big mouth shut. We don't need any heat." He flipped the phonebook open to the J. "Okay, here is Jamieson, but there are more than a couple of dozen. So which one do we pick?"

Greg glanced at the row of names. "The guy's name is Ryan. Look for the initial V, stupid."

"There are three."

"Then we'll call all three of them. Drink your coffee and let's get out of here," Greg said. "And write those phone numbers down."

After they finished, they looked for a phone booth. "I'll do the calling," Greg said in a firm tone.

"Fine with me."

Greg called the first two numbers with no success.

When he called the third, the woman who answered the phone said, "I'm sorry. Mr. Jamieson is on safari. Can I take a message?"

Without answering her, Greg slammed the phone back on the hook and turned triumphantly to Bill. "We've got him. This is the one."

"Great. We didn't write the address down."

"Then we'll just have to find another phonebook and get the address," Greg snapped. "Do you have any brains at all? Do I have to do all the thinking around here?"

They located a phone booth that had an intact phonebook and wrote the address down. Quickly, they left the airport and waited for a taxi.

"I can't believe we got the hardware through," Greg said.

"Well, we can credit that to my brains. You couldn't have done it on your own. There is a taxi!" Bill ran to the curb and shouted loudly, "Taxi! Taxi!"

The taxi pulled up before a high-rise apartment building. Carefully, Greg counted out the unfamiliar currency. "What do you think twenty rand is worth, Bill?" he asked.

"I think about twenty bucks. Who cares? We're here, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Now how do we get access to the writer's apartment?"

"I don't know. We need to hide the bags somewhere. You come up with an idea."

The taxi pulled away with screaming tires, the driver disgusted at the lack of a tip.

"Crazy drivers," Bill said.

"What do you expect? Those taxi drivers don't have any brains," Greg commented.

They stood and gazed at the tall apartment building and the entrance for a few minutes. Pedestrians looked at the two men and their bags curiously.

"So what now? We're attracting attention just standing here looking like a couple of idiots."

"Hide the bags. We'll pretend to be cops."

"Did you bring any ID?"

Greg grinned. "I sure did. I'm prepared at all times," he said proudly and pulled a stack of fake ID cards out of his pocket.

"You sure that's such a good idea? Someone might get suspicious when they hear our accents and call the real cops."

"You're right. Maybe we can find a way to sneak in. Let's just watch for a while."

They hid behind a tall pillar and didn't have to wait long. The doorman opened the glass doors wide and put stoppers down to keep them open. A moving van pulled up to the curb. Two uniformed men emerged and began loading new furniture from the back. The doorman left his post, approached one of the movers, and spoke to him.

"We're in luck," Bill hissed. "The doorman seems to be in conversations with the movers. We can sneak inside while he's busy and they're unloading."

They slipped inside without the doorman noticing. The lobby was huge, almost like a hotel foyer. Planters of exotic flowers flanked the windows and several comfortable couches and coffee table were arranged in the center.

"There are the elevators," Greg said pointing at the far wall.

Bill let out a soft whistle while he gazed at the three elevator doors. "Wow. Pure copper. This is a plush building."

Next to the central elevator button was an occupant listing. Greg ran his finger down the names. "Damn. Jamieson isn't on here."

"We'll have to ask, won't we?" Bill hissed. "Or didn't you notice that the elevators have attendants?"

Straightening his clothes, he pushed the button. The elevator doors opened silently, ushering them into gilt mirrored splendor. They stepped into it.

The attendant waited, his finger hovering over the buttons until he finally asked, "Which floor, Sirs?"

"Take us up to Ryan Jamieson's apartment." Bill ordered.

"Mr. Jamieson isn't home at the moment and Mamete, his housekeeper, just left," the attendant said. "I'm sorry. You'll have to wait until she returns."

Aggravated, the two men retreated to one of the foyer couches. "How the hell do we know who Mamete is?" Bill growled.

"I don't know. We'll just wait. Let's get rid of our bags." He quickly stuffed his bag beneath a tall fern and draped the leaves so that it wasn't visible. Annoyed at Bill's reluctance to let go of his bag, he snatched it from his hand and hid it on the other side of the fern.

They'd waited about an hour when a stout native

woman approached the elevators. Bill stared at her and wondered if she could be the housekeeper. The elevator door opened. It was the same elevator that Bill and Greg had entered before. The attendant spoke briefly to the woman and pointed at Bill and Greg. The woman turned to look at the two men then slowly approached them.

"Good afternoon. You're waiting for Mr. Jamieson?" she asked.

"Yes. We have an appointment with him," Greg said in his most diplomatic tone.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Jamieson is away. You'll have to come back when he returns, which won't be for some time."

Bill nudged Greg sharply in the ribs. He took a step toward the woman and hissed, "Ma'am, if you look at my right pocket, you'll see a gun pointed right at you. Now take us up to Jamieson's apartment."

Mamete's eyes flew to the pocket. Her already large eyes became even larger. Slowly she turned around and headed for the elevators, glancing behind her every now and at the lump sticking out of the man's pocket.

Greg watched the numbers light up of each floor they passed. The elevator continued after they passed the last number. Mamete produced a key that she inserted into a small slot on the panel. The doors slid open to reveal a huge apartment. They followed the woman out of the elevator.

"Jesus, this is something else," Greg exclaimed. Jamieson's front door is the elevator."

Mamete whirled to face them. "What do you

want?" she asked in a quivering voice.

Bill produced a pistol from his pocket. "We want to know where Jamieson has gone!" he shouted.

Greg looked at the pistol. "No violence. I won't have you hurting innocent people. We're after the diamonds. We're not out to kill anyone," he said in an assertive tone, then said to the woman, "We need to find Jamieson in a hurry. Could you tell us where he has gone?"

"Sir, he has gone on safari for research for his next book. I'm sorry, I can't help you. He won't be back for some time."

"He has an important document that he was supposed to give us before he left. We need it right now!" Greg said.

"It's imperative that we find him as soon as possible. We need to search the apartment," Bill added firmly.

"Sir, I really don't know -I -"

"Woman, just go and sit down. Are you here alone?" Greg asked.

"No. My husband will be back soon and –"

Greg threw Bill a triumphant look. "Good. Perhaps you can wait for him here and enlighten him. In the meantime, we need to do a thorough search. Where is Ryan's study?"

"Sir, no one goes into Master Ryan's study without permission, he-"

"Woman, we haven't got time for all this talk," Greg shouted. "We need to find out where your master has gone. Don't interfere!"

Bill waved the gun in Mamete's face. "Do you see

this?" he asked in a threatening tone. "If you don't go and sit down on that sofa over there, you'll feel its sting!"

Mamete sat down on the couch and watched in fear as Bill perched on the arm and pointed his gun at her. She shuddered at the evil she saw in the man's eyes. "The study is the second door on the left," she said in a shaky voice.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Greg said and quickly opened the door she indicated. "Keep an eye on her, Bill."

Greg searched the study for any information that would lead them to where Natalie and Ryan had gone. After he emptied all the drawers, gone through files, he suddenly noticed the map on the wall and the red line connecting a number of towns. "Am I stupid?" he asked himself as he tore the map off the wall. "It was right there before my eyes all the time!"

"Hey, Bill! I've got it." He waved the map triumphantly at Bill.

"Great. Let's get the hell out of here before her hubby comes back," Bill snarled.

"Tie her up!" Greg ordered. "Put a good wad in her mouth."

"I'm going to kill her. She can identify us," Bill said calmly and pointed the gun at Mamete's temple.

"Don't be an idiot!" Greg sidled over to Mamete. "You won't tell anyone about us, will you now?" he asked in a silky voice. "If you do, we'll have to kill you and your husband." He pointed to the bandana around her head. "Tie her wrists. I won't have any part in killing." "You're making a big mistake, Greg," Bill snarled. "They'll tell the authorities."

"Bullcrap. She'll be too scared and hubby dearest never saw us."

Bill bound Mamete to a chair, yanked the bandana off her head and tore it in strips. He stuffed a wad of tissue in her mouth and tied the bright cloth tightly around her face. After he'd secured her wrists and ankles he turned to Greg.

"As if anyone would hear her anyway. Let's get out of here before her old man comes back!" he snapped at Greg, who was busy inspecting the liquor cabinet.

Greg stuffed two bottles into the inside pockets of his jacket and tossed one to Bill. "Here, stick this in your pocket," he said with a grin. The bottle crashed to the hardwood floor and broke. Pieces of glass slid in all directions, the amber liquid spreading slowly over the shiny floor.

Mamete struggled. Muffled sounds came from her throat. It annoyed Bill. "Shut the hell up, woman," he shouted and clouted her with his fist. When he stuck the nozzle of the gun against her forehead, Mamete's eyes rolled in fear and she sat frozen.

"Bill, put that damn gun away!" Greg ordered. "I bet the writer man has some loot stashed away. Let's look before we take off."

Bill lowered the gun slowly. "Mm. You may be right." He stuck the gun in his pocket and started to yank paintings off the wall.

Greg went back to the study and bedrooms to search there. They emptied drawers, cupboards, but found nothing. A bell sounded, announcing the elevator. Greg rushed into the living room. "Bill, get behind that couch. It must be the woman's husband!"

Bill stood beside the elevator, his gun ready. The doors opened. Before Tomy could utter a word, Bill hit him with the gun. Tomy crumpled to the floor. Blood seeped slowly onto the floor, forming a pool near the man's head. Bill kicked the body away from the elevator doors and stepped into it. The attendant stared at them with frightened eyes, his fingers frantically pushing the buttons, but Bill had his full weight against the doors. "Let's get the hell out of here!" he shouted. He clouted the attendant over the head with the butt of his pistol. The man's eyes rolled as he sank to the floor. "Pull him out of here, Idiot! Don't just stand there!"

Greg pulled the unconscious man out of the elevator into the apartment. "Stupid asshole!" he hissed as he joined Bill. "We'll have the whole South African police force on our tails!"

The elevator stopped on several floors. Greg felt perspiration dot his forehead and upper lip as the man and woman who entered seemed to eye him suspiciously. He was relieved when it finally stopped on the main floor. Quickly he rushed to the fern and retrieved their bags. Trying to regain some composure, he motioned Bill to follow him.

The doorman held the door open for the two men. His forehead furrowed into a frown as the two strangers fled the building toward the street where they tried to hail a taxi. One of the men whistled loudly as taxis passed by. Abraham shook his head. "Must be tourists," he said to himself and watched the two men get into a taxi that finally pulled up for them.

They ordered the taxi to a car rental office. Bill used false ID knowing full well that soon the police would be searching for them. He was furious at himself for listening to Greg and not killing the housekeeper and her husband.

Greg drove in silence. He was not impressed with Bill's show of force. Though he had smuggled for the syndicate for many years, he was never involved in any of their violence. Now, he would be marked as an accessory.

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Tomy groaned. He felt dizzy. Slowly he lifted his head and gazed down at the pool of blood on the floor. When he stood, he swayed on his legs for a moment until he heard Mamete make some muffled sounds. He rushed to the kitchen and quickly removed the gag. Mamete spat the tissue out of her mouth.

"Tomy! You're hurt!"

"I'll be fine," he muttered while he untied her hands and feet.

"Look, they've hurt Jonas too," she said pointing at the unconscious elevator attendant.

"Call the police, Tomy."

"After I untie you. Did they hurt you? Who were those men?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "They asked for Mr.

Jamieson, but they're no associates of his. Go call the police, Tomy."

After pressing a damp tea towel to his wound, Tomy rushed to the telephone.

Within minutes, the apartment was crawling with police, detectives and paramedics. Tomy needed stitches. The elevator attendant felt groggy. Both men were rushed off to the hospital.

Detective Pieters looked at Mamete who sat on the couch wringing her hands. "Mamete, why don't you and I go to the kitchen. I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Yes, sir. Maybe I should make a cup of tea," she muttered.

"Sounds like an excellent idea," Pieters said as he followed her.

Pieters sipped from the tea Mamete had given him. "So you have no idea about Mr. Jamieson's route?"

"No, sir. Mr. Jamieson had a map in his study but one of the men ripped it off the wall."

"Can you describe these men for me, Mamete?"

Mamete tried to describe them the best she could. She'd been so frightened for her life that their faces had become a blur. All she knew was they were white, color of their hair and if they were tall or short. "I'm sorry, sir, that's all I can tell you."

"You didn't hear any names?"

"No, sir. But they're not from here. They talked with a funny accent."

"Really? That's interesting. Like Italian or French?" "No, sir. More like American."

"Thank you, Mamete," Pieters said as he finished

the last of his tea. "You've been a great help."

Walking back into the living room he called out to one of the men. "Gerry, call the station and have them check the passengers that arrived on recent flights from the States. We're looking for two men in their early forties. One is balding, the other has sandy hair. Question the doorman and see if he can tell us anything."

Pieters ran a hand through his hair. If these two men were after Jamieson they could be anywhere by now. Without any idea of which direction Jamieson traveled, how could they ever find them? He sank into an armchair to await the return of Tomy and the elevator attendant. Silently he hoped they'd be able to give him more information about the two assailants.

Finally, everyone was gone. Mamete cleaned up the glass, straightened Ryan's study and hung up the pictures the two men had torn off the walls, and mopped up the blood. She looked around with satisfaction. Ryan's house was back to normal. Sighing, she picked up the bucket of water and the mop and walked to the kitchen. "Tomy, you've made fresh tea. I thought I told you to go and lie down for a while," she scolded her husband.

Tomy smiled. "I'm fine, Mamete. I poured you a cup of tea."

"Thank you," Mamete said gratefully and sank down on a kitchen chair. "What is going to happen to Master Ryan, Missy, Kwame and Basilio?"

"They'll catch those men soon," Tomy said reassuringly.

"What if they can't find them, Tomy? Then what?"

"Look, even if they've got the map, how can two inexperienced men find anything in the jungle? They wouldn't survive two minutes. Don't worry so, Mamete. Drink your tea, it's getting cold."

Mamete sipped her tea. She didn't answer but her heart felt heavy with worry.

## Chapter Twelve

he sun could barely penetrate the thick foliage that soared above them like a living cathedral. Natalie often stopped to ask Ryan about shrubbery, trees or flowers. Patiently, actually quite pleased at her eagerness to learn, he taught her their names.

Pine, teak, mikwas, wattle, gum, and red mahogany trees were part of the forest along with many varieties of orchids, cycads and fiery flame lilies that especially caught Natalie's attention.

The trail, obviously used many times, was very narrow and forced them to walk single file. At times, Kwame, who led, hacked at vines and foliage that had overgrown the trail since the last human feet had trodden it.

Natalie's heart beat fast at the exotic array of noises filtering from the shadowy depths. Jewel-colored birds scattered with indignant squawks at the unwelcome human intrusion. Diamond-shaped cobwebs spanned the trees, all housing spiders as big as her hand. Rather than hack at the web, Kwame would point it out to them and bend to avoid it. A group of unruly monkeys climbed quickly into the trees, then curious, swung from branch to branch to follow the intruders. Natalie giggled at some of their antics. Her eyes on the monkeys, she did not see the root that blocked her path and tripped. Her hands groped for some kind of support, but the vines could not support her weight and she fell flat on her face.

Stunned, she lay on her stomach, then turned her face sideways to get her nose out of the pungent, spongy moss. Her eyes filled with horror when a gigantic black ant waltzed up to her face, its bulging eyes glaring at her. Her body froze. Suddenly two strong hands slid under her armpits, then pulled her to her feet as if she were as light as a feather. Ryan spun her around to face him.

"Are you all right? Did you hurt yourself?"

His large hands were on her shoulders for a moment, then with brusque awkward strokes he brushed at the dirt and leaves on her shirt. Just for a moment his fingers made contact with her breasts. Her skin tingled when he brushed her nipples and she felt them become hard against the taut satin of her bra. "I'm fine. Thanks. I'll do that," she said in a clipped tone and stepped away from his hands.

"I told you a woman would be nothing but trouble," Basilio hissed softly behind Ryan.

Ryan swung around, glad of the intrusion into the moment of sexual tension. He'd felt the soft curves of her breasts. It had been so long since he'd been with a woman that he hardly remembered what it was like to feel real desire. Sure, his body had needs, but his years in the jungle had not permitted him the luxury of a woman and he'd always refused the daughters offered to him by village Chiefs. His desires only troubled him at night when memories of the past plagued him. "Shut up, Basilio. She'll be fine," he said softly, then turned around to follow Natalie and Kwame who had already started along the path again.

He watched her movements as she stepped over obstacles. Her hands brushed at vines, and each move made the smoldering fire in his loin increase in intensity. At times, she swiped at small tendrils of hair that had escaped their tight prison. When her arm reached up, he could see the movements of her breasts. Her buttocks swayed slightly as she walked and keeping his eyes on her while he followed, he imagined her without clothes. It was as if the atmosphere of the jungle was charged with sexual tension. Desperately he tried to fight it.

Suddenly they stepped out of the forest and Natalie gazed at a vast veld dotted here and there with strange looking trees and some shrubs. The soil was parched and cracked. Long, dry grass grew in clumps. "It's like night and day," she said softly and turned for a moment to look into the darkness of the forest. The monkeys screeched loudly behind them as they started their trek through the open veld. "I think I like this better than the forest, Ryan. At least you can see something coming at you." She looked behind her to see a monkey holding her bra. "Ryan, look! The monkey has my bra! How the hell did he manage to get it? I couldn't even untie the knots."

"Go and get it, my dear! If you can."

The men stopped. Natalie started to head back toward the forest, but the monkey, proud of his prize

possession, disappeared into the cover of the trees. "It's gone! With my bra!" she exclaimed.

"The men laughed. "And your panties, Natalie."

Her hands groped behind her to feel the bars of the backpack. "Oooh, why didn't you tell me?"

"No big loss. I'm sure you brought more than one pair of panties and bra," Ryan chuckled. "Anyway, I don't know why you would want to wear those tight contraptions in this heat. I'm sure that soon, you'll discard the other bras too."

"Not on your life," she retorted.

"Just wait – "

Kwame and Basilio had started along the trail and she turned sharply away from Ryan to follow them. His chuckle behind her annoyed her. Whatever possessed me to accept his offer, she thought. He's insufferable just like the rest of them. Well, too late now. I'll show these men what I'm made of and that a woman can do anything they can do. Men – they're nothing but chauvinistic pigs.

They walked for hours and Natalie's feet felt like clumps. The men ate and drank while they walked – eager to get to their destination. Finally she lagged behind and sagged down to sit on a mound of sand.

Ryan glanced behind him and saw Natalie far behind them. "Kwame, Basilio, stop," he called out to the men and turned back toward Natalie.

Kwame and Basilio shook their heads and threw each other a knowing glance while they leaned on their rifles to wait for Ryan and Natalie.

"Natalie, you're lagging behind. We'll rest when we get to the river," he called out to her. "I just wanted to sit down for a minute," she said.

"Well, my dear, I suggest in future you watch where you sit," Ryan said with a grin.

"What do you mean?"

"That ant hill you happen to be resting on belongs to flesh-eating ants. You're lucky that they haven't attacked you yet. Just like piranha, they'll strip the flesh of your body in seconds," he said calmly, his lips twitching into an amused grin.

Natalie jumped up and backed away from the mound of sand. Now that she looked closer, she saw it was laced with small holes. Suddenly a huge ant crawled out of one of the holes. She shuddered and inspected her legs.

"Don't worry. Your legs are still there," Ryan said. "Come. The men are waiting."

She refused to let on that her feet hurt and she was sure she had blisters. Doggedly she followed the men, ignoring the pain in her feet until she could no longer feel them. In the distance she could see another forest, but not as thick as the one they left behind. Flocks of birds scattered and swooped into the sky, chittering their annoyance at the intrusion of their peaceful world.

Ryan pointed out one particular bird to her. "Look, Natalie, those are Blue Crane, Africa's national bird."

"They're so elegant," Natalie said while taking pictures of the flock.

Twice, Ryan pointed at vultures circling in the sky. "There must be a dead animal over there," he said to Natalie. "They're waiting until the predators have finished with it." The wildlife fascinated her. She stopped to take many pictures of the various species they encountered. They crossed the Savannah. It was covered with a thin sparse ground cover of shrubs and succulents. Here and there she spotted trees that Ryan told her were kokerbome, or in English, tree aloes.

Ryan stopped suddenly. He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and peered to the west.

"What is it, Ryan?" Kwame asked.

"A lion. It's attacking an antelope." He handed the binoculars to Natalie. "Take a look," he said.

Natalie looked through the binoculars but quickly handed them back. "I don't like watching stuff like that. It's awful."

"Antelope are preyed on by lions, leopards and cheetah all the time. It's part of nature, Natalie," Ryan said patiently.

"I understand that it's part of nature, but I don't care to watch it happening," she said and started to walk.

When they reached the trees and broad leaved foliage of the forest Basilio and Kwame hacked a path with their machetes.

Gingerly, Natalie pushed her way through the thick foliage, to stop when she saw a huge snake slowly slithering down a tree and disappearing into the forest. It resembled a Boa from what she'd seen on pictures. "It's a snake," she said softly.

Ryan nudged her in the back. "So it is. It's all right. The snake has gone."

She turned to see that annoying amused smile on

his lips. "But I almost stepped on it."

"But you didn't. Keep walking. It isn't safe to stand still here."

She kept walking until the sweet sound of babbling water entered her ears. "I hear water, Ryan. Are we near a river?"

"Yes. That's where we'll make camp for the night. We're almost there."

The thought of fresh water made her walk faster and weave her way through the foliage with more vigor. She could hardly wait to take off the offending boots and dangle her feet in its welcome coolness.

They cleared the forest and came to a sandy shore. A herd of buffalo scattered when they approached. On the opposite shore, a lioness and her cubs slunk away and glared balefully at them for invading their drinking spot.

The men dropped their backpacks and stretched. Ryan saw her struggle and sauntered over to help her. "Here, let me untie those for you. You must be tired. You're not used to so much exercise all in one day."

"I'm fine," she snapped. "I'm just hot and would like to freshen up. Is this water clean?"

"My dear, if the animals drink it, it must be clean. Animals have great instincts. They know fresh drinking water. But to ease your mind, Kwame will test it first."

"Can we swim in it?"

"Sure."

"How about crocodiles?"

"Not here. Don't worry, you can take a bath."

The backpack dropped on the ground and Natalie

sat on a large rock to take off her boots. To her chagrin, she couldn't get them off. They were stuck to her feet. Ryan saw her struggle and walked over to assist her. "Here, let me do that for you. Your feet must be swollen."

Gently he removed one boot, then the other and looked with a frown at her bloodied white socks. "Natalie, why didn't you say something? You've got blisters all over your feet by the looks of it and they've rubbed open. It must have been agony for you."

"After a while I didn't feel the pain anymore. They're throbbing now."

"Basilio, first aid kit, please?" Taking the kit from Basilio's hands, he ignored the look of sarcasm Basilio threw him and silently tended Natalie's bleeding feet.

Natalie was surprised at the gentleness of his large hands and fingers as he removed the socks. He washed her feet with disinfectant, then sprayed something over the blisters. "This is liquid Band-Aid. When we continue tomorrow, we'll put pigskin over those blisters. I think you should wear your running shoes tomorrow, rather than the boots. I told you they were a size too small, but you wouldn't listen."

His fingers rubbed the soles of her feet gently, sensually. His touch sent shivers up her legs, into her groin, the pit of her belly and made her heart pound faster. "I'm sorry. I should have listened."

"We have a trick. We'll stuff the boots full of wet leaves so that they'll stretch and leave them like that for a few days. After that, your blisters should have healed and you can wear them again."

"Thank you, Ryan."

"And in future, don't play the martyr. Tell me if something is wrong!"

"Yes, Sir!" She saluted. "Can I bathe? Is there a private spot anywhere?"

"You don't want to move too far away from camp, Natalie. Just go around that bend, that's far enough. And since I saw you packing soap and shampoo, don't use it in the water. It'll spoil it for the animals."

"Then how – "

He handed her a tin mug. "Get wet first, then soap yourself on the riverbank and use this mug to rinse your hair and body on the bank."

She rummaged in her backpack for clean clothes, soap and shampoo, then called out to him, "Ryan, I forgot to bring a towel."

"The sun will dry you, Natalie. I told you we travel light."

Muttering under her breath about primitive life, she headed for the slight bend in the river. When she could no longer see the men, she quickly took off her sweaty clothes and stretched, allowing the sun to caress her body. The sun's rays felt warm on her skin. She felt so free, a sensation of wild abandonment overtook her and she understood why the natives wore very little. A giggle escaped her at the thought that she'd rather continue the trip without clothes.

Carefully she stepped into the water. It was tepid warm, but felt like a luxurious bath. Slowly she walked into it further until she couldn't stand any more. With vigorous strokes she swam to the center, then lay on her back and allowed the soft current to sway her as she gazed up at the bright blue sky. She had no idea how long she floated. Nearby was a huge gray rock. She swam toward it and climbed onto its prickly surface. The rock felt warm. She leaned back to let the sun play with her hair and body, until the rock suddenly moved. With horror she saw a head appear above the water. A loud scream escaped from her throat when she realized she sat on top a hippopotamus.

Ryan, in the midst of his own bath, heard her scream. Without thinking twice, he swam toward where she'd disappeared around the corner. What he saw made him stand up and bellow with laughter. Natalie had fallen forward and lay spread-eagled across the animal. The hippo moved slowly through the water, hardly aware of the lightweight on his back.

"Jerk! Don't just stand there and laugh. This is embarrassing. How do I get off this thing?"

"Just slide off carefully, Natalie," Ryan shouted at her. "He hasn't noticed you yet. Swim very slowly away from him. Or would you prefer that I come and get you?"

"No. Stay where you are and close your eyes."

He did as he was told and closed his eyes, but he'd seen her nakedness as she lay sprawled across the hippo's back. Her firm buttocks were engraved in his mind. Her tapered waist, slim back and soft skin that looked milky white against the dark, murky gray of the hippo, played havoc with his feelings. Though his eyes were shut, the picture stayed in his mind and he groaned inwardly.

Gingerly she slid off the animal then quickly swam

away from it. "I'm off it now."

"Good. Can I open my eyes now?"

Natalie didn't answer him. She gazed at this man who was now her employer. He stood naked as the day he was born, without shame. Unabashed, she stared at him. Droplets of water still clung to the black hair on his wide chest. Broad shoulders and a massive chest tapered to narrow hips. She could not help but let her eyes rest on his loins. A black bed of curls surrounded his cock. It fascinated her as its swollen appearance slowly shrank until it lay nestled on a soft, furry black bed. Thrill upon thrill coursed through her body as she imagined what it would feel like for him to hold her against his nakedness.

Ryan could have left her alone in the river then and gone back to his own spot. Instead, he watched her as she swam with lazy strokes toward the shore. The crystal clear water showed her breasts, her buttocks, her long slim legs, and he fought to keep his loins under control so she wouldn't see his desire.

"Are you going to stand there, or can I come out of the water?"

"Eh—sorry. I was just thinking about something." He turned away from her to walk back to Basilio and Kwame but the picture she made on the hippo stayed in his mind. It had taken all his willpower not to dive into the water, swim up to her and take her in his arms. "Lust, you big oaf. Pure animal lust, and she's not the type of woman to fool with," he said softly while he continued on back to the men but before they could see the clear evidence of his desire for her, he dove into the water to cool his passion. \*\*\*

Natalie rinsed her clothes. She dared not use soap on them because she'd have to rinse them in the river, but even without the soap she managed to get them clean. After she'd hung them on branches to dry, she slowly walked back to the men on painful feet. They had already set up the tents, including hers. The campfire they'd built sent a lazy spiral of smoke up to the sky that was slowly turning vivid pink with lines of orange and red as if a painter had splashed the sky with watercolors.

Basilio and Kwame sat near the fire and the delicious aroma of roasting meat entered her nostrils. Her stomach growled in protest and she'd never felt so hungry in her life. "Hi, guys, where is the boss?" She glanced at the spit while she talked but didn't dare ask what they were cooking.

"In his tent. He's writing."

"Already?"

"That's the usual routine," Basilio said. "You'd better take those socks off and let those blisters get some air. They'll heal faster."

"Thank you, Basilio. So what am I supposed to do to assist Ryan with his writing?"

Their teeth flashed white when they grinned at each other. "You'll have to ask Ryan, Natalie. We just do our job. I don't know what a secretary does in the jungle."

After she pulled off her socks, she crawled to the entrance of Ryan's tent. "Ryan?"

He didn't answer so she tried again. "Ryan? What am I supposed to do?"

She heard no sound, but the flap opened and he motioned her to come into the tent. Not knowing what to do, she sat down and waited. He jotted something down on the pad in his hand, then turned to his backpack and produced another pad and pen. "Write down everything you saw and experienced so far. In your own words."

"From when we left Johannesburg?"

"Yes, from the moment we packed and got ready to go. You'll do this every day from now on."

"I don't know – I mean, where do I start?"

"For goodness sake, woman, start from the moment we went shopping to get supplies for you."

Natalie was puzzled. "But, what does that have to do with your book?"

"Look, you're here to take notes, not to ask questions." The moment he'd snapped the words at her, he felt regret, but the feelings she aroused in him were not what he needed at that moment and he had to douse them somehow.

Soon the light in the tent grew too dim to write by. "Let's go and see what the men cooked up," Ryan said in a brusque tone. "We'll turn in after that. We take off at dawn."

The food tasted good. Natalie suspected it was some kind of bird, or rabbit, but whatever it was and she dare not ask them for fear it was something else, it tasted like chicken. Her hunger overcame her suspicions about the food. After she'd eaten and drank a glass of water, she yawned. "I'm really tired. Can I turn in?"

Ryan nodded. "Let me put something on those blisters before you do."

His hands were gentle on her feet and she wondered how such large, callused hands could be so tender. One moment he's so aloof and impossible and the next minute he's sweet and tender. What caused him to be so wary of women? The snap of the medical kit broke her thoughts.

"Now crawl into your tent with your feet up so you don't get any dirt on your feet," he said softly. "Goodnight, Natalie."

"Night, Ryan, Basilio, Kwame." She crawled into the tent and closed the flap.

Basilio and Kwame turned in too. Ryan stayed by the fire for a while. He gazed into the flames, then let his eyes roam the calm waters of the river. A leopard and four cubs hesitantly approached the edge now that darkness had descended. The leopard threw furtive glances at the fire and stayed at a safe distance from the humans who had invaded their territory. Ryan felt utter peace wash over him and enter his soul, as it always did when he was away from the rat race of the city.

An owl hooted from the forest, followed by the sound of animals hunting at night. Leaves rustled. The sky above was clear and dotted with stars. Ryan leaned back on his elbows and allowed his mind to go blank. His soul was at peace. He felt one with nature.

A sound from Natalie's tent broke the serenity of the moment. Irritated that his moment of tranquility was disturbed, he glanced at her tent and saw it lit up with her flashlight. He heard her mutter softly about her pajamas and he grinned. He'd discarded the unnecessary item before they left Johannesburg.

Amused, he watched her shadow, which he could see clearly through the thin nylon material. She tossed the backpack aside, then proceeded to take off her blouse. He watched her struggle with the pants and sucked in his breath when the bra came off. Silhouetted against the light of the flashlight and the side of the tent, he saw her nudity. When she stretched, her breasts were fully visible. Her nipples were hard and poked out like small pebbles. The smoldering in his loins increased as he remembered her nakedness in the river. She turned then, almost as if she sensed that someone was watching her and sat on her knees with her back toward the side of the tent. Ryan watched her slim back, tiny waist and rounded firm buttocks. He wondered if she wore panties and for a moment his imagination ran wild and he could almost feel her velvety softness. The light went out and he was stuck with a throbbing cock. He opened his fly releasing the aching object and circled it with his hand. While picturing her naked body in his mind, his body now completely on fire for her, he swiftly moved the skin back and forth. It did not take long for him to come. His semen spurted to the sand as he turned swiftly so as not to soil his clothes. Even though he'd climaxed, his cock did not return to full flaccid state. Natalie was too much on his mind

Purposely, his thoughts wrenched away from the woman in the tent. He lay on the sand, his hands

under his head and gazed up at the clear, star dotted sky. He forced Natalie out of his thoughts and made himself concentrate instead on the book he had to write.

## Chapter Thirteen

Bill and Greg had been traveling for several weeks through the Zimbabwe desert toward Zambia. Several times they took a wrong turn and got lost. To save time, they took turns driving. While one drove, the other slept.

"Okay. This is it. End of the road," Greg said while studying the map.

"How do you know?" Bill asked while rubbing his eyes.

"There's a big red X right here and then nothing. Some red circles here and there but no roads leading to the places he marked."

"Look. There's a gas station."

"Yes. And a sign that tells us it's the last one for miles. Wonder who those Jeeps belong to? Maybe we can swipe one," Greg said pointing at the vehicles.

"That's a thought. Maybe the owner of the gas station knows something. I wouldn't mind betting that Jamieson stopped here to gas up."

"And I wouldn't mind betting that at least one of those vehicles belongs to Jamieson. The red line comes to an abrupt stop right here. Maybe this is the point where he starts his safaris," Greg said. "Although if he left his Jeep here, it's no use us going on with a vehicle because obviously, he's following some trail."

Bill stopped the car in front of the store. "Okay. Let's go and buy some supplies and question the owner."

A buzzer rang loudly through the store when the two men entered. Poppie hurried down the stairs as fast as she could. "Can I help you?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes. We'd like a compass, a couple of backpacks and enough supplies to last us for a while," Greg said.

"Where are you heading?" Poppie asked.

"That's for you to tell us!" Bill snapped and produced his pistol. He dangled it casually on his forefinger.

Poppie's blue eyes widened with sudden fear. Carefully she edged toward the counter and dashed to stand behind it. "I don't know what you mean, Sir," she said in a quavering voice.

"This is the last gas stop for miles. Did Ryan Jamieson stop here?" Bill barked the question.

"Well-yes-but-"

"Was there a woman with him?"

"His – secretary – and – "

A door at the very back of the store opened. Footsteps sounded on the wooden floor. "Who is that?"

"My husband," Poppie said.

Jan stopped in his tracks when he saw a pistol pointing at his wife. "We don't have any money," he

said. "You can have whatever is in the cash register. Most people pay with a credit card."

"You're a lying bastard. Get the hell over here!" Bill snarled and waved his pistol at Jan.

Greg tried to stop Bill. "Take it easy, man," he muttered.

"You whining pussy. Your spineless ways won't get us anywhere." Bill snarled at his accomplice. "Christ, I don't know why Dirk even bothered to bring you in. At least I recognize a wimp when I see one." He leaned over the counter and jabbed the pistol at Jan's chest. "Ryan Jamieson. Do you know him?"

Jan shook his head. "No. Sorry."

"Lying son of a bitch!" Bill shouted in a rage. "Your woman just told us Jamieson was here. Now tell me which direction they went!"

"Into the jungle," Jan said through clenched teeth. "I don't know where."

"Guess I have to rough up the little woman!" Bill snarled and reached to grab Poppie by the arm. He pulled her over the counter until she lay halfway across it, face down. With his free hand he ground her face onto the glass. Poppie screamed.

Jan jumped into action. He dove beneath the counter and grabbed the rifle he always kept there, but before he could fire it, a shot rang out. The rifle fell on the floor, the trigger never pulled. Bill's aim was precise. Jan collapsed to the floor, his sightless eyes gazing up at the ceiling.

Poppie's screams echoed through the store until Bill punched her hard in the stomach causing the woman to double over in pain. "Shut the hell up, woman. Now tell us which way Jamieson went!"

He pulled her head up by the hair and stuck the pistol in her mouth. "Are you going to tell us?"

"Take the damn thing out of her mouth, idiot. How can she talk with that thing choking her?" Greg snapped. "You stupid prick! Now you're facing a murder rap."

Bill grinned evilly. "And you right along with me as my accomplice. Anyway, who gives a shit? No one here knows us." He withdrew the gun but held it against Poppie's temple. "Talk or die! It makes no difference to me either way."

"A trail—behind—the store," Poppie stammered, her breath erupting in harsh gasps. Bill let go of her hair and threw her against the shelves that lined the wall behind the counter. She cried out and crumpled to the floor in a daze. Canned goods clattered around her. One large can of fruit hit her on the head.

Just before everything went black, Poppie saw her husband's glazed eyes. The pain that shot through her heart might as well have been a bullet.

"She's out cold," Bill said. "Tie her up."

"What for?"

Bill shook his head in disgust. "To give us a head start, or is thinking that painful for you? I'll get the stuff we need. And get that rifle when you're done." He grabbed a bundle of rope off one of the shelves and tossed it onto the counter. "Make sure she's tied up tight. I don't want her working herself loose five minutes after we leave."

They took two backpacks off the top shelves and

packed them with all the supplies they thought they'd need. Bill found ammunition under the glass counter and cartons of cigarettes. He smashed the glass and stuffed a couple of boxes of ammunition in his backpack, a carton of cigarettes and threw a carton to Greg. "Here, we might as well go prepared," he said and tried to stuff another carton in his own backpack but it was too full. Instead, he opened the carton and filled his pockets with cigarette packages.

Just before they left the store, Bill put the closed sign in the window. "That should give us plenty of time," he said. "No one will find them for a while."

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Two days later, a native boy of about nine banged on the shop door. He couldn't read, so the sign meant nothing to him. Carefully he felt the knob, but the door wouldn't open. His little black face shone with anticipation when he thought of the goodies the white Missie always had for him.

When no one came to the door, he went around to the back. The door wasn't closed. Feeling quite at ease, he entered. He'd known the white Missie since he was little and she was always kind to him.

No one seemed to be in the store. He sauntered past the shelves and looked at the items on them with big eyes, sometimes carefully touching but never taking. A soft moan from behind the counter caught his attention.

Slowly he dared walk behind the counter to see what the noise was. Children weren't allowed behind

the counter. His large, inky black eyes darted around the store to make sure he wouldn't get caught.

Then he saw the mess on the floor, and the blood. He screamed and ran as if demons were after him.

Poppie's head swam. The scream pierced her unconscious state and brought her back to reality. She lifted her head, saw her dead husband lying next to her and fainted once more.

An hour later she came to. Tears soaked her round cheeks, the redness now replaced by an ashen pallor. Using the sturdy wooden shelves for leverage, she pushed herself toward the end of the counter. Somehow, she managed to sit up. The floor was covered with shards of glass. Her fingers groped for a long sliver. Carefully she wedged it between her bonds and started to move it back and forth.

Once her hands were free, she quickly untied her ankles. Her legs were numb. She rubbed them to get the blood circulating again. Soon, pins and needles caused excruciating pain. She waited until the pain subsided and tried to stand up. Her legs felt rubbery when she attempted to walk, so she crawled to the telephone, only to find the cord cut.

Sobbing hopelessly, she crawled back to Jan. Cradling his head against her chest she rocked him gently. "Oh, Jan—what have they done to you—Jan, honey—wake up—what am I going to do?" she cried softly.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

A stalie's blisters had healed in about ten days, making it easier for her to keep up with the men. After almost five weeks of crossing rolling grasslands, climbing hills and occasionally plugging through forests, she almost became accustomed to life in the wild. Suddenly, Vancouver and city life seemed so far away. It was almost as if she'd lived in the wilds of Africa all of her life. Sometimes they ran into natives who were hunting, or a tribe who were moving their village to another spot. The natives greeted them at times if they passed close by, but mostly they stayed at a distance.

Ryan stopped. "Natalie, look at that forest in front of us. There is a river there, and a native village. We'll stay there for a couple of weeks. I know the Chief well. They're a very hospitable tribe."

"What are they? Zulu? Bantu?" she asked while she gazed at the distant forest. "It'll be great to bathe. I feel as if I've got all of Africa caked on my body."

"You'll have to ask Basilio or Kwame. I think they're a mix of several tribes that have banded together to form one. Right now we're in Malawi. We're not too far away from a national park but that's East. We'll travel northwest next."

When they entered the forest, the solitude and tranquility hit her, as it never had before. Suddenly she felt an invader as birds scattered and monkeys swung high in the trees screeching at the foreigners to go away.

This forest was not as dark as the last one and the sun found its way through the branches above. Tropical flowers grew in abundance, as did wild fruits. Natalie stopped to look at flowers that grew close to the ground. "These are pretty, Ryan. They look like Impatiens."

"They're much sought after. Those are used for medicinal purposes in the fight against Leukemia. Don't ask me their name, it's Latin. I have it written down somewhere in my notes."

"What about that one? It looks velvety but it feels sticky," Natalie said as her finger stroked the leaves of a large pink flower. The flower's leaves were needleshaped and grouped together to form one compact head surrounded by conspicuous, highly colored bracts.

"It's a Protea. They call it Suikerbossie. It is South Africa's national flower, and grows in abundance in the Cape. I'm surprised to find it here. There are dozens of different Protea in a multitude of colors. We're falling behind, Natalie. Better keep going."

The sound of distant drums accompanied them. "Ryan, the drums, what are they saying? Do you know?"

"No. But it sounds as if the natives are sending

messages to other tribes. We'll find out when we get there."

"What about Kwame or Basilio? Wouldn't they know? she asked.

"They weren't raised in the wilds. No, they don't understand the drums," Ryan said.

When they arrived at a wide river, she stood for a moment to look at the village on its shores. A neat row of bamboo and straw huts stood not far away from the water. Naked children played at the river's edge and women sat in front of the huts grinding wheat or threading beads. "I don't see any men. Where are they?"

"Probably out hunting. The medicine man should be there. He's probably in his hut," Ryan answered her then steered her toward the village.

The children spotted them, and came running toward Basilio and Kwame. The women heard the commotion and stopped their work. They left their tasks, stood up and walked slowly toward the visitors but did not greet them with smiles. Fast conversation took place between Basilio and the women. Their mode of dress was varied. Some of the women wore bright lengths of material wrapped around the lower half of their body. Their breasts were bare. Around their necks were large round collars made from colorful beads. The collars were quite wide and rested on their shoulders and chest in a half moon circle. Beaded bracelets almost reached their elbows and adorned their ankles. Copper or gold hoop earrings hung from stretched earlobes. Their hair was tightly braided in neat rows closely against their skulls. Some

of the women carried babies on their hip.

Several young girls gazed at the visitors with suspicion. Their large black eyes looked at them fearfully. Not having reached full womanhood, they only wore a leather loincloth. Natalie smiled and watched a young girl quickly hide behind her mother. She wondered at their fear.

Basilio turned to Ryan. "Ryan, the men have gone after slave traders. The younger lads have gone hunting. It seems that five of their young girls have been abducted. Now we know the message of the drums."

"Oh, no!" Natalie exclaimed. "Will the men find them?"

Ryan shook his head wistfully. "I doubt it. Slave traders carry guns. They're also very elusive. We'll wait until the men return and then we'll go after them."

"We will? I still can't believe that this still goes on in today's world. Does it happen often?"

"My dear, sultans pay well for young concubines. You're thinking of years ago when slaves were shipped to America. Now, the slave traders hunt for pretty young maidens and profit from the trade. The world doesn't really know what goes on. No. Thank God it doesn't happen that often anymore, but the few occasions that it does, need to be stopped."

"So when are we leaving to go after them?"

"We? Basilio, Kwame and I will accompany the young warriors. It's much too dangerous for a woman."

"I can hold my own and I'm a good shot. I took

lessons and -''

"We don't aim to kill, Natalie. We only carry the guns for self-defense. We'll steal the girls back, just like they were stolen from here."

"How will you do that?"

Ryan rubbed the growth that now covered his face and chin. "I don't know yet. I'll have to wait until the men return and find out if they found the abductors' trail. Basilio, how long have the girls been missing?"

"Four days and four nights, Ryan. They're very young. Between twelve and fourteen."

"Ryan, what happens to these girls?"

"You don't want to know, Natalie." His face was grim. "They're sold like cattle at an auction."

"Aren't they a little young for – eh – "

"For intimacy? Well, in a sense. These young girls are considered ripe for marriage when they reach puberty. Three of them have not reached that stage yet. They know what life is all about, but harem life is not quite like life in their village. If you read the book I left for you on the plane properly, then you wouldn't be asking me all these questions."

"I did read it, but you didn't explain it as fully as you're doing now. You should when you write this book, and -"

"The medicine man approaches. He's about to welcome us," he interrupted her.

An old man approached them, leaning on a stick. His face was heavily painted with red and white marks, as was his frail body. A bright length of cloth was knotted around his hips. As he walked, his bony legs protruded through the long slit. She could almost count his ribs as they stuck out sharply through his wizened black skin. Unlike the others of the tribe whose skin looked smooth and healthy, his looked almost leathery. His close-cropped hair was quite gray. A necklace of teeth hung around his neck almost to his waist. Around his wrist he wore a bracelet of bright colored beads. Feathers and a large tooth dangled from the beaded chain. In his other hand he carried a spear. It too was decorated with bright-colored feathers. He seemed to be the oldest member. She couldn't see any older women or men unless they were hiding in their huts.

Natalie listened to Basilio and the medicine man. The old man's movements were agitated as he spoke, then finally he gestured to two huts and walked away.

Basilio turned to his three companions. "The medicine man said we're welcome to stay, but until the girls return the villagers are sad and they can't welcome us properly. We're to stay in those two huts. The left one for Kwame and I, and the other one for you two." He saw the look on Natalie's face and added, "I told the medicine man you were Ryan's wife, Natalie."

"That is outrageous. Why did you do that, Basilio? I refuse to share a hut with Ryan. I'll put up my tent, thank you."

Ryan chuckled. "It's better that they think you're my wife, Natalie. By the way, I don't snore and neither do I bite."

"I won't do it. I'll go off by myself and camp down the river." As soon as she uttered the words she realized it was just an empty threat. She'd be too scared to camp alone. "For now, I'll go and find a spot to bathe."

"You can't go alone, Natalie. Let's go and put our back packs in the hut and I'll go with you."

"Like hell you will," she snapped.

"Then I guess you'll go without your bath, Ma'am." He gave her a lazy salute, winked and strode toward two huts that stood separately from the village. Kwame and Basilio sent her a wicked smile as they followed Ryan.

Natalie stood and watched them. Stubborn pride stopped her from moving a foot, until she realized she had little choice but to follow them to the huts. Reluctantly she crawled into the dark hut. Ryan had already spread his sleeping bag on the straw mat that covered the hard ground. She bit her lip, then said, "Ryan, I do need to bathe. We haven't seen water for days and I feel filthy."

"My dear, if you think I'm going to stand and gawk at you like a teenager, you flatter yourself. Naked women don't do much for me anymore. As you've seen for yourself, most the women in this village are near naked." *Liar*, he thought. *If she only knew* –

"I've noticed. I presume I can wear my own attire while we're here?" she asked in a sarcastic tone.

He laughed softly. "That's up to you, my dear. The women wouldn't think anything of it if you paraded around in your birthday suit except admire your pearly white skin."

Natalie kept her lips tight together while she searched in her backpack for clean clothes. She threw her dirty clothes on a small heap, then muttered, "Damn, I don't have a clean bra. If that monkey hadn't taken off with my second one -"

Ryan heard her but didn't comment. He just chuckled inwardly. "Are you ready?"

"Can I use soap in this river?"

"Yes. The current flows quite fast and it won't matter. Just don't use too much of it."

When she crawled out of the hut and followed Ryan, she noticed the amusement in Basilio's and Kwame's eyes. Embarrassment flooded her for a moment. Then she thought, what the hell do I have to feel ashamed about? "Aren't you two going to get cleaned up?" she asked aloud as she passed them.

"In a bit. After you're finished," Kwame said with a smile.

When they were some distance away from the village Ryan stopped near a sandy stretch of riverbank. "This should do nicely. I'll sit over there behind that tree. You go ahead and do your thing."

Natalie glanced at the tree. It was a big tree with a huge trunk. She waited for Ryan to sit behind it, then kept her eyes on him while she quickly stripped.

Even though the water was tepid, against her hot, sticky body it felt cold and she gasped when she ran into the river and dove into the water. She swam, dove, and then floated for a while, until Ryan's lazy voice drifted toward her. "You'd better not go in too far, Natalie. There are crocodiles in this river."

"Noooo, I don't believe you, you're – you're – "

"You'd better believe me. Stay near the edge. Also, the current is quite strong in the middle and I don't feel like battling it to save you. I'm too tired."

"You insufferable pig!" she yelled while she struggled to get back to shore. The current was too strong and it kept pulling her back. "I can't get back," she yelled then screamed when a branch floated past and brushed against her. "It's a crocodile – Ryan, help me," she screeched in sudden fear.

With amusement Ryan watched the branch float away. He chuckled. "I warned you!" He stood up and walked slowly to the edge of the river. Gazing at her for a moment, he watched her struggle before he stripped and walked into the water. With strong strokes he was beside her in seconds. "Fair lady, hold on to me and I'll take you back to the shallow end."

Natalie didn't care that she was naked. Her eyes scanned the water for any signs of crocodiles. She clung to his shoulders and within minutes felt the sandy bottom of the river under her feet, the water just reaching above her breasts. Ryan's hands were around her waist. For the first time she noticed he was naked, too, and all thoughts of crocodiles were forgotten. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest and she drew a deep breath to still it.

Ryan gazed into her blue eyes and tried to read the expressions in them. Fear, anger, and he thought he saw something else but wasn't quite sure. Was it a hint of answering passion? His hands tightened around her waist and he pulled her toward him until their bodies touched.

As if scorched, Natalie pulled away from him when she felt his erection against her belly. "Don't, I mean—we're both naked, and..." she stammered, at the same time trying to stop the passion that had flared within her. Wild thoughts raced through her mind. His nearness sent the blood coursing hot through her veins and a strange longing overwhelmed all sense of sanity. Without realizing it, she moved closer to him until her breasts touched the hair on his chest.

Ryan saw her eyes darken with passion and knew he could take her right there and then, in the water. His hands tightened around her small waist, his cock throbbing, reaching for that spot between her legs, until he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. Moving swiftly, he scooped her into his arms and with a few large strides strode out of the water. He set her down on the sandy shore and gazed at the tenfoot-long crocodile that approached just under the surface, its snout barely visible, its knobby back just poking above the surface. Gently he cupped her chin and turned her face toward the beast.

"You weren't joking," Natalie gasped softly.

"Of course not," he murmured softly while his fingers stroked the velvety softness of her chin, then her breasts, those delightful nipples begging to be sucked. He ached to pull her into his arms, to feel her perky breasts against his chest. But now was not the right time. "He's spotted us and coming this way. Run and get your clothes," he told her while stepping back.

The spell broken and forgetting her clothes, which lay near the rocks, Natalie hastened to hide her nakedness with her arms and ran for the safe cover of a tree. Her breathing was fast and shallow at the memory of the passion that had devoured her and almost allowed her to make love to her employer. When her breathing calmed, embarrassment flooded her and she felt her face grow hot at the thought of what she just experienced.

Carefully she looked around the tree to see Ryan stand atop a large rock, calmly looking down at the huge crocodile that hovered near the edge of the river, his cock once again resting on its bed of dark ringlets. She gasped. Slowly the crocodile walked onto the sandy shore on its short, stubby legs and then sat there, its huge eyes motionless. Natalie shuddered. "Why the hell didn't you tell me earlier, Ryan," she hissed softly while her eyes were glued to the great beast. It waited for quite a while, before finally sliding back into the water.

"I did tell you."

"But not until I was already in the river."

"Look, usually there's no problem if you're careful. You should have stayed closer to the edge. I told you about the current."

"Ryan, I'm furious," she shouted at the man who still stood unashamedly naked on the rock, now with his back to her.

"Why? I just saved you from a horrible death and you're furious? I fail to understand a woman's reasoning," he yelled back at her.

"Get off that damn rock and go away so I can get my clothes and get dressed."

"It's still here, Natalie, waiting for a tasty morsel like you to set foot on the shore."

"I don't believe you."

"Come see for yourself then," he yelled, then chuckled loudly.

"Put something on. I don't particularly like staring at your naked butt," she shouted.

"And get eaten? I don't think so, milady. If you don't like my butt, don't look at it."

Natalie gritted her teeth. Against her will she looked around the tree trunk again and could not help but admire his broad back, narrow hips, firm, smooth buttocks and strong muscular legs. Fear overcame the wave of wanton lust that swept through her for a second. What if he was telling the truth? Surely he wouldn't stand motionless on that rock if it weren't true? Wistfully she looked at the little pile of clothing near the rocks. Her eyes caught a movement in the water and saw the dark shape of the crocodile glide farther away from shore.

Ryan jumped down off the rock, scooped some of their clothing in one hand and ran to the shelter of the tree. No sooner had he hit the ground when the beast headed back for the shore.

"Quick, get dressed and let's get out of here."

"My shoes and other stuff—"

"Never mind your shoes and the other stuff. We'll get it later. Come on, woman. Don't just stand there," he said while he pulled on his pants and put on his shirt.

Natalie crouched down and quickly pulled the clean T-shirt over her head. She had no choice but to stand to put on her shorts. She turned her back to him while she pulled them on, then finally faced him.

Ryan saw her flushed cheeks and grinned. "Time

for modesty is gone, my dear. I've seen all of you now. Take my hand and we'll make our way back to the village through the trees."

"What about the crocodile?" she asked while glancing at it. It was just leaving the water again and waddling toward the forest.

"It'll get sick of waiting. We have to warn the villagers. The beast is either old or wounded and very hungry. You saw the children play near the water and crocodiles have been known to drag people off land." Without waiting for her answer, he tugged at her hand and started to run. Jumping over rocks and fallen tree trunks, he dragged her behind him.

Natalie tried to keep up with him. Branches swept against her face and cut into her arms, but she didn't care. All she thought about were the huge jaws of the crocodile and the small children it could gobble up in one bite.

They arrived in the village and saw Basilio and Kwame bathing in the river. Just like before, small children played at the river's edge. Several women were bathing their babies. Natalie drew in her breath sharply. Ryan let go off her hand and while he started to scoop children out of the water he yelled at Basilio and Kwame.

"Kwame, Basilio, there's a crocodile out there looking for dinner. Basilio, warn the women!"

Basilio called out to the women in their native tongue then swam with big strokes toward the shore, Kwame in hot pursuit. The women grabbed their babies and ran to their huts. Children ran screaming to their parental huts. One woman returned and spoke to Basilio. Her movements were agitated. Basilio tried to calm the woman and at the same time turned to Ryan. "She says her son was playing here just a few minutes ago. He's not here now. Stay here with the women. We'll go and look for him. Maybe he wandered off further down the river."

Natalie's heart beat with horror at the thought that a child could be in danger. She watched the men disappear into the huts and come out carrying their guns. "Be careful," she shouted after them.

Ryan ran along the river. He didn't have to go too far before he spotted the boy playing by the river's edge. The crocodile had already targeted the lad. It must have gotten right back into the water after they left to come back to the village.

The huge monster lay just feet away from the lad, waiting, watching. The youngster, unaware of the danger, moved further into the water. The three men ran as fast as they could. The lad heard the running men and looked behind him. A large, welcoming smile lit up his round black face, showing an even row of pearly white teeth. Basilio was first on the scene. He snatched the boy into his arms and rolled away from the gaping jaws just about to claim its victim. Ryan and Kwame fired several shots before the water turned red with the beast's blood. Its tail thrashed and churned the water and the beast still managed to move close to shore. Finally, it died.

The lad scrambled up and looked with big round black eyes at the dead monster that had almost devoured him, then ran as fast as his legs could carry him back to the village. "Thank God, we were here in time," Ryan said to Basilio and Kwame. "One second later, and -" he didn't complete the sentence. The thought was just too horrible.

Within seconds, the villagers surrounded them. The medicine man arrived. He started to dance and chant around the dead beast. Basilio turned to Ryan. "They say that just last week it killed one of their older lads."

Ryan frowned. "Where are the older boys? Shouldn't they be back by now?"

"No, they're still out hunting. They are due back soon."

Natalie approached them slowly. Ryan noticed the pallor of her face and beads of perspiration that dotted her smooth forehead. "Is everyone all right?" she asked with trembling lips.

Ryan heard the tremor in her voice and put his arm around her. "We're all fine, except the beast. He's eaten his last victim, I'm afraid."

An intense shudder shook her body and he pulled her closer. "Now, now, it all turned out well." Awkwardly he patted her on the back when he saw tears soak her cheeks. "Look, this is probably about the worst you'll come across on this trip. Smarten up now. Be brave."

She stepped away from him and looked at him with angry eyes. "Worst? Man-eating crocodiles are the worst? What about those poor girls?"

"At least they're still alive, Natalie. Come now, calm down. Go to the hut and make some notes about this event. It'll be a good addition to the book."

"Book? Is that all you can think about? That child almost died—I could have been killed!" she shouted, then ran away while angry tears dripped steadily.

Once she was in the dark confinement of the hut, she calmed down and thought about the situation. Ryan was right. It could have been worse, but deep within her regret smoldered that she had taken on the job of being his secretary and agreed to go on this foolish trip. Angry with herself, she wiped her eyes, then took out her notepad and started to write.

When dusk fell and she couldn't see anymore, she put the pad away and remembered her tangled hair that was now dry. With a grimace she dug the brush out of her pack and started to work on the tangles.

"Natalie? Are you decent?" Ryan's deep voice sounded just outside the hut.

"Yes."

He came in and sat cross-legged beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I am now."

"Good. I like your hair down like that. It makes you look younger. Why don't you wear it down more often instead of that prissy bun? The villagers have cooked us a meal. The men have returned with news of the girls, and the lads are back, too."

She knew it was a compliment in an awkward way but to be called prissy annoyed her. "I'll wear my hair however I please," she snapped. "There's nothing in our employment agreement that says anything about my hairstyle. I'm not really hungry."

"You've hardly eaten all day. You need to keep up your strength." He tried to look into her eyes, but in the dim light in the hut he could not read her expressions. But her white T-shirt stood out against the darkness. With wry humor he thought about the pile of clothes that still sat next to the rocks where she'd bathed. The excitement of the day was suddenly replaced by desire as he looked at her breasts clearly outlined and the dark nipples that showed through the white material. He ached to touch her, to cradle her in his arms, but her aloofness held him back. That afternoon, he'd been sure she returned his feelings. *Feelings?* he thought. *Damn it all, I'm falling in love with the woman. That wasn't part of the plan.* Conquering his ardor, he said in a brusque tone, "Come, the villagers are waiting."

## **Chapter Fifteen**

he atmosphere among the villagers was one of half feasting that the crocodile was dead and would kill no more, and half of sadness that the men had not been able to rescue the girls. Natalie sat cross-legged near the campfire and accepted the morsels handed to her. She had no idea what she was eating, but it tasted good. Some of it was rice, she knew. The small pieces of light meat tasted like a cross between fish and fowl. They sat quietly while Basilio talked with the men.

Suddenly the medicine man stood up and said something. "What did he say?" Natalie whispered to Basilio.

"He's honoring us for killing the crocodile and saving the lad."

"Oh. Are we supposed to do anything?"

"No. They will dance."

One of the women handed her a clay mug. At first Natalie pulled a face when she sipped the liquid. "What is it?" she asked Ryan.

"It's a potion derived from a root. It's supposed to make us all strong and get rid of evil spirits. I suppose you could call it their kind of wine. Be careful not to drink it too fast. It's quite the aphrodisiac."

"Did the men find out where those slave traders took the girls?"

"They found their trail, but there are quite a few men and they're heavily armed. For a while they followed the wrong men, two white men who seem to be lost. They're also armed and kill whatever comes across their path."

"What are those two men after? Are they slave traders, too?"

"I don't think so. I don't know what they're after. Maybe they're just stupid young lads out for some excitement that will cost them dearly if they're inexperienced. Drink your juice, Natalie. It will help you to sleep tonight without being plagued by crocodile nightmares."

Natalie glanced at the brooding expression in his eyes and wondered what he was thinking about. Carefully she sipped the strange tasting liquid, then took a few big gulps until she'd emptied the mug. Within seconds she felt a strange solitude wash through her body. Everything around her was clear, but it was as if she were dreaming. When a woman filled her mug again, she languished on her elbow while she sipped from it slowly.

"Ryan, why are they celebrating when their girls are in trouble?"

"It's a mixture, Natalie. They're happy that we saved one of their children from the crocodile and that we killed the beast. It has killed seven members of their tribe in the past months. But they're also getting ready."

"Ready for what?" She asked lazily. "Where did these older women come from? They weren't here when we arrived."

"Look at the medicine man. He's chanting and talking to the gods. The older women were in their huts praying to the gods to bring the girls safely back home. They've only come out because we killed the crocodile."

"It's all too weird and my mind is too foggy to understand any of it now. Explain it to me tomorrow," she said, stifling a yawn.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Kwame, Basilio and Ryan got up and danced with the warriors and women. She closed her eyes and let the sound of the drums lull her senses. When she opened them again, Basilio, Kwame and Ryan were painted just like the warriors and wore nothing but a string of beads around their loins with feathers dangling from it. Ryan's hair swung like a black mane as he danced around the fire. Natalie giggled and drank some more of the strange liquid that dulled all sense of reality and presented her with strange dreams.

The elders sat in a row and watched the dancers. An old woman shuffled up to Natalie and nudged her. Dreamily she looked at the old woman and wondered vaguely what she wanted. The old lady tugged at her arm until Natalie realized she had to stand up.

Ryan noticed the interaction between Natalie and the old lady and quickly left the group of dancers to join her. "The old woman wants to honor you, Natalie. Like Kwame, Basilio and I, they want to make you one of their tribe."

"Oh, isn't that sweet," Natalie smiled up at Ryan, then at the old lady.

"Just go with her. She won't hurt you," Ryan gave her a little push and Natalie followed the old lady into a hut. Several other women followed. They tugged at her T-shirt and pulled it over her head, then at her shorts, until she stood naked before them. Somehow, Natalie didn't care what they did. The women painted her face, her breasts, and her arms and legs. They released her long hair from its bun and made small braids at the sides with feathers at the ends. They wrapped a length of bright colored cloth around her hips. It reached to her ankles. Then they put beaded bracelets around her wrists and ankles.

Natalie giggled and wished she had a mirror. The women chattered among themselves, then just before they pushed her out of the hut out into the open, they hung a long beaded necklace around her neck with a flat, brightly red painted stone in its center. It had some white symbols painted on it. The stone settled between her breasts and felt cool against her warm skin. Carefully the women nudged her toward the dancers.

As if in a trance, she started to move to the beat of the drums and their song. Her legs seemed to have a mind of their own and she swayed her hips and copied the others. Somewhere in the deep recesses of her mind she saw it all happening and knew it had to be a dream. Swaying seductively like the other women, she danced up to Ryan. Ryan swore softly under his breath. "Damn, this is too much, Natalie. I can resist you when you're snappy and make smart remarks, but now you're setting me on fire."

She grinned seductively and moved back among the other women and copied their every move. Slowly, each of the women disappeared as their mate carried them off to their huts. Only a few were left dancing around the dying embers of the fire. The old ones sat like statues watching it all.

Natalie danced toward Ryan, her hips swaying seductively, her breasts proudly thrust out and her arms an open invitation.

"That's it," Ryan said. He scooped her into his arms and tasted the sweet honey of her lips while he carried her to their hut.

Kwame and Basilio sent each other a knowing grin and took off to their huts with the woman allotted them for the night.

Ryan lowered Natalie gently to his sleeping bag and joined her. He groaned when she pushed her body against his and moved her hips against his throbbing cock. Her lips were parted and her eyes slightly glazed as her hands stroked his chest. Her fingers pinched his nipples then slowly moved down to his loins. He kissed her softly, tenderly, then as pent-up passion overwhelmed him he sucked the sweetness from the pink recesses of her mouth. His tongue explored, tasted, danced within her sweetness and sucked each hollow until he thought he'd drown in the pink silky depths. His hands felt for her breasts. He massaged them softly, then tweaked her nipples until they became taut and hard. His blood roared in his ears as his lips trailed kisses down her neck, then moved slowly toward those twin peaks that tantalized him for so long. He nibbled at them and sucked a nipple deep into his mouth while his hand parted her legs and stroked the velvet folds hidden between.

It was too dark in the hut. He wished he had a light so he could see her and see the expression in her eyes. His one hand resting between her legs, fingers parting the folds to expose velvety crevices, he let his other hand grope for the flashlight. She lay very still when his fingers sought and found the entrance to heavenly bliss. He rotated his finger, felt deep inside her, the juices soaking his hand. He eased another finger into her and waited for a response. The flashlight clicked on. For moments he gazed down at her body, at her legs so wantonly spread for him, then up at her face. Natalie slept. A groan escaped from the depths of his soul. "Ah-no-Natalie, I can't take you like this. You drank too much of that stuff and you won't remember this as anything but a dream," he murmured softly while he withdrew his hand and cradled her against him. "You don't know this yet, my darling, but I love you. One day I hope you'll love me too and will willingly come to me."

He held her in his arms, devouring every inch of her, finally feasting on her exposed clit. He released her, gently placing the flashlight so that she was bathed in its light and her clit fully visible to him. Without touching her, just drinking in her beauty, the sight of her breasts, the cleft and her vagina, he masturbated deftly and breathed heavily as release finally came. It wasn't satisfactory, not with her naked body tantalizing him, but it would do for now and at least allow him some sleep without the torture of his body on fire.

He gently removed the feathers and beaded trinkets the women adorned her with. With the aid of his canteen of water and a T-shirt, he washed the paint from her body, until she lay clean and innocent before him. Softly, he crawled to the opening and saw that all was quiet outside. Quickly, he retrieved her shorts and shirt and crawled back into the tent. Dressing her was awkward. She felt like a limp doll. When he was finished, he rolled her gently onto her own sleeping bag and hid the feathers and trappings of the night under his own. He turned the flashlight off and with his hands under his head tried to fight the turmoil she'd caused within him. He'd admitted the love that had slowly grown, but was it really love or was it lust? Having been without a woman so long, it was difficult for him to tell the difference. There was no doubt that Natalie stirred him in a way no other woman ever had.

Confused at his feelings, he tried to find sleep but the memory of the forbidden fruits he'd just tasted, her wanton dancing earlier on, kept him awake for hours. When sleep finally did come, a woman dragging him to the altar plagued his dreams.

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Very early the next morning, he woke up in a sweat.

Visions of the bride and the altar were still clear in his mind and he glanced toward the sleeping woman beside him. "I trod that path once, Natalie. I'll not commit myself again," he said softly. "I want you and romancing you can help my book, but that's as far as our relationship can ever go. Would you be satisfied with just that? I doubt it. You're the type of woman who wants a commitment from me, and I can't give you that."

While he spoke the words, he knew he was lying to himself. Quickly, he dressed and strapped on his backpack. It was time to go and rescue the village girls.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

atalie stretched lazily. Sunlight streamed in through the opening of the hut and tickled her nostrils. She squinted at the bright light, glanced beside her, but saw that Ryan was gone. "Mm, I had the strangest dream," she said softly while she sat up and stretched again. "I could have sworn – No, that's impossible. It was just a dream."

It wasn't until a few minutes later that she noticed Ryan's backpack was gone. On her own was a note. Natalie,

Basílío and some of the villagers and I have gone to get the girls back. Hopefully we won't be gone long. Ryan.

Anger flared inside her. She glanced at her watch and knew they couldn't have left that long ago. Quickly, she put on socks, shorts, shirt and her boots. When she crawled out of the hut, she found Kwame chatting with the lads who had stayed behind. Some of them spoke English. "Kwame, which way did they go? When did they leave?"

"They only left a few minutes ago, Natalie, but Ryan thought it better that—" "Which way did they go? Damn it, Kwame, tell me!"

Kwame shrugged his shoulders and pointed. "They're following the river for now."

"Thanks. See you later."

"But, Natalie, Ryan said – "

"I don't give a damn what Ryan said. I'm going with them," she shouted at him while she quickly grabbed her backpack from the hut and ran to follow Ryan.

Kwame was in hot pursuit. He couldn't let her follow Ryan alone. He sighed. Natalie was a stubborn woman and behaving foolishly. Ryan would surely send her back.

Natalie's eyes scanned the riverbank. Far in the distance she saw specks moving and knew it was the search party. Her feet flew. A few times she fell headlong, only to scramble up again and continue.

It took her an hour to catch up to them. When she did, Ryan's eyes were black with anger.

"Are you out of your mind, Natalie? We're going after slavers. Before they let go of their precious cargo, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot any of us. Kwame, why didn't you stop her?" he asked the panting man.

"Man, she's fast when she wants to be. She wouldn't listen, Ryan. I'm sorry."

"Well, take her back. She can't come along," he told Kwame and looked at Natalie. "Go back with him, Natalie."

"No, I won't. Isn't this what your novels are all about? If I am to take notes of everything that happens, then I'd better be party to it. And don't yell at me like that."

"Go back to the village, Natalie. The slavers are a few days ahead of us and we're not taking any time to rest. You'll never last." His anger now dulled to a simmer, he added, "And don't forget, if they get us then they'll capture you, too, and you'll end up in a harem."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I'll last. You'll see. And I'm not going back."

Basilio intervened impatiently. "Ryan, we're wasting time arguing with her. Let her be foolish. Women generally are."

Natalie sent Basilio a murderous look for the comment he'd made. When Ryan turned abruptly and continued on, she followed close behind him. Without looking back at her, he said loudly, "Just remember, I'm not taking responsibility for this if anything happens to you. It's on your own head." He called to Kwame. "Return to the village, Kwame, and keep an eye on the women and children."

"But what about her?" Kwame shouted.

"Never mind her," Ryan shouted back. "And as for you, Natalie, I'd better not hear a peep out of you. Whatever happens, it's your responsibility."

"Do you want it in writing, Ryan? Oops, I forgot my notepad. Perhaps I can use yours," she bit back.

"Just shut up and follow us. If you can keep up. Those bastards will have a couple of Jeeps waiting somewhere. We have to get to them before they get to their vehicles. That means traveling day and night. We're lucky that they don't know these poor beggars have help. They think they've chased the tribe away for good with their guns and they bask in a feeling of safety. They'll take their sweet time before heading for North Africa and the desert. I've sent two of the lads to the nearest wildlife station. Hopefully we'll get help soon."

"Screw you, Bill. We're lost. If you hadn't killed that guy in the store, he could have sent us in the right direction."

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"He was obnoxious and he went for his gun. I don't like obnoxious idiots, especially if they're old."

"Yeah, well—he knew which direction they took. Now we're just looking for a couple of ants in a gigantic forest."

"I think your lady is on to us. Why the hell would she take her flight bag with her? I bet she's got a buyer for the stones."

"You're out of your mind. She took her flight bag because it has her stuff in it. Are you stupid? And now, thanks to you, we'll be wanted for murder."

"No one saw us, Greg."

"The woman saw us. I bet she was on the phone as soon as she got untied."

"I cut the phone cord and she probably died, too. I tied her good enough that it would be impossible for her to untie herself," he said coldly while peering around. "Mm, someone has passed through here recently. I think we've found the trail. See, look at the foliage they hacked away," he said, kicking at a broken branch, "and there's an old campfire.

"The wife wasn't dead when we left and she'll give the cops a good description of us. Look, it's senseless. We'll never find them. Why don't we just make our way back and go our separate ways? The sooner we get out of this country, the better. If we can even get away anymore. After all the stunts you pulled, they'll have descriptions and be watching for us at the airports. You screwed up big time. I think I'll disappear from Canada for a while until the boss has cooled down."

Bill's thin lips twisted into a menacing grin. "I've got a much better idea. We'll find the rocks and we'll sell them. Then we'll disappear. Dennis will never find us. We're on the writer's trail because these ashes aren't that old." He threw a cigarette butt on the ashes.

"We've been in this godforsaken country for weeks now and you think we're on their trail? Gimme a break, man. And if you think we'll get out of this country, you're dreaming."

"Look, luck is with us all the way. We're on somebody's trail. Look at those broken branches." Bill continued to follow the trail of broken branches while lighting another cigarette. "Come on, jerk. Don't just stand there. Think about that package of rocks and retirement."

Instead of retirement, Greg pictured a coffin in his mind. He was broke and had to find the diamonds so he could get his money from Dennis. Then slowly Bill's idea sank in and took root. "We could go to Cape Town after we get the rocks and leave from there to Mexico, but where are we going to find a buyer?" he shouted. "Maybe they won't be looking for us there. They'll expect us to leave from Johannesburg!"

"We'll worry about that after we get the rocks. Move it, partner," Bill shouted back with a sly grin.

Greg noticed the grin did not reflect in Bill's green eyes that narrowed to slits. He didn't trust Bill at all and felt if he turned his back long enough, the man would probably kill him, too. He was stuck with him for now, but as soon as they had the diamonds and were out of the jungle, he'd try and convince him to split them and they could go their separate ways.

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They did not stop to rest. Natalie battled the fatigue that attacked her. The hot sun beat down on her head and at times she had to stop for a moment to take a deep breath and shake her head to fight sleepiness. Relentlessly the men marched on. The natives from the village led the way while Natalie made up the rear of the row.

Unbeknown to her, Ryan glanced back every now and then to make sure she could keep up and was all right. He was angry that she'd not gone back and he worried about the danger involved. If she got hurt, he'd never forgive himself. He saw her struggle to keep up. Her face looked flushed and tired so he stopped, let the others pass by and joined her. Without a word, he handed her his flask so she could quench her thirst. He noticed her chewing on berries a few times and admired her for being so observant. "Want a hand, Natalie?"

Memory flashes of her dream shot through her head when he held out his hand. Reluctantly she put her hand in his and allowed herself to lean on him and draw from his strength. When he put his arm around her and supported her under the armpit, she was grateful for it, because it was as if he lifted her off the ground. "The sun's going down, Ryan. How much farther do you think?"

"Hopefully not too far. We'd like to catch them at night when they're asleep."

"Then what will you do?"

"I'm not sure yet. I have a plan brewing in my mind, but it hasn't fallen in place yet."

"Ryan, that stuff I drank last night gave me weird dreams, was it hallucinogenic?"

"Well, now—I don't know about weird. Pleasant dreams, perhaps, and yes, it acts as an aphrodisiac. I warned you about that," he said with a smile remembering the night and the passion that had attacked his loins.

Puzzled, she wriggled out of his arm and continued on her own, but he stayed right behind her. When they came to hilly country, he helped her climb. Each time he touched her, it sent searing heat through her body, especially when his large hands cupped her buttocks to give her a little push. Several times she almost fell and he caught her in his arms.

The quarter moon sent very little light for them to see. None of them spoke, except in whispers. Suddenly the leader stopped and talked to Basilio with agitated gestures and pointed down. They had reached the crest of the hill.

Ryan placed his hands under Natalie's armpits and lifted her to the top. She stumbled against him and for a moment he held her against his chest. The loud pounding of his heart thundered in her ears to match her own heartbeat. Carefully she looked up at his face to see his eyes gaze down at her. In the dark, she could not read their expression, but when he released her and touched her cheek for a moment it was the tender touch of a lover. His fingers were hard and callused, yet when he stroked her cheek, then traced her lips, his touch felt like the brush of a butterfly's wings. *I love him*, she thought. *I've fallen in love with a wild man – a complete savage –* 

The spell was broken when Basilio joined them. "Ryan, they're camped down below. I can see their Jeeps in the distance. What do we do now?" he whispered.

Ryan climbed onto a rock formation and looked down. He saw five men, and a group of about twelve young girls. The girls were bound together with strong ropes and sat in a group away from the encampment in a clear area where the men could keep an eye on them. The men sat around a large fire that crackled loudly and sent embers up into the darkness above. Several of them had guns leaning against them or draped over their legs.

Natalie joined Ryan. "They sound like they're drunk," she whispered.

"They are, but not drunk enough. I have an idea but I don't know if it'll work. Stay here." She heard him whisper to Basilio for a few minutes. Then Basilio translated Ryan's words to the native men. Within seconds, two of them disappeared into the darkness of the trees and Ryan joined her on the rocks, his camera and telescopic lens in his hands. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them to go find some of those roots that make happy water," he whispered with a grin.

"How are you going to get it to those men?"

He handed her the binoculars. "Look beside that far tent. There's a crate with half a dozen bottles of wine left. They'll probably drink all of it tonight before they head back to auction off the girls. One of our natives will put some of the root's juices into each bottle."

Natalie looked through the binoculars and saw the crate. She swung the binoculars to look at the group around the fire. "They're Caucasian," she whispered, shocked.

"What did you expect? There's good money in selling slaves. The slave buyers will pay a fortune for virgins. They must have raided several villages. We're lucky to catch them before they take off in their vehicles."

While they waited, all she could hear were the sounds of the night and the soft click of Ryan's infrared camera as he took pictures.

It took a little while before the two natives returned, their arms filled with long roots. Quickly they went to work on them. Using rocks, they squashed them to pulp, then squeezed the juices into Basilio's empty canteen. "Now watch," Ryan hissed when they were finished. "A few drops of that stuff in each bottle, and those men will not wake up for days."

"It's that strong?"

"Yes. Normally the village women mix the potion with fruit juices and water to make the brew you had the other night. The stuff taken straight will knock you for a loop."

The canteen around his neck, one of the men slid like a snake down the hill. Even with the binoculars, Natalie couldn't spot him as he slid along the ground, circled the encampment and pulled the crate of bottles behind the tent. "He's taking a long time. What if they go to the crate to get more booze," she whispered.

"It just seems long. It's only been minutes. Just watch."

Just as he whispered the words, the crate slowly slid back to its spot, the corks neatly shoved back into the necks of the bottles. The young warrior had almost reached the bottom of the hill when one of the slavers stood, threw his empty bottle into the fire and swayed toward the crate to get another.

"You might as well close your eyes and rest up a bit, Natalie. Those men won't be going anywhere tonight. Try and get some sleep."

"What about you?" she whispered.

The warrior returned and she noticed the others lie down to rest. Basilio leaned against a small tree and already had his eyes closed. "Me too. Come here," Ryan said softly and took her hand to pull her down off the rock. He leaned against it and she sat next to him. Her eyes burned and even though she tried to stay awake, sleep overtook her.

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Ryan glanced down at her. He reached out and pulled her into his arms until her head rested on his chest. He rested his bearded cheek on her head and suddenly he knew. He really loved this woman. It wasn't just lust that drew him to her. It was far more than that. The intensity of his feelings for her frightened him a little. Would she be satisfied with just a partnership? He kissed the crown of her head and felt overwhelmed with strange feelings of tenderness.

"I love you, Natalie Dubois. I can't tell you yet, but I'll tell you when we get back to civilization. I love you more than I can ever put into words. I never knew a woman could show so much strength. I don't only love you; I admire your spunk. Maybe we'll be a good writing team after all." Glancing down at her, he saw that she was already asleep. She had not heard his soft whisper. He kissed the crown of her head again and listened to the noise in the valley until he dozed off.

The sun was just showing its face on the horizon when piercing screams broke the silence and woke them all with a start. Natalie struggled to open her

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eyes. For moments she had no idea where she was until she felt the hand that rested over her breast and heard his heartbeat in her ear. Her heart fluttered, her skin puckering. She could feel her nipples react to the wanton thought that she wanted his hand to squeeze, to fondle her. Then, angry at the weakening of her heart, she removed his hand, sat up and looked into his brown eyes. They held hers for a moment before he smiled and showed his even white teeth. "Ryan–I fell asleep–the girls–"

"They're scared. The slavers have passed out and now the girls are screaming for help. You know, I love your hair loose like that."

Natalie stood up. "You've told me that before. What a time you pick for compliments. It's hot on my neck," she said softly unwilling to leave those brown eyes that tried to tell her something. I need to go - eh - "

"Over there, behind those rocks."

When she returned, they were getting ready to descend. Ryan held his hand out. "Going down is easy. Be careful though, the soil is very loose. Go down on your rear." He pulled her down until she sat.

She watched the others slide down the hill and followed their example. They were all there before her. The last part of the hill she slid too fast, lost her grip and rolled the rest of the way.

This caused a rumble of laughter from the men. Angrily she beat her shorts at the dust caked on them. The girls had quieted down when they realized that people had come to rescue them. Basilio was collecting the guns and pistols while Ryan snapped pictures of the sleeping slave traders. "You see, Natalie? This is how I catch them. I'll send these pictures to the proper authorities and they can take it from there. It prevents bloodshed. Long ago, the tribal warriors would have slaughtered these men. Now, with all the modern weapons, the warriors would have been killed. I've taught many tribes new ways of dealing with this scum. This particular tribe has never been raided, but from now on, they'll know what to do."

"They don't have camera equipment like you or the know-how to contact the authorities."

"No, but they can free their girls and move their village. And all without bloodshed."

"Do you think they'll keep that rule when you're not around?"

He frowned. "I don't know, Natalie, and I don't want to know. All these years I've been trying my best. That's all I can do."

"How did you know that the slavers had taken girls from that village?"

"I didn't. It was just by chance that it happened just before we arrived. This has shortened my trip considerably. The tribe will move to a different region and we'll head back. I think I've got enough material for my next book."

Natalie watched as Kwame and the warriors pulled the unconscious slavers into the tents and closed the zippers. "You're just going to leave them here? Won't they follow us when they come out of it?" He laughed. "Not without arms, ammunition and supplies. Look at the Jeeps."

Natalie saw several warriors near the Jeeps. They stripped the vehicles and threw everything into a large pile. When they were done, they set fire to the pile.

"Kwame, did you get their wallets?"

"Yes. I took all their identification, left them some water and enough money to buy some food."

"Good. I guess it's time to head back then." Natalie turned to look at the group of girls and watched as a warrior cut through the ropes that had held them in bondage. Some of them were just children. They looked no older than eleven years or so. Their breasts were just starting to bud. Others were a little older and more developed. They were naked and stood huddled together, subdued and quiet. "How will the other girls get back to their own villages, Ryan?" she asked.

"They'll stay with this tribe until the tribe has found a safe spot to build a new village. Then the warriors will help them find their homes."

"They're just children. I feel so sorry for them."

"Most of them are ready for mating, Natalie. The laws of the jungle are different from our society."

"They're so young."

"When you were thirteen or fourteen, weren't you ready? Didn't you experiment with boys?"

"Ryan! That's inexcusable. You can't compare me with—"

"With those girls?" He laughed softly. "Natalie, sexual desires are the same all over the world.

Whether or not one engages in them is up to the individual and rules of society. Here in the jungle there are no rules, as we know them. They have their own laws and customs. When a girl reaches puberty, she marries according to their customs. And it is no picnic, let me tell you that."

"What do you mean?"

"When a little girl is born, according to tribal custom, female circumcision is performed. The exterior genital area is cut away and the opening sewn together with strong twine to ensure their virginity until they reach puberty. It causes malformation, difficult intercourse and girls often die in childbirth."

Natalie gasped. "That's monstrous. It's still practiced today?"

"Yes. Many tribes still apply the ritual. Some tribes who have been infiltrated by white missionaries and doctors have stopped this appalling practice."

"Are the girls that belong to the tribe we're staying with mutilated like that?"

"I'm afraid so. When we return to Johannesburg, I'll inform the missionaries about the situation and hopefully they'll send people to educate them. I reported this tribe the last time, but they've moved several times since then. Basilio will make sure we know where they're going. It's time to leave, Natalie. We've burned everything, destroyed the weapons, and we have to get these girls back to the village before the men wake up."

"But you said they won't follow us."

"Not at this point. We took their credit cards and

everything else. So it will take a couple of weeks at least before they can backtrack, but we can't afford to waste time. The village has to migrate to another place. And hopefully the authorities will pick the slavers up before they have a chance to track us or continue the kidnapping."

"I feel so sorry for the girls. I'll see if I can comfort them."

Before Ryan could stop her, she approached the group that huddled together. When she reached out, they shied away from her and Natalie turned back to him with questioning eyes. "They're still very afraid, Natalie. They don't know you and some have never seen a white woman. We're about to start the trek back. Come. Hopefully the lads have informed the authorities and they're on their way to pick up these scoundrels."

## Chapter Seventeen

he women and children saw the group approaching, and within seconds the whole village ran to greet them.

Tears ran unheeded down Natalie's cheeks when she watched the reunion of the five girls with their families. Sadness overwhelmed her for the others who had to wait before they were reunited with their loved ones, although the girls seemed happy that they were at least rescued out of captivity and welcomed in the village.

Now that it was over, she felt exhausted and her knees almost buckled. "Ryan, I'd like to lie down for a while. I'll write the notes after I rest up a bit, is that all right?"

Ryan noticed the dark rings under her eyes and nodded. "Yes, the notes can come later. You'd better rest up before the big feast tonight. The young men of the village have already left to hunt for a wild pig. The feasting will go on for hours. Probably well into tomorrow."

"What about you and Kwame? Don't you need to get some rest? We've trekked non stop."

"I'll rest later. I need to write for a while and take some more pictures. Off you go."

She took his advice and crawled into the hut.

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When she opened her eyes, Ryan was quietly sitting in a corner of the hut, his notepad on his knees and writing steadily by the beam of his flashlight. "Hey – Ryan, did you rest at all?"

He smiled and set her heart racing. "I caught a few winks. You've slept right through all the commotion. It's almost nine o'clock and the festivities are about to start. You'd better get ready."

Natalie sat up and stretched. "Oh, man—I need to wash up. I've got seventy-two hours of dirt caked on me and look at the scratches on my arms. Do you think the river is safe now?"

"I found a small pool further down the river. It's surrounded by large rock formations, so crocodiles can't get in there. I'll go with you. It's too dangerous to go by yourself. Animals prowl at night."

Natalie groaned when she stood up. "Oooh, my poor aching muscles." She searched for clean shorts and shirt in her backpack then followed Ryan out of the hut and along the river's edge until they reached the rock formation he'd mentioned. He climbed to the top first then reached down to grab her hand and pulled her up. She looked down at the dark, glassy surface of the small pool. Not a ripple marred its surface. "Ryan, are you sure there's nothing in there?"

"I've been using it myself. No, there is nothing in

there except some frogs and small fish."

"Not the flesh-eating kind, I hope?"

"You're being silly. I'd hardly be bathing in it," he said with a chuckle. "Off you go. I'll sit and wait for you just behind this rock and when you're finished I'll jump in myself." He turned away from her and sat with his back against one of the large rocks.

Quickly she peeled off the torn, dust caked clothes, then climbed down to the water, shampoo and soap in one hand. Even though she wanted nothing more than to relax and float in the tepid water that reached to just under her breasts, she did not dare. The thought of crawling things in it made her hurry. She washed her body and hair as fast as she could. When she was done, she tried to get a grip on the rock, but its surface was slippery and it took several tries before she could get a firm grip to haul herself out of the water.

Ryan had dozed off for a moment until he heard Natalie get out of the water. He could not help himself. The urge to look at her was too great and he sucked in his breath at the sight of her nudity. When she reached the top, she stood silhouetted in the moonlight for a moment, her arms raised up to the sky and it seemed almost as if she were a wood nymph come to life. Her long dark hair tumbled in disarray down to her waist, drops of water and soap still clinging to the curling ends. Breasts jutted out firmly from her slim body, nipples hard and erect; a drop clung to one of them as if ready to nourish. He drank in the sight of her slim waist, flat belly, the soft bed of black curls that hid that which he'd seen and tasted the sweetness of so briefly. His heart pounded in his chest and his loins burned with longing to jump up, take her in his arms and declare his love for her.

She broke the spell when she started to climb down to join him, and he quickly closed his eyes and turned his head away while she walked to the river's edge. He heard her scoop water from the river and rinsing her body and hair. Temptation was great, but he managed to quell his desires. But for how long?

"I'm ready. Your turn now," she said softly while she held out the soap and small bottle of shampoo.

It didn't last. Just the sound of her voice caused an instant erection. He fought to control his passion, the urge to grab her and grumbled, "Just the soap will do. I never use shampoo."

"Soap is bad for your hair. Take it," she insisted.

Their fingers touched briefly when he took the offered items. Natalie felt the currents that flowed from his fingers to hers and she held her breath. Prickly tingles ran down her spine and goose bumps covered her arms and legs. Drums came from the direction of the village and singing filled the night air. It served only to heighten her senses.

"I won't take long," he said suddenly while he pulled his hand away. Without waiting for her to sit behind the rock, he stripped, then climbed to the top and jumped into the water.

Natalie followed his movements while she slowly sat to wait for him. She watched the muscles ripple under his skin as his strong legs scaled the rocks with a few large steps. For a moment, she admired him when he stood up straight to jump into the water below. "You've got to stop this, Natalie," she told herself softly. "Love only hurts. It doesn't bring joy and happiness. It causes pain. Don't allow yourself to love this man. It's futile to even consider it." Then she argued with herself. "But, what I feel now, I've never felt before. I never felt like this with my ex husband, or with Greg. Is this real love then? Or is it just wanton desire because of the unusual circumstances?"

"What did you say, Natalie?"

His deep voice startled her and she looked around the rock to see him just pulling on his shorts. "Uh nothing—just that the mosquitoes are bad tonight."

"When we get back to the village I'll give you some salve to rub on your exposed skin."

They walked back to the village in silence. Natalie threw her dirty clothes inside the hut and turned to start walking to the fire but Ryan stopped her. "Hey, you can't go there unless you wear what they gave you. They'd feel insulted."

Her eyebrows shot up into half moons. "That wasn't a dream, then?"

"No. I've got it under my sleeping bag."

She felt the hot blood pulse in her cheeks. "I don't remember that evening clearly. I thought I'd dreamed it all," she said softly.

"You drank too much of the happy water. It's a wine they make from the roots, the same roots we extracted to put the slavers to sleep. They dilute it with juices to drink when there are celebrations. They'll expect you to come dressed in all the trappings, my dear." Once they were in the hut, he turned on the flashlight and produced the beaded bracelets, feathers and necklace. Natalie looked at the little pile of colorful items in horror. "I'm not going to wear that. Ryan, tell me it isn't true? I didn't dance around the fire half naked, did I?"

He didn't answer her question. "Look, I noticed you brought a bikini. Put it on, then put on all this other stuff." Without a word he took off his shorts and put on the feather skirt and then rubbed his body with some kind of greasy salve from a clay bowl.

Embarrassment flooded her and she averted her eyes while he put on the traditional trappings. "How do you know I brought a bikini?" she asked softly.

"You dropped it once when you were searching for stuff in your backpack. I'll see you out there." He grinned while he put his camera around his neck and left the hut.

Natalie sighed. She had no idea why she'd brought the bikini in the first place, but had packed it as an afterthought. She actually forgot about it until Ryan just mentioned it. It was buried deep in the backpack. She pulled it out and held it up. It was nothing but some scraps of material and the bottoms no more than a g-string. "Oh well, I dare to wear this to the beach, so why not here?" she muttered. After she took off her shorts and top and put on the bikini, she wrapped the length of cloth around her hips. The beaded belt hung just below her bellybutton. Thinking back to what she thought was her dream, she put on the arm and leg ornaments, then brushed the tangles out of her hair, made small braids and braided the beaded strings and feathers into them. For a moment another picture flashed before her eyes. Painted breasts, blue, white and red paint on her face, on her arms. She shook her head. "No, that part wasn't real. It couldn't have been—if it was, that means that Ryan and I—" she said aloud. Not daring to picture the thought, she shook it from her mind, left the hut, and walked slowly toward the fire and the singing, dancing villagers.

The group of rescued girls were the center of attention. Natalie was glad of this. When she approached the fire and sat cross-legged on the sandy ground one of the women suddenly noticed her and pointed at her face. Within seconds, two women rushed to her with clay bowls and proceeded to paint her face and arms, and tugged at the bikini bra. "No, I don't want that off – please, don't – " she argued while she tried to hang on to the wispy bits of material.

Ryan noticed. "Natalie, you're the only woman here who has her breasts covered. For goodness sake, they're the same as everyone else's and it doesn't matter if they're white or black. Breasts are not considered enticing here. They're for nourishment of the young and honored as such." His thoughts were different though. He knew and felt her embarrassment, but also knew that the women of the village would find it strange and they'd be insulted if Natalie didn't cooperate. "Have a drink of happy water. That'll make it easier to bear."

"You needn't talk. I don't see you walking around with the crown jewels painted!"

He burst into laughter. "Now that's a new word for

it. I like that."

"Why can't you get Basilio to explain to them that white women don't walk around naked?"

While she was arguing with him, she'd not felt the women remove the garment in question and proceeded to paint a large blue, white and red circle around each breast, a long blue stripe down to her belly button and more horizontal stripes on her belly. They made her stand up and did the same to her back and hips. To her relief, they did not know she wore the g-string panties. When they were done, they stood back and spun her around. Satisfied grins showed their white teeth contrasting sharply against their ebony skin. They nodded with satisfaction and handed her a clay mug.

Ryan watched her from the corner of his eyes and smiled when she sat cross-legged with the women and pulled her long hair forward to cover her breasts. I wonder if she realizes how enticing she looks right now, he thought. She looks wild; untamed – He watched her raise the mug to drink from it and quickly snapped a few pictures of her.

This time she drank the liquid slowly, but it still caused the same sensation as before. All sense of reality left her and once again she lived the dream. Only this time, the feasting and dancing continued. The boar roasted slowly over the fire and the heady aroma of smoked meat filled the air around her. The women brought her large leaves filled with what looked like pieces of fish. They tasted so good that she smiled and held out the empty leaf for more of the tasty morsels. When Ryan sat next to her to eat his appetizers, she shouted, "Ryan, what is this? It tastes good."

He grinned while he put another chunk in his mouth. After he swallowed, he said, "You don't want to know, Natalie."

She stared at the white chunks for a bit and hesitated before eating more. "Do you know?"

"No, and I prefer not to know," he shouted back at her. "I guess it's all right. These people all seem pretty healthy and look at their strong white teeth!"

She hesitated before she took the next bite. Pictures of the crocodile flashed through her mind and suddenly she wondered what the villagers had done with the beast. The chunk fell from her fingers back onto the leaf.

Ryan noticed and smiled. When she stood up and walked slowly to the river's edge still carrying her clay mug, he followed her. "What are you doing?"

"Emptying it and filling it with water," she said. "I don't want hallucinations like I did the last time I drank it."

"Mm, so you had strange dreams? What were they, Natalie?"

"Never you mind," she snapped. "It's bad enough that I have to walk around looking like a savage without you giving me a hard time. Anyway, do you think they'd mind if I went to bed early?"

"I think they'd be highly insulted. You're one of the rescue party and this shindig is in our honor."

"Tell them I'm sick. Tell them I've got PMS. Damn it, Ryan. Don't stand there smiling as if this is all a big joke. Tell them anything!" "You don't have to raise your voice here. I can hear you just fine. By the way, you look enchanting." For a moment he thought she'd throw the clay cup at him, but instead she turned away from him sharply and started back for their hut. "When do we leave?" she called back to him.

"When they pack up and get ready to move their village."

Natalie stopped and turned her head to look at him. "When will that be?"

"When they stop feasting. Probably early in the morning. Sometimes they feast for days, but I don't think this one will last as long because of their fear of the slavers."

His camera clicked as she walked away from him and crawled into the hut. Ryan sighed. "Women, they're so unpredictable. I'll never understand them," he said softly. "I love her, but do I really want to tell her that? I'm not ready for a commitment and such a huge change of lifestyle." He kicked at some pebbles and grimaced. "Love does turn a man into an utter fool. Right now she's invaded my mind so much I can't even concentrate on my project." He took some pictures of the dancers and tried to put Natalie out of his mind.

The next morning Ryan woke her very early. "Natalie, wake up. We're almost ready to go," he said softly.

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She groaned. "Already?"

"Yes. We want to get an early start. Most of the villagers are still asleep."

They got ready to leave. Some of the women waved good-bye as they left the village. When they were quite a distance away from it, Natalie heard the drums again.

"The drums again, Ryan!" she called out to him. "Has something else happened?"

"No. This time the drums are conveying a happy message," he said and grabbed her hand to help her climb over a rock. "They're sending messages to the other tribes to help them find the families of the girls."

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Bill poked their guide in the back. While trekking across the Savannah, they ran into a lone native on his way to trade. Within seconds, Bill had the native subdued. The man spoke broken English. Bill told him they were searching for a man, a writer by the name of Ryan Jamieson. The native looked at them with big eyes filled with fear at the gun poking him in the chest. His expression subtly changed when Greg pulled the cover of the book from his backpack and swung it in front of the man's face. "Do you recognize this man? Do you know him?"

The native nodded. Bill ordered him to guide them to where Ryan was camped. Terrified of the gun and what the white men would do to him, the native agreed.

"Stop! Greg, I hear drums and chanting," Bill

called softly behind him. He shoved their guide aside roughly and quickly advanced in the direction of the sounds.

The native saw his opportunity and slunk into the darkness of the forest. When Bill looked around and saw the man was gone, he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, he did his job. We can just follow the beat of the drums now," he said. "By the sounds of it, we're close." He pushed ahead. Suddenly a screeching monkey jumped in front of him. Bill swore. He dropped the flashlight and aimed the rifle.

Greg saw what he planned. Are you crazy? The noise! It's just a monkey. If you fire off that rifle, you'll alert them all," he hissed.

Bill's finger was ready to pull the trigger but he realized Greg's words made sense. He lowered the gun and continued on.

Carefully they followed the sound of the drums until they spotted the village at the river's edge. They stopped and watched for a while from the cover of the forest.

"Do you think they're friendly?" Greg said, his eyes fixed on the village while he spoke to Bill.

"How the hell would I know? Looks like they're roasting some kind of animal, so at least we know they wouldn't eat us." Bill said while his eyes gazed with lust at the near naked women.

"I'm starving. That smell is enough to drive me crazy." The aroma of the roasted meat made Greg's stomach yearn for a decent meal.

"Hey, cool it, man. They could still be savages," Bill hissed softly. "Don't think so. I see a white guy. He's taking pictures of the dancers."

"Look, let's just crash for the night. We'll pitch our tents right here."

Greg took his binoculars out of his backpack and focused on the white man. "Hey, Bill, I think that's the writer. I don't see any sign of Natalie."

Bill yanked the binoculars out of Greg's fingers. "Let me see. Damn, I think you're right. She must be in the village somewhere. Maybe she's in one of the huts. We'll wait until they stop partying and everything is quiet. Talk about a lucky star!"

Greg sank down to the ground and rested his back against a tree. Bill watched through the binoculars for a while then sat down to rest too. The dark night was filled with sounds of animals hunting their prey. Greg shuddered each time he heard leaves rustle. It didn't seem to bother Bill, who snored loudly. Now and then he trained the binoculars on the village and especially on the writer, until he saw him enter one of the huts. I wonder if Natalie is in the same hut, he thought. How do we get to them without alerting the whole village? She's probably sleeping with the creep—

Close to dawn, the natives slowly became quiet and by the time daylight broke and the sun's early rays glimmered through the trees, the village was hulled in silence. Greg had dozed off, to be awakened roughly by Bill who poked the gun in his ribs.

"Hey, wake up, man. They're all asleep."

Greg woke up feeling rather groggy. Lack of proper rest and his constant fear of wild animals were

starting to take their toll. He shook his head for a moment to clear his fogged brain, then grabbed the binoculars to look at the village. Just as he trained the binoculars on the white man's hut, he saw Natalie come out of the opening. His breath hissed as he drew it in sharply. This was a Natalie he'd never known. She had on a tank top and it was obvious that she wore no bra. Her shorts were cutoffs and showed her shapely legs. Her hair hung loose to her waist in tangled curls. A sudden passion consumed him when he watched her stretch. He never felt such desire for her before. Their lovemaking was always more mechanical and a satisfying of their mutual needs rather than real desire. As she stretched, the bottom of her breasts showed from under the halter top, and her shorts shifted to show her bellybutton. He drew in his breath sharply, his cock jumping to attention. He wanted her back, he knew that now. He'd been a fool. Maybe if he'd ever romanced her properly she would have shown this other side of herself. He quickly jerked off to release the fire that consumed him, the sudden need for her. He'd have her again. Soon. His cum spurted, spilling on his pants. He didn't care. Tucking his cock back into his underwear and closing the zipper, he continued to watch through the binoculars. The writer followed Natalie soon afterward. Two black men joined them and it was obvious that they were getting ready to depart.

After a little while, he saw them fetch their backpacks from the hut and put them on. Natalie had changed into jeans and had her flight bag slung over a shoulder. Instead of its usual bun, her hair was drawn back into a ponytail and a hat perched on her head at a crooked angle. He frowned. This was hardly the woman he had dated on a steady basis for so long and finally become engaged to. "Bill, they're leaving. The writer and Natalie. Natalie has the bag with her. Two black men are with them."

"Good. We'll follow them at a safe distance and get the bag when they camp tonight. Is the woman carrying a tent?"

"Yes, they're each carrying a tent strapped to their backpacks."

"That means she sleeps alone when they camp in the wilds. Let's get ready." Quickly they gathered their gear and got ready to follow the foursome.

## Chapter Eighteen

Atalie wiped the droplets of perspiration off her upper lip and brow and rested for a moment. At times she felt like throwing the annoying flight bag in the river. It wasn't big, but it was cumbersome and she finally realized she should have listened to Ryan. They walked in single file along the river's edge. Suddenly, Kwame and Basilio stopped.

"What's wrong?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know. I thought I heard something. Could be that something is stalking us."

Ryan frowned. "Something or someone?"

"It has stopped now. Maybe it was just a large animal."

"Well, it's time for a break anyway," Ryan said while taking off his backpack. "I hope to reach the falls by sundown and we can camp there, so we'll have a brief respite, eat something, and continue."

"I'd give anything for a swim," Natalie murmured then in a louder voice, "Ryan, is the water safe here?"

He shook his head. "No, not here, Natalie. Wait until we get to the falls and you can shower to your heart's content."

"Falls? As in Niagara?"

Ryan chuckled. "Hardly. It's really just a rock formation piled against a mountain. It's nothing like Niagara, Natalie, but a waterfall nevertheless. You know I've never told you how much I admire you for sticking it out. The only time you freaked was when you saw the crocodile. And the villagers were very impressed with you when you participated in their rituals."

"I hardly participated. I sat with them, ate their food, allowed them to paint me and fill me with embarrassment, and that's about it."

"You don't remember dancing with them?"

"Don't be silly. It was hard enough to walk and try to hide my nakedness with my hair, let alone dance, and—" she stopped suddenly. Her winged eyebrows shot up, her eyes widened and she gazed at him with an incredulous expression. "I didn't—" That annoying chuckle again and the hint of amusement dancing in his eyes. It was all a dream. It wasn't real—if it were real—that would mean that he touched my body that we made love—surely I'd remember?

Ryan handed her a chunk of meat that the villagers had packed for them to take along. "Here, you'd better eat something before we continue."

Natalie munched on the meat for a while. It was cold and tough and she tore at it with her teeth. After chewing and washing the meat down with water, she turned to Ryan. "You said you wanted to go home. Aren't we headed in the wrong direction?"

Ryan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No. We're headed toward a small town. There is a ranger station there. They have a very small airfield and a helicopter. I'll hire the pilot to take us back to where we left the Jeeps. I've got sufficient information now to write my book." *Almost,* he thought. *Not quite enough, but I guess I'll have to imagine the rest.* 

"Ryan, how was life in the orphanage?"

The sudden personal question took him by surprise. He was very quiet for a moment, then finally answered. "Natalie, just like you, I don't like people probing into my personal life. The orphanage is a piece of my life I don't care to talk about."

"You have a nasty habit of probing into mine," she retorted sharply. In a friendlier tone she asked, "On the back of your book it says you started writing by recording your memoirs. Why were they never published?"

"Because it's none of the world's business," he said in a gruff tone. "I wrote them for myself, just to get my grievances on paper, but it led me to want to become a full time writer. I was lucky. I chose the right subject and scored with my first novel."

"I'm sorry."

"Natalie, I haven't asked you any more questions about your past, so please don't probe into mine."

"I won't." Deep down, because of her own experiences in the orphanage so long ago, she was curious, but by the closed look on his face, she knew to drop the subject. Silently she put the backpack on. Usually Ryan assisted her, but this time he let her struggle alone. She glanced at his stern face and wondered about his thoughts. Her question had obviously disturbed him. When she slung the flight bag over her shoulder she sighed, finding its weight cumbersome. For a moment she gazed at the river, once again tempted to get rid of it and its contents, but then remembered Ryan's words that he'd hire a pilot to fly them back to the Jeeps, so she wouldn't have to carry it that much longer.

Ryan waited for Natalie to pass him. Her question had touched a scar on his heart and opened it. While he walked and climbed, he thought about his childhood. His parents had both died of some unknown viral infection when he was just a lad of ten. No one in the family wanted him, though he had several aunts and uncles. There was no will, so the authorities placed him in the orphanage. He winced as the memory of the cane plagued him. Matron was a stern old woman and when he complained one day about always eating cabbage for dinner, she sent him to the office of the director, her husband. Mr. Versteeg never asked questions. He ordered Ryan to pull his pants down and bend over, hands touching the floor. The cane whipped him without mercy, leaving long red welts on his tender buttocks. He couldn't sit for days. That was the first whipping. He soon learned that the sixty-four boys who inhabited the orphanage were whipped on a regular basis, often for no reason.

For the first two years he'd cried himself to sleep each night, until his heart hardened and he managed to shut out the sound of the whip as it crashed down on his buttocks. He concluded that Mr. Versteeg got his jollies out of whipping naked little boys. As a result, he studied hard and was determined to get out of the orphanage as soon as he turned eighteen.

Then when he was twelve, a little girl lit up his life. Ryan smiled as he pictured her. She was engraved in his memory. At night, often her dark curls and blue eyes haunted him. Nattie O'Conner. He wondered whatever happened to her. She promised to write, but her letters never came. When the new nurse arrived at the orphanage with her small daughter, she looked so lost and forlorn. Nattie wasn't allowed to play with the boys and had to stay near her mother's rooms. One day he had to polish the deck of the long rectangular gallery and she sat on the red flagstones, her back against the wall, reading a book. He knew her name, but she didn't know his. She didn't know any of the boys' names. "Hi Nattie," he'd said and she'd looked at him with shocked blue eyes.

"You're not supposed to talk to me. You'll get whipped," she whispered softly.

"I don't care. Aren't you lonely? There are no girls around here at all for you to play with."

"Matron wants me to play with the station master's son, Pieter, but I don't like him."

"Why don't you like him? I don't know him. He doesn't go to my school."

"I played with him once but he wants me to pull my panties down. What's your name?"

"Robert Lowell." Suddenly he felt angry with Pieter and very protective of this little girl and said to her, "Nattie, you were right in refusing to play with that kid. That was bad of him. I'll be your friend. Each day, we get an hour free time after we do our homework. I'll play with you."

"You're not allowed."

"We can go and play where no one will see us."

That had been the start of their friendship. Eventually one of the boys saw them and reported it to Matron and he was whipped severely, but they found another place to play. They met near the koppies where none of the boys dared venture.

And they talked. For the first time he talked about the grief he felt when he lost his parents. She listened quietly and then kissed him softly on the cheek. He thought she understood because her father had died, too.

And then came the awful news that Nattie and her mother were leaving. He drew a small picture for her of a red rose and underneath it he wrote, "One day I'll marry you and look after you forever." On the back of the card he wrote the address of the orphanage.

But after they were gone, each time the mail was handed out after dinner, his name wasn't called. Slowly his hopes of ever seeing Nattie again dwindled and bitterness returned. Happiness wasn't meant for Robert Lowell.

He stumbled over a rock and caught himself just in time. At the same time he glanced at Natalie, just ahead of him. *Nattie would be about her age now,* he thought.

Natalie heard him stumble and glanced back. For a moment their eyes met and she read the sadness in

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them and wondered about it. Who are you, Ryan? One moment I feel your warmth and my heart tells me that you want to open up to me, and then you distance yourself. What are you thinking right now? What caused this sadness within you? Quickly she averted her eyes and continued on, but her heart beat wildly and his brown eyes caused a tumult in her body that she did not want. Love had betrayed her and she would prevent that ever happening again.

Just before sundown they reached the waterfall. Kwame stopped when he found a clear patch and turned to them. "This looks like a good spot to camp for the night. Better enjoy this, Natalie. By tomorrow night, we'll be on our way back to Johannesburg."

Natalie smiled. "You know, I was just getting used to this wild, savage way of life. It'll be strange to be back in the city." She turned to Ryan, who had started to put up his tent. "How long will it take you to write your book, Ryan?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Three months, maybe. That depends how it flows. Fiction is a foreign style for me so it may take longer."

"I guess you won't need my services during that time, so I can fly home and see my mother?" she asked.

"Wrong. I hired you as my assistant, remember? Secretaries get to do all the fun stuff, like checking my writing for typos and spelling errors that the computer spell check missed. You'll get to edit my rough drafts and you can criticize. I've never written romantic fiction, so I'll need your help with the more flowery stuff." "Romantic? Flowery stuff?"

"Yes, romance. I'm a little rusty in that area."

"Romance?" she asked with a frown. "You told me you had to change your style but you never said anything about romance."

"Well, not romance as in your silly little novels. But the editor wants me to incorporate more about real life, about relationships."

"Among the natives?"

"Yes. I suppose." He quickly changed the subject before she could ask any more questions. "Let me help you with your tent, then while Kwame and Basilio make us some grub, you can go shower under the falls to your heart's content."

Natalie glanced at the water that cascaded down. "I guess animals don't venture behind that curtain of water?"

"Rarely, but I'll check it first to make sure."

She busied herself with a corner of the tent. When Ryan reached out to grab a stake, his hand brushed hers. Was it her imagination or did his hand linger longer than it should have? *I wouldn't be surprised if he's got strong emotions buried deep within his heart. I bet he could be a passionate lover.* The thought caused her to quickly pull her hand away.

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The touch of her warm skin against his hand caused the blood to rush faster through his veins. It echoed in his mind and overpowered the thundering sound of the water as it crashed on the rocks below it. He drove the stake into the ground and lifted the side of her tent. His heart pounded in his chest and his loins ached while he watched her drive the last stake into the ground. Her breasts swayed with the movement, enticing him, teasing. He longed to touch them again, to suck her dark nipples until they were hard and have her body crave for his. The memory of that night in the hut had not left him. It haunted him day and night and caused him to have amorous dreams that woke him time and time again. *You love her – you love her – you love her – a small voice echoed in his mind.* Her voice interrupted the annoying echo, and he quickly averted his eyes.

"There, that's done. Thanks for the help, Ryan," Natalie said with a wide smile that showed her pearly teeth.

He fought to control the wild desire that consumed him to take her into his arms and make wild, passionate love to her, and so he stayed hidden behind the tent. "You're welcome. You'd better go and enjoy that water while you can. I'm going to scout around and take some pictures. Don't worry, we won't be able to see you." His desire finally under control, he left her tent to crawl into his own to get his camera.

When he crawled out of the tent, Natalie was gone. He heard movement inside her tent, so he assumed she was getting ready to go and bathe. He climbed up the rocks and edged behind the curtain of water. After he made sure that everything was clear, he returned to the rocks to wait for her.

He leaned against a large boulder and watched

Kwame and Basilio disappear into the forest. They would hopefully return with a rabbit or bird they could roast over a fire.

His thoughts were in tumult as he tried to fight long forgotten feelings. After Megan had jilted him, he swore never to give his heart to a woman again. Sure, he had women over the years to satisfy his needs, but none had crept into his heart. Until now. Somehow, Natalie invaded the locked corners.

I never felt like this about Megan, though I loved her. Natalie causes feelings within me that I've never known. I want to protect her, like I wanted to protect Nattie. Without wanting to, I feel close to her, as if she's already part of me. It's as if I can touch her soul, as if we were meant for each other. Why am I thinking like this? I don't want to get married or have a permanent relationship. I'm a confirmed bachelor now. A woman would cause too much of an upheaval in my life.

His thoughts were interrupted when Natalie crawled out of her tent, shampoo in her hands, soap and a towel slung over one arm. To his amazement, she wore a yellow bikini that left little to the imagination. His eyes raked her body and the bikini did nothing to help stop the tumult within his heart and mind.

Natalie climbed the rocks until she reached him. "Did you check it out, Ryan?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes, everything is safe. Go ahead," he said in a gruff voice. "I'm going into the forest to take those pictures now.

"Thanks." Carefully she edged behind the curtain of water and walked along the ledge until she'd reached what she thought was approximately the center. Gingerly she stuck a foot under the water and felt how far the ledge stuck out. Her feet encountered at least a yard of rock face and she threw the towel against the wall, then stepped completely under the water. She let it cascade over her body. Its force stung for a moment, but then it felt wonderful.

After she'd stood under the refreshing streams for a long time, just allowing the water to soothe her body, she realized that no one could really see her through the curtain of water. With a grin she undid the clasp of her bikini, then took off the panties and tossed them to land with the towel, soap and shampoo against the rock wall behind the water.

The water refreshed and invigorated her. She twisted and turned until her whole body tingled from its force. She lifted her face to let the water massage her skin. She felt completely one with nature at that moment.

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Ryan had scouted the area and taken some pictures of colorful birds and rare flowers. He returned to their campsite and frowned when he saw no sign of Natalie. Softly he called her name near the opening of her tent, but there was no answer. Muttering under his breath, he snapped some pictures of the waterfall, then walked toward the rocks to wait for her. When she still didn't appear after fifteen minutes, he started to worry.

Quickly he scaled the rocks and edged behind the

falls. Keeping close to the wall so not to get his camera wet, he spotted her towel and toiletries. He stopped and gazed at the nymph he could just barely see through the streams of water. It was as if she were worshipping something unseen. Like a ballerina, she twisted and turned, her face held up. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he raised his camera and snapped pictures.

He had just decided to return to camp now that he knew she was safe and just enjoying the experience of bathing in a waterfall, when suddenly she stepped out of the water and stood in front of him. He held his breath and waited for a sharp remark. None came. Instead, her eyes were misty and she held his gaze. He couldn't stop himself. His hand reached out slowly to cup the back of her head. His fingers threaded her hair until he had a tight grasp. Slowly he pulled her face toward him. Their lips met. Her lips parted under his and her arms wound around his neck as she returned his kiss with a searing passion he'd not counted on, never thought she was capable of. Carefully he explored the honeysweet cavities of her mouth, his tongue flicked in and out, danced around hers, until she gently nibbled his lower lip, then explored his in return. His breath stopped when her small tongue entered his mouth and he sucked it gently. Her hands fumbled with the strap of the camera and when her lips left his for a moment to pull it over his head and lower it to the towel, he dared to touch her breasts. She did not resist his touch. Her lips met his with a force and ardor that caused all sanity to leave him. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt then slid it off his shoulders.

Natalie's thoughts were blank, except that she wanted this man and the love she felt for him needed to be satisfied at least this once. Her need to become one with him was so great that she forgot all else – the way he irritated her at times, how he angered her, how obnoxious he could be.

Her fingers fumbled with his belt, then the button on his pants and his fly until she could pull them over his hips. Vaguely, as she drowned in a sea of passion and while his lips were devouring her, she felt him kick them off. His arms circled her and her breasts pressed against the thick dark hair on his chest. She felt his throbbing hardness press tight against her belly. Slowly her fingers caressed his back, slid down to his buttocks, to cup them and pull him harder against her body. She drank from his soul while their minds seemed to blend into one and moved her hips against him so that she could feel his cock pulse against her naked skin.

Slowly, she maneuvered him so that they both stood under the cascading waters. This was such a tender, precious moment that she wanted it to continue under the waters sent down by nature itself. It was as if she had never loved before, never made love in her life—as if the cleansing waters washed all of the past away.

Ryan's hands massaged the breasts that enticed him so much. Gently he stroked, cupped them. He tore his lips away and trailed kisses down her neck to the nipples that now resembled hard dark pebbles. He squeezed her breasts slightly so that they stood out even more. Their points beckoned, inviting his lips. For moments he gazed at them before he took one in his mouth and sucked hard while his fingers played and tweaked the other. He felt her hands release his hair from its restraining band. Her fingers entwined themselves in it while she pulled his face tighter against her bosom.

One leg curled around him and he felt the tip of his manhood automatically search for its destination. He sucked the other nipple and let his fingers trail slowly down to rest for a moment to play with the soft, dark triangle, before he searched for and felt for that small bud. It felt hot under his fingers and throbbed to match his heart. Softly he rubbed it until she opened her legs wider to part her clit, to envelop him. He gently opened the soft folds until his fingers found the entry to her vagina. Slowly he circled, teased, until she pushed down and forced his finger to enter. She removed her leg from around his body to encase his finger tightly between her legs. His lips trailed down to rest for a moment on her silken skin while his tongue flicked the hollow in the center of her belly. Slowly, he licked pearly droplets of water off her skin, trailing soft kisses, until his tongue reached the small bud. With one hand, he parted her legs and allowed his tongue to tease her until her hands tugged at his hair and her body squirmed.

He straightened and lifted her so that her legs circled his waist while his lips claimed the sweetness of hers once again. He felt them tremble as he brushed them tenderly with his tongue while his cock sought fulfillment. His arms tightened around her slim body and forced her down upon his erection slowly until he was deep within that silky tunnel and touched the core of her womanhood. The soft velvety walls tightened around him when he moved slowly within her. "Natalie—my darling—my long awaited love—" he whispered softly against her lips, but the sound of his whisper was drowned in the roar of the waters.

They rode the tide of passion that consumed them both until Ryan could no longer contain himself. He had wanted her for too long and desired this so much that he was near explosion.

Natalie felt him shudder. His cock expanded, filled her and when she felt him swell even more ready to release his passion within her body, she matched her release with his own. "Ryan, I love you," she moaned, and screamed as final release caused her to spasm and her muscles to tighten around his cock. She felt his cum shoot inside her to mingle with her own. Reluctant to let him go, she held on to his cock until she felt it swell again. They stood joined together for a long time, while their lips drank hungrily from the passion not yet quenched.

Neither of them noticed that the sun had gone and darkness had fallen. Ryan slowly lowered her until she stood before him. His hands slid over her body examining each detail before he spun her around, bending her over, and cupped her breasts while his cock became hard again and sought the haven it had left not long before.

Natalie felt him swell against her buttocks and bent

forward to receive him. She wanted him within her forever, to be joined to him and be one again. For moments he rubbed his cock between her buttocks until he drove into her with a force that made her gasp. His hands stroked her buttocks, and then slowly he pushed a finger into her anus to tease her while his cock moved within her slowly.

She wanted to see him, to hold him while he took her a second time and squirmed away from him to face him. His dark eyes bored into hers until she felt he could read her deepest thoughts and the secrets of her soul. While their eyes held, his hands explored her breasts, her nipples and the crevices between her legs until he lifted her to enter her once more. Her hips moved in unison with his strokes until they rode the crest of the waves to come thundering down when their passion released simultaneously. She screamed, her release drowned in the roar of the falls.

Ryan held her, his cock still encased within her and swayed gently. He moved slowly in a circle, his lips on hers until suddenly he saw the gleam of a flashlight through the streams of water, breaking the spell. With a soft curse, he broke away from her.

Natalie tried to pull him back, but he shook his head and pointed toward the light that came nearer. He stepped out of the waters to almost run into Kwame.

"Ryan! We've been looking all over for you two! Where is Natalie?"

"Eh—she's showering further down," he lied. "I'll be there shortly. I'm sure Natalie is almost done too."

Kwame grinned. His eyes had caught movement

within the streams of water and the beam of the flashlight was strong. "Sure. We caught a rabbit and it's cooking. We'll see you two in camp."

Natalie watched the light disappear. When she stepped out of the water, it was very dark and she had to grope for the soap and shampoo. "Ryan?" she said loudly to overcome the noise of the water.

"I'm here. We've been here a long time and they were worried about us. We'd better get dressed." He reached out for her and kissed her once more before he bent to retrieve his clothing.

Suddenly feeling empty, Natalie quickly stepped under the waters, washed her body and hair, and rinsed herself by scooping water from the indents in the ledge. She stepped out and dried herself with the shirt Ryan left behind and put the bikini back on. The full moon just sent sufficient light through the streams so that she could see a little but when she looked for Ryan, he was gone. Disappointment flooded her. She hoped he would wait for her.

When she approached their campsite, a small fire lit up the area and the smell of roasted meat entered her nostrils. Ryan glanced at her when she crawled into her tent, but he didn't say anything. Quickly she sprayed herself against mosquitoes before pulling on her jeans and T-shirt. She left her hair loose after she'd brushed it, put on her sandals and crawled out to join the men.

"Enjoyed your shower, Natalie?" Ryan asked casually.

"Yes. More than I ever could have imagined. I wish for something like this in my backyard. I wouldn't need a bathroom anymore," she joked to cover the disappointment she felt at his casual behavior toward her.

Little was said while they ate the roasted rabbit meat and fruit that Kwame and Basilio had brought back. After Basilio and Kwame had finished their meal, they said goodnight and turned in. Ryan and Natalie sat near the fire in awkward silence.

Slowly the fire died until only the embers glowed red in the darkness of night. Without a word, Ryan held out his hand. Her eyes questioning, she placed her hand in his. He jumped to his feet, pulled her up with him and pulled her along to his tent.

Once within the tent, he closed the zipper and took her in his arms. Gently he lowered her to the soft sleeping bag and kissed her. He whispered softly against her lips, "Natalie, I love you. You've done the impossible. You've captured my heart, my soul and my body."

She held his face between her soft hands. "Ryan, I love you, too. So much that I ache to be in your arms forever."

"You will be, my darling. Always and forevermore."

They slowly undressed each other, then savored their newly found love, more slowly, more delicately—not with the frenzy that had consumed them under the falls. They had to be quiet, so the other men wouldn't hear them and made love quietly. The tent wasn't big so they couldn't experiment much, but just to be together, to be as one, was enough for the moment. After they had satisfied their longings and desires, they lay entwined for a long time, whispering their love against moist lips. Their bodies were as one.

Ryan finally whispered softly, while he nibbled her ear, "Sweetheart, it's very late and you need to get some rest before we set out tomorrow morning. You better return to your tent now."

"I don't want to," she whispered. "I want to stay with you."

His arms tightened around her. "I want that, too, but for now to avoid Kwame's and Basilio's teasing remarks, it's better this way." He kissed her tenderly on the tip of her nose, claiming her lips once more. With his lips still against hers, he said softly, "I love you, Natalie. I fought it all this time, but I guess I fell in love with you the moment I saw you on that plane. You've unleashed all the emotions I've locked away for years."

"You infuriated me on the plane and many times after that. Why did you lock away your emotions, Ryan?"

"Because I was betrayed by love when I was young."

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "Seems both of us were betrayed, only I didn't lock away my emotions until just recently. I planned never to fall in love again."

"What happened, Natalie? Do you want to tell me about it?"

She lay quietly in his arms for a few minutes before she finally spoke. "Ryan, I'll tell you about it some day, but not tonight. Let's just enjoy each other right now and the love we've discovered. This is so precious, so new, I don't want to spoil it by talking about unhappy times in my life."

"You're right. We have a lot to talk about. What do we really know about each other except what we've learned these past weeks?"

"I know you can be obnoxious, insufferable and unbearably stubborn," Natalie whispered in his neck. "But now I know that it's all just a thin layer of veneer, which hides the real Ryan."

He silenced her by claiming her lips for a last deep kiss and reluctantly pulled away. "Goodnight, my love. It's time for you to go back to your tent. Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight, Ryan. I want you to remember that if tomorrow never comes, this has been the happiest night of my life, and -"

Again he smothered her words with a kiss, then released her from his firm hold. "Don't be morbid. Night, Natalie."

She pulled on her panties and T-shirt, but didn't bother putting anything else on. There was no one outside to see her except the moon and stars and perhaps an animal gazing at them from between the dark trees. After a last quick kiss, she grabbed her jeans and shoes, crawled out of his tent and ran quickly to her own.

She crawled into the sleeping bag. Her fingers stroked her lips where his last lingering kiss still hovered. His image etched in her mind, she slowly drifted off into a deep sleep, her fingers resting between her legs, inside her clit as if to hold his last touch, the feel of his lips still on hers.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

**"G**reg, wake up!" Bill shook Greg's arm until he finally opened his eyes.

For a moment he looked around dazed, blinked a few times, then remembered where he was. He sat with a start. "What? What time is it?"

"It's two-thirty. The girl has just crawled into her own tent. From the sounds I heard coming from the guy's tent, they must have had a pretty good time. They were moaning and -"

Greg felt a wave of jealousy wash through his mind and heart. "Shut up. I don't need to listen to this. So you think it's safe now? How long has she been in the tent?"

"About half an hour. She'll be fast asleep now. We can get the bag."

"And the girl. We're taking her for security. She can be our hostage."

Bill poked him with the gun. "Are you crazy? If she screams, we'll have those three guys on our backs."

"I'll make sure she doesn't scream."

"Look, all we want are the diamonds. She'll just forget about the missing bag."

Greg pushed the gun away. "I want the girl, too."

"And have a whole army looking for us? No way."

Slowly Greg drew a knife from within his sleeve and pressed it at Bill's throat. "Do as I say, asshole, or I'll slice your throat!" he hissed.

Bill stared at him with a glimmer of fear. The look in Greg's eyes was almost as if he was losing his mind, his eyes looked crazed, his face contorted. "All right, all right. Take it easy. Let's do it, then."

Stealthily they approached the four tents. Greg was the first beside Natalie's tent. He drew the knife and sliced through the thin material easily, then slashed horizontally to make a flap. He could just distinguish the white blur of her face and her shoulders and arms. He had torn a T-shirt to ribbons to prepare for this. With one hand he grabbed her wrists and held them and with the other hand stuffed a wad into her mouth when she opened it to scream. Her legs thrashed within the sleeping bag. Worriedly he glanced through the tear at the other tents to see if the men had heard, but everything remained silent. Swiftly he tied her wrists together, then tied a strip around her mouth, ignoring her furious blue eyes.

"Hurry up," Bill hissed softly behind him. "Where's the bag?"

"You get the bag. I'll take care of the girl."

"And I'll take care of the three men," Bill said with an evil grin.

"What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean." Bill fingered his knife, the metal glinting in the moonlight.

"Don't be stupid. It's already bad enough that you

killed that man and woman."

"No one will find them for months, and by that time we'll be long gone from here."

"You're wasting time, asshole. Get the bag and let's get out of here."

When he held the knife close to Natalie's eyes, she stopped thrashing and became very still. He yanked the gun out of his belt and held it against her temple. "Get out of the tent. Now!" he whispered. She didn't move immediately so he dug the gun deeper into her temple, then waited while she crawled out of the sleeping bag. When she stood beside the tent, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward the cover of the trees. Bill soon appeared carrying the flight bag. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said to Greg.

Natalie could hardly breathe. Greg's grip dug into the flesh of her arm so deeply that it felt like an animal had clamped its jaws around it. Her feet hurt as she trod on rocks and thorns. Branches whipped her in the face and against her bare legs. Tears of pain and frustration ran down her cheeks as Greg yanked her along.

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When they were far enough away from the campsite, Bill stopped for a moment. "Do you know where we're going?" he asked in a normal voice.

"No. Back the same way we came, I hope. You've got the compass. Use it."

Bill dug in his pockets. "Damn, I've lost it!" he

muttered.

"Good going, Bill! Well, let's keep moving. We have to put as much distance as possible between them before they wake up." The bright beam of his flashlight lit up the trail they'd made when approaching the campsite.

When the first rays of the sun broke through the dense forest, Natalie's tears had dried and she became oblivious to the pain washing through her body. At times she felt faint. The wad in her mouth almost choked her.

Slowly the scenery changed, until they suddenly faced plains of dry grass and scarce shrubbery. The ground under her feet was dry and cracked. Relentlessly, the two men carried on without releasing her from her bonds or removing the wad from her mouth. The gun that prodded her in the back constantly, squashed any thought of escape.

When they came to a patch of trees and a pool of muddy water, Bill stopped. "We've been going steady for eight hours now and my canteen is empty. Let's stop for a rest and get some water," he said.

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Greg looked dubiously at the muddy pool. "I don't know, Bill. I didn't see any animals drinking the water when we approached. I wouldn't touch it. It looks stagnant. You should have been more careful with your rations."

"Shut up," Bill snarled. He threw his backpack on the ground, then tossed Natalie's flight bag at Greg. "You know where the rocks are. Get them," he said as he nodded toward the bag.

Natalie moaned when Greg roughly pushed her down to the ground. Her eyes pleaded with him to take the wad out of her mouth.

Greg glanced at her and saw the heaving of her chest. For a moment the movements of her breasts caused a flutter in his loins, then when he looked up at her face again he realized that she wasn't getting enough air and was dehydrating. "Natalie, if I take it out of your mouth, will you promise not to scream? Not that there's anyone around to hear, but if you do, I'll have to stuff it back into your mouth because I don't want to listen to your hollering."

When she nodded, he untied the knot at the nape of her neck and pulled the wad out. He handed her his canteen. "Only take a couple of swallows. I'm not drinking the water from the hole. It doesn't look too healthy," he said while he glanced at Bill who had gulped down a canteen full of the murky water and was filling his canteen for the second time.

"The surface is quite clear, Greg, and it doesn't stink or anything. It should be all right," Bill said and drank the second canteen of water.

"No. I don't trust it. It looks foul," Greg said.

"Greg, can you untie my hands too? My wrists hurt and I'm not likely to run away."

He thought about this for a moment then realizing that she had no clothes, nothing to protect herself with, or any food, he untied her hands and handed her the canteen.

Natalie savored the few swallows of water. Her

parched throat felt a little better, and when Greg handed her a pack of chewing gum, she accepted it gratefully. Still dizzy and dazed from the whole experience, she gazed at a herd of wildebeest in the distance. Not too far behind them was a herd of giraffes. Their long legs galloped gracefully and churned up a cloud of dust as the giraffes followed the wildebeest. Under normal circumstances she could have appreciated the beauty of the moment, but her mind was troubled. The gum eased her parched mouth and settled the churning of her stomach a little. She finally found speech. "Greg, what are you doing? How did you find me, and why did you kidnap me?"

He didn't answer her. His eyes were crazed, almost insane with lust. He reached for her T-shirt and yanked it up, exposing her breasts. "Mine now, all mine," he hissed and grabbed a breast.

Natalie winced and wrenched away from the offending hand. Her breast ached where he'd grabbed it. But there was no getting away from him. Roughly, he pulled her back by her hair and yelled, "Bitch! You'd rather have the writer, would you? I'll teach you who's boss now!"

He held her head back, the knife at her throat. "Take your panties off," he ordered.

"No. I'd rather die."

"Then I'll have to do it for you. And don't move. That pretty neck of yours will snap like a twig on a tree."

In a flash he slashed the sides of the panties and with the tip of his knife pulled them away from her body. She heard his sharp intake of his breath near her face and shuddered.

"I can't believe I ever thought I loved you, or slept with you," she hissed through clenched teeth. The pain from him pulling her hair was bad, and the way he squeezed her breast again was excruciating. To make matters worse, he wasn't satisfied and putting the knife between the material of her top, he sliced it, exposing her completely.

"What the hell are you doing, Greg? Stop fucking around with the woman. Look for the rocks!" Bill yelled while drinking yet more of the tainted water.

Natalie thought for sure Greg would rape her on the spot, but he didn't. He let go of her and she crouched back, trying to hide her nakedness by pulling the tattered edges of the shirt around her body.

Instead, he pulled the flight bag toward him and dug into the false bottom. He pulled out a flat, leather package.

She watched with amazement. When Greg opened up the package and the sun shone on the contents, everything finally became very clear. "Diamonds," she said softly. "You used me to smuggle diamonds into Canada. The bag has a false bottom. Years ago, when I lost my other bag and you bought me this one, the old bag got lost on purpose, didn't it?"

Greg toyed with the diamonds. He let them trickle through his fingers. They sparkled in the sun. "Yes," he said softly. "Right here you see a fortune. These little rocks will secure our future, Natalie."

"What future?" Her lips cracked as she spoke and

she winced while she carefully licked the blood off her smarting lips.

"Our future, honey. I've decided that you and I should get married after all." He held out a hand full of diamonds to show her. "Look at these babies. Can you imagine that this is a million dollars I hold in my hand?"

She snorted in disgust. "I wouldn't marry you if you were diamond and gold plated. You used me, Greg. Those little rocks will bring you nothing but unhappiness. I'm sure Ryan, Basilio and Kwame are hot on your trail and that will be the end of your insane dreams."

"Enough talk. You're mine now so you'd better do as you're told." He turned to Bill. "Let's get going, buddy."

Bill suddenly looked ill. Clutching his stomach, he stood up, pulled his gun from its holster and pointed it at Greg.

Greg dropped the diamonds and started to stand up, but Bill waved the gun at him.

"Stay where you are and hand me those rocks," he ordered.

A nervous laugh escaped Greg's lips. "You're joking, aren't you? You'll never make it through this wilderness alone."

His eyes glazed with greed, Bill pulled the trigger. The bullet hit Greg in the shoulder. Uttering a yelp of pain, Greg crumpled to the ground.

A second shot hit him in the side of the head. A soft sigh escaped from Greg's lips as the last breath left his body.

Natalie gasped. Filled with horror she gazed at Greg's empty eyes staring up at the sky. Fear settled in the pit of her stomach and it took all her willpower not to become violently ill. She tore her eyes away from the dead man and looked to see what Bill would do next, expecting the next shot to be for her.

Bill bent to pick up the diamonds. He crumpled the cloth together, stuffed it back in the pouch and put the package in his pocket. Then he moved toward Natalie and waved the gun at her. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked. "I guess I'll have to finish you off, too. But not till I'm done with you."

Natalie's mouth had opened to utter a scream when Bill advanced toward her, but she only managed a croaky sound from her parched throat. Her heart beat wildly in her chest when the gun poked her in the ribs. "Please," she whispered. "I won't tell anyone. I promise. Just take the diamonds and leave."

"Like hell I will. If I leave you here and your buddies find you, you'll have the cops after me in no time. You can't come with me because you'll just be a nuisance. I'll have my fun with you and then finish you off."

Her body was frozen in time. She dare not move a muscle as the gun poked harder between her breasts. In a glance she saw the blood ooze from Greg's wounds and pool in the sandy soil, staining it a rusty color. "Fresh blood will draw wild animals. We have to get out of here," she said softly and hoped the man would listen to reason.

"Nonsense. We've got time before they smell the

blood." Bill straightened and kicked some sand over the spreading stain.

Natalie's sharp ears picked up the soft sound of flapping wings. She glanced up and saw vultures hovering high above the carnage. "If you look up, it has already drawn the vultures. Other predators won't be too far behind them."

He glanced up but immediately turned his attention back to her. She'd hoped it would have distracted him long enough to kick the gun out of his hand. Her ruse hadn't worked.

"Bill, you'll never survive. You're ill from drinking that water. I suspect it's poisoned. Sometimes ivory hunters poison the water holes to kill elephants. Then they remove the tusks and leave the animals to rot. I don't even know how you and Greg made it to our camp without wild animals attacking you. What do you know about the jungle? It's a miracle you both survived that long. We're lost, Bill. Why don't we just wait until Ryan finds us? He'll help us back to civilization."

"And hand me over to the authorities, no doubt," he snarled. "Are you crazy? Now stop your prattling and be nice to me. You might as well enjoy your last moments."

Natalie shuddered at the thought that this man would touch her body. When she tried to stand up, he poked the gun into her chest so hard she was sure it pierced her skin.

"Don't move. Just do as you're told."

His hand was on the remnants of her T-shirt, ready to rip it off her body. The material cut into the

back of her neck. She jerked away from him, only to be yanked forward. The strong cotton knit didn't tear so easily. Bill let her go. With a smack she fell back against the tree. He pulled a knife from his belt and shoved it through the material. She felt the tip of the knife scrape her skin. He was about to slice through the sleeves of her shirt when suddenly he doubled over.

A loud moan escaped from his lips and bloody froth dotted his mouth. The gun dropped when he clutched his stomach and lay near her feet.

Carefully, her fingers edged toward the gun until she felt the hot metal. She grabbed it and mustered all her strength to jump up and point the gun at the squirming man.

He suddenly vomited, covering the sand with blood and bile. The stench was terrible.

Natalie, still pointing the gun, slowly backed away. Bill collapsed to the ground, too ill to notice her retreat. She stopped to scan the area and noticed a pride of lions not too far away. The lionesses waited patiently while the cubs played around them, but the lion stalked back and forth. A soft growl rumbled from his throat while he waited for the human to die. It was as if natural instinct told him that the man would not live long.

Remembering Ryan's words, "If you see a lion or tiger family, keep very still. If you run or move, they'll attack." Slowly she sank to her knees, her legs like rubber as they folded beneath her.

She knelt on the hard, crusty soil and tried to still her trembling body. Bill writhed on the ground until his body went into spasms, froth bubbling from blue lips. The spasms slowly subsided until he lay very still. His eyes stared sightlessly up at the blue sky. Nearby, the overturned canteen leaked the tainted water into the dry soil.

The lion snorted, almost as if in acknowledgment that the man was dead. He bounded toward the body. Natalie kept very still. The great beast turned to stare at Natalie with golden eyes before he sniffed the body. She hardly dared to breathe as his gaze held her. Then, almost casually, he turned away and sniffed the dead man. As if he knew that the man was poisoned, he slowly, majestically walked away from Bill and approached Greg's body. He lay down and sank his mighty fangs into Greg's flesh and tore out dripping chunks.

Natalie shuddered. She felt sick and tasted vomit rising in her throat. Unwilling to witness more, she closed her eyes and waited. She heard the grunts and growls as the lion filled his stomach. Then she heard the lioness and her cubs approach and feast on the leftovers.

Time seemed suspended while she waited. The blazing sun beat down on her head. Dizziness attacked in waves and she fought to stay upright and conquer the approaching faint. Ryan, where are you? her mind cried. Oh, God, please help me. Direct Ryan to this place. Save me from these wild animals – She prayed silently expecting the lion's claws and his fangs to sink into her throat at any moment. For now, he had his fill from Greg's body, but soon – he'd want more and she would be the next target.

The lion didn't attack her. Satiated, the pride lay beneath the tree to guard their food. Vultures swooped down to feast on the remains, but each time they came close, the lion jumped up and chased them away.

Natalie kept her eyes closed but heard it all. If she succumbed to the hot sun and fainted she knew her last moments would come, so she summoned all her strength to remain in the Buddha position. Her legs and feet felt numb and her back ached from sitting immobile. A chorus of drums beat relentlessly in her head. She knew she could not last much longer as the sun's rays burned on her head, her skin, her exposed breasts.

The earth trembled beneath her. Her eyelids flew open to see a herd of elephants approaching in the distance. The lion raised his head and growled, then reluctantly, followed by the lioness and cubs, slunk away out of the path of the herd. Thankfulness entered her heart that she had been saved for the moment. But only for the moment, because surely she'd be trampled to death by the elephants. Then her eyes fell on Greg's savaged body. Her mind swam and everything turned black before her eyes. She could no longer fight the effects of her ordeal and succumbed to the darkness.

## Chapter Twenty

yan stretched. An inner instinct woke him up at the same time each morning. Usually he got up immediately, but this morning he put his hand under his head and thought about the night of love he'd just experienced. A lazy smile played on his lips. The book wouldn't be so hard to write after all. Like riding a bicycle, he'd not forgotten the art of making love. But do I really want to get married? I know that in the heat of the moment I promised we'd be together forever. But marriage? he thought wistfully. Marriage will interfere with my writing. I know it will. Maybe Natalie and I can be just very close friends. This book is just an experiment. It probably won't sell well and my publisher will want my old style back. Natalie will have played her role in my life and gone back to Canada. Both of us will go on with our lives like before –

Angry at his rather selfish thoughts, his publisher and the upheaval that Natalie had caused in his life, he unzipped the sleeping bag and crawled out of his tent. He stretched and gazed up at the chablis sky for a moment and listened to the birds' morning song before his eyes were drawn to Natalie's tent.

"What the hell—" In seconds he was examining the

gaping hole in its side. Roughly, he pulled it open to display the vacant interior. His trained eyes spotted footprints in the soft river sand. Large feet had left them there. Male feet.

Ryan wasted no time. He shouted loud enough to wake the whole forest, "Basilio, Kwame, get up. Natalie is gone!"

Basilio and Kwame were beside him in seconds. They didn't need to ask questions. The gaping hole in Natalie's tent and the footprints in the sand told the story. Minutes later, they were packed and ready to follow the trail. "Who do you think did it, Ryan?" Kwame asked.

His face was grim when he answered. "His face was grim as he answered. "He wore boots or shoes." He zipped up his bag and got an arm through a loop. "Her ex-boyfriend?" The backpack on his back, he started to run along the clear trail, continuing "But how'd he find us? Or survive here?"

The three men settled into a smooth lope. Basilio puffed "Two men."

Kwame added "Not slavers. There'd be more tracks, more men."

"They won't have gotten far," Ryan tossed back over his shoulder.'

"I knew it was folly to take a woman along," Kwame muttered while he followed the footprints to the edge of the forest.

"Folly or not, I'm responsible for her safety and we have to find her," Ryan snapped. "Don't worry. It's the last time we'll ever take a woman with us."

"Famous last words," Basilio said softly.

"What was that, Basilio?" Ryan looked at Basilio suspiciously.

"Eh—I agree with Kwame," Basilio quickly changed his statement.

They grabbed their rifles and the backpack that contained the medical supplies. It didn't take long for them to find the trail the kidnappers left in the forest. Rough hacking at foliage and shrubbery left very clear directions. Ryan drove them relentlessly. Fear of the unknown was always exhilarating for him, but this time he was consumed by a deeper fear. For the first time in his life, he was afraid for someone else. Someone he cared for very deeply and didn't want to lose.

"They've been going in circles," Kwame finally spoke up.

"Yes. It's obvious that whoever kidnapped her have no idea where they're going. We can't be too far behind them. They took her some time between three and six."

Kwame and Basilio glanced at each other with a knowing look. They both knew that Natalie had joined Ryan in his tent. The night sounds of the forest had not dulled the sounds of passionate lovemaking they'd heard coming from the tent.

For hours they followed the trail of cut foliage and branches. The kidnappers had hacked their way through the forest, destroying whatever was in their path.

Their quest became more difficult when they left the forest and crossed the veld. The hard, crusty soil didn't leave traces of footprints. They had to search for crushed twigs of dry grass. Scattered bits of waste, a chewing gum wrapper and cigarette butts helped to point the direction the kidnappers had taken.

The hot midday sun beat down on them relentlessly. Ryan refused to rest. He drove on, even when Basilio and Kwame complained and threatened to turn back if he didn't stop for five minutes. Exasperated, they followed him.

A shot echoed back to them. Ryan stopped dead in his tracks. A second shot followed. They knew then they were on the right track and not too far behind the kidnappers. The shots caused Ryan's heart to beat loud with fear. Had they killed Natalie? Or had they shot an animal? He started to run.

"Ryan, slow down. You'll kill yourself running like that in this heat. You won't be any good to Natalie if you keep this up."

"God knows what they're doing to her," he said through clenched teeth.

"They probably just shot a snake or something," Basilio said to calm Ryan's fears. Deep down, he too was afraid for Natalie, but he tried to stay optimistic for Ryan's sake. "Why would they bother taking her this far, only to kill her?"

"She's a stubborn wench. If she puts up any resistance, they just might."

Kwame shook his head. "If your suspicions are correct and it's her ex that kidnapped her, then why would he kill her? You're not making sense, Ryan."

"Nothing makes sense," Ryan snapped.

A herd of elephants crossed their path, forcing them to stop. Impatiently, Ryan cracked his knuckles.

The elephants were in no hurry. He watched as their large feet crushed any evidence of humans who had trodden the ground. The herd changed direction.

The three men followed at a safe distance without any idea now if they were going in the right direction until they found more flattened cigarette butts.

The herd finally headed away from them in a different direction. Ryan soon knew why. Vultures shot up into the sky, squawking loudly at the rude interruption of their meal. His heart sank when he spotted the water hole and the bodies scattered around it. Some distance away, a pride of lions lay licking their chops. He started to run, with Kwame and Basilio following closely on his heels. Dead—she's gone—the words echoed through his now numbed mind. Pain shot through his heart when he saw her lying a distance away from the scene of carnage. She resembled a crumpled, naked broken doll.

He bolted toward Natalie in a glance noticing that she wasn't hurt and held his breath when he knelt next to her and felt her neck for a pulse. It beat, albeit erratically, under his fingers and his breath slowly escaped accompanied by a grateful sob.

He swallowed hard to hide his emotions. "She's alive," he shouted to Kwame and Basilio. "Bring me the medical kit!"

The two men rushed to join Ryan. Basilio handed him the kit. "The two men are dead. One is so mutilated by the lions he's unrecognizable," he said.

Carefully, Ryan cradled Natalie in his arms and forced drops of water between her parched lips.

Basilio and Kwame concentrated on her cut and blistered feet.

"Ryan, we can't stay here too long. Look over there." Basilio pointed behind him.

Ryan looked at the lion and his family. The lion growled and stalked restlessly back and forth. "They're the cause of the torn carcass of the one male. We'll have to carry her. She'll be too weak to walk anyway."

"He was shot through the head. I don't know how the other one died. The animals haven't touched that one."

Ryan nodded. "Strange. It's a miracle they didn't attack Natalie." A soft moan escaped her lips when he forced more water down her throat. "Natalie, honey, we're here. Natalie-"

Her eyelids flickered. For a moment she shut them tight against the bright sun. "Am I dead?" she whispered softly.

Ryan's laugh rumbled through his chest. "No, thank God you're not. I guess the good Lord doesn't want a stubborn wench like you," he quipped.

Her eyes opened to gaze up at him. "Ryan? You found me. I'm so thirsty."

"Here, drink some water." He held the canteen to her lips and she gulped greedily. "Easy, now. You're dehydrated. Kwame, take some clothes out of that damn flight bag she insisted on carrying along all this way, will you?"

Natalie struggled to sit up. "I can walk."

"No you can't. Your feet are cut and blistered. We'll go back to the river and make camp for a few days to give you a chance to heal. We'll take turns carrying you," he said while he pulled a pair of shorts over her legs.

"Ryan, the lion – "

"Is waiting impatiently to return to his food. The elephants caused them to move to a safe distance but now they're getting restless, so we'd better get a move on."

"The diamonds. Get the diamonds out of his pocket."

Ryan frowned. "Diamonds? What are you talking about?"

"Not Greg's. The other man who hasn't been savaged has the diamonds. He drank from the water and -"

"That explains why he died and the lion hasn't touched him. That water is no good, probably poisoned. Put your arms around my neck." Carefully he pulled her up to standing position then tugged her legs around his waist. Placing his hands under her buttocks, he started to walk. "Basilio, go through that man's pockets and take any identification or whatever else you find. Don't bother with the other one. Natalie knows him." He started to walk away slowly. "Hurry, and don't run. That beast is eyeing us with too much interest."

"Aren't you—aren't you going to bury them?" Natalie asked, trying to stifle a sob.

"Honey, we have to get away from here. The lion will attack us if we try to move those bodies," Ryan said.

Querulous growls followed them as they started to

walk away from the bodies. Ryan glanced behind him several times. Basilio and Kwame had their rifles ready in case of an attack. The lionesses and their cubs returned to the water hole, but the lion followed the humans for a short distance. Then the magnificent beast stood still and watched until he was sure they would not return. Ryan was glad that the animals had had their fill, because it would have been unlikely that they could have left so easily.

Feeling safe at least, Natalie leaned her head against Ryan's broad shoulder. It didn't take long for her eyes to close and she fell into an exhausted sleep.

When Kwame took over the task of carrying her, she didn't wake up. "Is she all right, Ryan?" he said while Ryan transferred his precious cargo.

"Yes, she'll be all right. She's in shock. All she needs now is sleep and when she wakes, food. She's a strong gal. She'll survive this."

## Chapter Twenty-One

he trek back to the river was slow and difficult. The task of carrying Natalie made it even harder. They didn't follow the trail Greg and Bill had made. That trail meandered, so they had to cut their own trail through the thick foliage.

Because her sleep was so deep, Natalie constantly slid off his back so Ryan finally tied her hands together.

The sky was already blushing a salmon pink when they eventually arrived back at the river. Kwame set about patching Natalie's tent with Basilio's help. Ryan sat with Natalie cradled in his arms until Basilio and Kwame were done. "I'm going to take her to the pond to wash the dirt and blood off her body. Kwame, you keep watch. Basilio, go find us something to eat?"

"Sure you don't want my help, Ryan?" Basilio quipped with a broad grin.

"I'll manage," Ryan growled.

When he removed her shorts and shredded T-shirt, Ryan realized that Natalie was close to unconsciousness caused by shock. Her mouth was slack, her dry lips slightly parted. Her legs and arms flopped like a rag doll as he approached the rocks. This wasn't just a deep sleep. He was deeply worried about her; about what impact this terrible experience would have on her mind. Her body would heal, but was she strong enough to deal with her ordeal? He stood before the rocks for a moment and shook his head. It was impossible to carry her up the rocks and climb down to the pond, so he carried her to the river.

He waded into the cooling water until he was waist deep, then lowered her into it until only her face was above the surface. Gently, as if he were washing a baby, he rinsed her hair, then washed the caked-on dirt and blood from her arms and legs, all the while supporting her with one arm.

Hesitantly, his hands tenderly washed her breasts, back and buttocks, then her slit. It felt good to touch her there, but he washed her quickly because of her unawareness of what he was doing. It felt like an invasion of her privacy. He was about to lift her out of the water when she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Ryan—it wasn't a dream then—you're real—" she said softly. So soft was her voice that he could barely hear her above the roar of the waterfall.

"Yes, my darling. You're safe now," he said and bent down to kiss her on the forehead, a weight lifted from his heart that she wasn't in a coma. He lifted her to hold her against his broad chest.

Natalie felt overwhelmed. For the first time, she allowed her tears to flow freely. Softly, she sobbed against his chest. His large hand held her head against him tightly. They stood like that for a long time, until Natalie had spilled her grief. Darkness descended. Ryan felt a huge shudder go through her body and cradled her tightly in his arms. He carried her to shore.

"You need to eat and drink something, my love," he said loud enough for her to hear, but his voice was filled with tenderness. "And lots of sleep."

Never before had he felt so protective. All thoughts of ending their relationship before it had barely started had left him for the moment. He never wanted to let her go.

He walked back to the campsite cradling the naked woman in his arms. Modesty was not part of jungle life and Kwame and Basilio hardly glanced at her nude body.

"Is she all right then, Ryan?" Kwame asked.

"Yes, she'll be fine. I'm going to put her in her tent now. Did you find some food?"

"I found some fruit. Here is fresh water. I got it from the falls." Basilio handed him some wild mangoes and a cup of water.

Ryan set Natalie on her feet. When she swayed, he held her to stop her from falling. "Get into your tent, love. You need to rest now."

He followed her into the small tent, turned on his flashlight and put the water and mangoes down next to the sleeping bag. He helped her get into it.

In the dim light he saw that her eyelids were heavy and drooping. "No, darling, you need to drink and eat something. You can't sleep yet. Later you can sleep all you want." Quickly he cut the mango in four pieces and cut chunks of the flesh. He fed her like a child. After eating almost all of one mango, she shook her head.

"No more, now – thirsty – "

She drank the whole cup of water. Satisfied now that she'd be all right, he kissed her on the forehead. "Sleep, my love. Tomorrow you'll feel ever so much better."

Her small hand grabbed his hair and pulled him down. "No, stay with me – please, Ryan –"

He nodded. "Okay. Just let me tell Basilio and Kwame that I'm turning in."

He stuck his head out of the tent. "Guys, I'm turning in, too. She wants me to stay."

"And we hear him protesting loudly," Kwame said with a grin. "Goodnight, Ryan. Put some salve on those cuts and scrapes. I found some roots in the forest. Put some of their juice on the cuts first. They'll heal faster." He handed Ryan the tube of ointment and a piece of root.

Ryan pulled the zipper closed. He opened the sleeping bag and squeezed juice from the root on her many lacerations, then applied salve. The beam of the flashlight picked up a dark bruise between her breasts and a small round cut. Anger welled within him when he thought of someone else's hands on her breasts. He put some of the juice and salve on the area and cupped her breast for just a moment. "You're so beautiful," he said softly. Desire stirred in his loins. He quickly zipped up the sleeping bag, then lay down beside her and took her in his arms, sleeping bag and all.

"I love you, Ryan," she murmured sleepily while

her eyes were already closing.

He shut off the flashlight then cradled her head against his chest. "I love you too, honey. Sleep now."

"Yes-Ryan, we'll have beautiful children-" she murmured against his neck. "They'll have black hair and brown eyes and -" her voice trailed off. She was asleep but this time it was a healthy, healing sleep.

Now that she was safely back in his arms, her words disturbed him and even though he was exhausted, sleep would not come immediately. He loved this woman with all his heart, but a permanent commitment? Children? He was too old to start a family now.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

atalie slept all night. When Ryan woke in the morning and gently removed her arm from around his neck, she didn't stir. Worried about her, he lifted her eyelids but the pupils were normal. She was only asleep. He crawled out of the tent quietly, planning to spend the day writing.

Usually he wandered off to a quiet spot to write his notes, but this time he sat close to Natalie's tent in case she woke up. She didn't wake until late afternoon.

"Well, this trip should give you plenty to write about, Ryan!" Basilio said with a grin while he cooked a wild rabbit over the fire.

"Yes. I got quite a bit done today," Ryan murmured absentmindedly while he pondered on the love scene he had just described on paper and hoped to make real when she woke up and felt better. "What did you find in that man's pockets?"

"Diamonds. Pretty little rocks. Lots of them."

Ryan frowned. "Natalie mentioned diamonds just before she passed out again. We'll have to wait till she wakes to hear the whole story." "What story?" Natalie's soft voice said behind him.

Ryan jumped up noting that she was dressed in shorts and a top. "How are you? Are you okay?" He put out a hand to help her sit down but she shook her head.

"Except for my feet, I'm fine now. I've slept enough to last me a week. I can sit down on my own, Ryan. Please don't treat me any different than before," she said softly.

"You're a brave woman," he said.

Natalie saw admiration in his brown eyes and basked in it for a moment. "I don't feel so brave. If the three of you hadn't come along, I don't know what would have happened. Until Bill killed him, Greg wanted to rape me. Then after Greg was dead, Bill was ready to rape and then kill me. And then the lions." She shuddered. "They had their fill for the moment, but I'm sure if I'd have moved they would have had me for dinner that night. You got there just in time." She looked at the rabbit Basilio was roasting over the fire. "I'm starving. That smells good, Basilio."

Ryan grinned. "That's my gal," he said proudly. "You're a lot tougher than you look, Natalie." He handed her a mango and his knife. "Here, munch on this while the rabbit roasts."

She devoured the mango within minutes. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she asked, "The lion and his family? You didn't shoot them, did you? I'm surprised they left me alone. But I did what you said. I sat like a statue and didn't make a sound."

His lazy smile warmed her.

"No, we didn't shoot them. The herd of elephants

chased them away from the waterhole. The lion watched from a distance and waited till the elephants were well out of sight and it gave us a chance to grab you and leave. The lion followed us for a bit, but then he went back to his meal."

She shivered. "Good. Poor Greg. What an awful thing, to be eaten by wild animals. I hate to say it, but it's a good thing he was already dead. Bill died because he drank from that pool."

"It's the law of the jungle, Natalie," Ryan said. "You know, I'm puzzled about how those men managed to find us. Maybe they've been tracking us all along. Now tell us about the diamonds?"

"They were hidden in my flight bag. Before we left your penthouse, I talked to Mom. She told me that Greg mentioned to her that there was something he wanted in my flight bag. I couldn't imagine what it was and dismissed it. Turned out that the flight bag he bought me as a gift after I lost my old one had a false bottom in it. He has been using me to smuggle diamonds."

"Ah, and you decided to take the flight bag along and that's why you got yourself in this mess. You should have listened to me and left it behind. It would have avoided all of this."

"And then they would have harassed Mamete and Tomy. Bill was a killer. He shot Greg because of his greed, and he probably would have killed them, too, had the diamonds been in your apartment," she snapped.

"The lady is back to normal," Ryan growled. "And what you just said, worries me. How did they find out about our route, unless they did go to my place – How are your feet, Natalie? And the cuts?"

Her voice softened. "They're fine, thanks to your ministrations. I should be able to wear shoes again soon. My God, Ryan, I hope they didn't harm Mamete and Tomy."

"We'll find out soon enough. When we pick up the Jeeps, I'll phone home. We'll stay here for a few days until you're healed. You can make notes and I'll write. We can all do with some rest." Ryan prodded the rabbit while he spoke. "Is that rabbit done yet, Basilio?"

"Did you bring the flight bag back with you?" Natalie asked, remembering certain items that she'd need soon.

"Women," Ryan sighed and shook his head. "We had enough to carry. The backpack, and you of course. And you're no lightweight," he said teasingly.

"I'm so sorry," Natalie snapped. "Maybe you should have just left me there to be devoured by the lion."

"If you act that way, then maybe we shouldn't have wasted the time," Ryan retorted, playing with her.

"Oh, you're such an insufferable man. I can't imagine I ever—" She stopped herself just in time as she realized her foolish question about the flight bag. Not wanting to admit her mistake, she stood up and winced at the pain in her feet.

"I'm going to bathe," she announced and wobbled to her tent to get clean clothing.

Ryan chuckled. "The lady is as stubborn as a

mule," he said softly.

He waited until she'd disappeared around the bend, giving her enough time to get undressed and get into the water before he followed her.

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Basilio cut a slice of meat off the now roasted rabbit and pierced it with a stick. He handed it to Kwame and grinned. "We may as well eat. Those two won't be back for a while."

"Thanks. Do you think they'll get married?" Kwame asked.

"I don't know. If they do, we'll be out of a job for sure. Unless, of course, the lady likes jungle life so much she'll encourage Ryan to continue writing his stories about life in the jungles."

Kwame smirked at that statement. "I doubt it. After the experience she just went through, she'll go back to Canada and will never set foot in Africa again."

#### Chapter Twenty-Three

yan tried to tell himself that the only reason he followed her was to make sure she was safe, that he only wanted to protect her.

He walked to the water's edge and almost panicked when he saw her floating face down. Just as he yanked his shirt over his head, he saw her dive, surface again and swim with lazy strokes toward the falls. He let his breath out. "Damn it, woman, don't scare me like that," he muttered, at the same time admiring her for her strength. Except for her sore feet, scrapes and bruises, she seemed none the worse for wear after her harrowing experience.

For a while he watched her antics in the water, until he could stand it no longer. In seconds, he stripped and waded into the water to join her.

Natalie surfaced. Out of the corner of her eye, she'd spotted Ryan. A wild abandonment invaded her. The man so often aggravated her with his remarks, but she knew that it was partly her fault. She'd been in no mood for his lightweight remark. It was half a joke, but deep down she knew that carrying an unconscious person through the jungle must have been an exhausting experience for the three men. She understood that after what she experienced, to ask if they remembered her flight bag was frivolous, but she knew she would soon need her sanitary protection.

She deliberately kept her back to him though she heard the splashing of his strong arms as he approached. When his arms pulled her against him thrill upon thrill invaded her body. The need for him was so great that she almost felt disgusted at her wanton desire.

Slowly, he turned her to face him. He gently massaged her breasts and tweaked her nipples while his lips brushed hers. His cock, harder than ever, pressed against her belly. Her hand crept between them to encase it. A long sigh escaped her lips as she felt it throb and pulse within the palm of her hand. He cupped her buttocks and pulled her up until she could feel the tip of his cock probing, searching. Slowly he pushed her down. She wrapped her legs around him and her arms around his neck.

His strong legs treaded water. The movement caused him to move within her while his hands pressed her buttocks down hard. She buried her face in his neck. Never before had she felt such urgent desire, such wanton abandonment or such a need for a man to fill her. It was almost as if her narrow escape from certain death had heightened her senses. Her scream of release was lost in the sound of the falls.

Without letting go of her, Ryan swam to the river's edge. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bank where he lowered her down on the warm sand. "I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear while he nibbled tenderly on the lobe. "And we did rescue your flight bag."

She took his face between her hands and pulled his lips toward her own while she gazed deep into the depth of his dark eyes. "I'm sorry too, my love," she said against his lips. "It was my fault."

He lay beside her and pulled her into his arms. "I thought I'd lost you," he said while playing with her hair. "Thank God we got there in time."

The happiness in her eyes clouded for a moment. "The sight of Greg's mangled body will stay with me for a long time, Ryan."

"Yes. It wasn't a pretty sight. The law of the jungle can be harsh."

"I'm hungry," she said only to be silenced by his lips.

His kiss was urgent, prompted by a different kind of hunger. It spoke of a need that could only be stilled by her love. Gently he massaged her breasts until she begged for more, for his mouth to take her nipples. Arching upward she almost shoved them into his mouth, first one, then the other. He sucked hard until they peaked as hard as they could become. Squeezing hard at the base of her breasts he watched as her nipples looked bigger than ever. One would hardly think this frail woman had just gone through an ordeal the way she urged him on. Her small hands on his cock almost caused him to come again. He had to use all his strength to save himself for her. He sucked each nipple briefly, then trailed kisses down her stomach. He sucked her bellybutton for a moment and continued down to the valley of delights.

In utter abandonment she opened her legs for him, very wide. He wished it was daylight so he could behold the sweetness of her, but in the twilight of evening the flesh between the dusky lips was a deep rose, the inner lips almost black. He parted them wide and gazed at her vagina. A trickle of pearly liquid ran down her cleft. Quickly, he bent and licked it, savoring the musky taste of her cum. He licked the folds then sucked her clit. It was hard as a rosebud, pulsing, begging for more. Her hips arched up pushing hard against his mouth.

When his tongue entered her he heard her gasp. He twirled his tongue inside her, feeling the silkiness of the inner walls of her vagina, and knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

"Turn around," she called out.

He looked up at her and realized what she meant. He swiveled his body until his cock was above her mouth and within seconds she circled the head with her tongue, then took him into her mouth fully. He pushed down a little, wondering how far she could take him that way. As her lips closed around his cock, she sucked at the same time moving the skin back and forth with her hand, he could hardly contain himself. Utter willpower stopped him from coming right then. He wanted her to come as well, so he buried his face in the sweet fur between her legs and sucked hard on her pussy.

She pushed up against his mouth wanting his tongue, so he entered her for a moment, but knew she needed more. While sucking her clit, he parted the lips wide and entered her with three fingers. She sucked his cock harder and the movement of his skin became fierce.

He came then. There was no stopping anymore, and as his cum squirted into her mouth and she swallowed, he tasted her sweet juices and like her, sucked them into his mouth and swallowed them.

Never in his life had he had sex like this. Never had a woman done this for him. His cock became flaccid, but still she held him in her mouth and he stroked her clit softly, tenderly, raining kisses in between the fragile folds and on her clit.

Finally, she let go of his cock and nudged him to turn around. He took her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest.

They hardly noticed that darkness had descended. Their love fulfilled for the time being, they lay quietly in each other's arms, until Natalie asked softly, "Ryan, what happened to you in the orphanage that pains you so much?

He drew away from her and looked into her eyes. For moments he basked in the love that shone from them before he answered. "Honey, that's the past. I really prefer not to talk about it. Let's just say it was a bad experience that has left lasting scars."

"I'm sorry."

"I survived," he said with a wry smile. "How about you? Did you love Greg very much?" he asked.

"No. For a long time I thought I did, but when he cheated on me I knew that I only stuck with him out of habit. I realized later I never really loved him. Not like I do you. But I do feel terrible about his death," she said softly.

"Your marriage?" he asked.

"Same thing. He couldn't be trusted at all. I was too young when I married him, I guess. Love soon flew out the window when I also caught him cheating on me." She paused for a moment. "Ryan, what about you? You said there was a woman in your life. What happened?"

"That was a long time ago. While I was on my first expedition she married another man. I found out about it when I returned."

"So like me, you were hurt, too, and you've not been able to trust a woman ever since," Natalie concluded.

"I suppose," he said and claimed her lips in a deep kiss.

"The rabbit Basilio cooked will be cold by now," he murmured against her lips.

"I like cold meat," she replied, "but the mosquitoes are starting to like me, too."

He grinned and jumped up. "We'd better wash the sand off our bodies." Without further ado, he picked her up and ran with her into the river. This time, they played and frolicked as if they were in their teens.

Hand in hand they walked back to the campsite. Kwame sat by the fire. Movement in Basilio's tent indicated that he had already retired for the night.

"Are there any leftovers?" Ryan asked.

Kwame pointed at the rabbit on the spit. "If you like blackened meat," he said with a smirk. "Basilio found some coconuts and guavas."

"Great. Kwame, will you get me the medical kit please? The sooner Natalie's feet heal, the better. I'm anxious to get home to write my book."

They slept together that night, wrapped in each other's arms, though after sleeping all day, it took Natalie a long time before she finally drifted off. *Home*, she thought. *Ryan's home*. *Will our feelings be the same once we're back in Johannesburg? Is it this primitive existence that started our wild love? When we're back in the civilized world, will Ryan propose to me?* 

# Chapter Twenty-Four

hey camped beside the river three more days. Natalie's feet healed fast, in fact, faster than she thought they would. She didn't know if it was because of Ryan's gentle administrations, the healing waters of the river, or the juice of the roots Basilio kept finding for her in the forest.

Ryan spent many hours making notes and had her write about her ordeal. She knew by now that she could not disturb him while he was working on his book, so she would either write her own notes or swim.

Kwame and Basilio were becoming restless. They knew Ryan had everything he needed to complete his novel and their adventure was over for that year. They wanted to go home to their wives and families.

It took them three days to reach the small outpost. Their trek was uneventful and tiring. Natalie's feet were healed, but still tender. Much to Kwame's and Basilio's annoyance, they had to stop a number of times so she could rest and to tend to her feet.

Ryan ignored their grumbles about taking women along on their trips and the next time they might as well make it a family affair. There may not be a next time, he thought. If this book doesn't sell, it could be the end of my writing career.

It was as if Natalie read his thoughts. "Ryan, have you ever thought about writing stories set in other places? Like the Amazon, for instance. You'd find lots of material there. The Amazonian tribes and the rain forest would give you plenty of writing material. I've never been there but I've watched documentaries and it would make a change from what you've been writing. And you could take Kwame and Basilio along. They've been with you a long time."

The thought had crossed his mind, but somehow the pull of the African jungle was always too great. It always lured him back. "If this book doesn't sell, Natalie, it could be the end of my career."

"It'll be a great book. If you fictionalize it, as the publisher asked, it should sell well."

"We're almost at the outpost," he said, his voice tainted with regret.

Natalie caught it and tried to fight her own reluctance to leave jungle life behind and the sweet love she experienced there.

Only at night had he taken her in his arms and murmured words of love. But was it only lust? It was as if with the end of their trip drawing near, his love was dying slowly. Once again, he became the cynical, arrogant man she had first met on the plane.

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Natalie watched the helicopter disappear in the

distance. Suddenly she felt forlorn. Her big adventure had not taken as long as she expected, and the thought of going back to the city filled her with a dread she could not understand.

The two Jeeps were caked with dust. Ryan drew his finger over the hood and frowned. "Strange. Usually, Jan washes them on a regular basis. Matter of fact, things are rather quiet around here." He left his backpack on the ground next to his Jeep and walked to the store. The usually open door was closed. He turned the handle, but it didn't open. He peered through the grimy window and couldn't see any movement inside.

With a sigh he walked to the stairs that led to Jan's and Poppie's apartment above and climbed them. He pounded on the door.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," Poppie's voice sounded from inside.

Basilio, Kwame and Natalie waited by the Jeeps. Natalie saw the door open and Poppie come out. She had lost a considerable amount of weight and her face looked haggard. Natalie could see, even from a distance, that Poppie had been ill.

"Poppie, what's up? Are you sick? Where is Jan?" Ryan asked. "The store looks as if it has been closed for days."

"It has, Ryan. Jan is gone," Poppie said unable to stem her tears.

"Gone? You mean he left?" Ryan growled.

"No. A couple of weeks after you left here two men came. One of them shot Jan. They were looking for you and the woman, Ryan. The police want to talk to you." She angrily wiped the tears streaking her face.

"Oh, my God, I'm so sorry, Poppie!" Ryan said. He hugged the woman and patted her awkwardly on the back. "I know the two men you're talking about. They're dead now."

"You killed them? Good for you," she sobbed on his shoulder.

"The jungle took care of them. Those assholes almost got Natalie, too."

Poppie moved out of his arms to look over the balustrade. "I'm sorry. Why don't you all come in for a cup of iced tea? You can phone the police from here."

"Sounds like a great idea. I'll go and get the others," Ryan said and started to walk down the stairs.

"Maybe you'd like a home-cooked meal, too?" Poppie called after him.

"That sounds even better, Poppie. We'll be there in a minute."

"What's up, Ryan?" Basilio asked.

"Those bastards killed Jan. "As I suspected, they got hold of my route. That means they were at my place. Oh, Lord, I hope they didn't hurt Tomy and Mamete."

Natalie felt faint. She leaned against the Jeep to steady herself. "It's all my fault. I feel terrible, Ryan. If I hadn't come along on your excursion, none of this would have happened."

"Don't be silly. In that case it's my fault, not yours, as I'm the one who hired you. And you didn't know that fool ex-fiancé of yours was smuggling diamonds in your bag. If anyone is to blame, it's me. Now pull yourself together. Poppie doesn't need any of this. She wants us to come in for a meal. And I have to call the police."

"Did Greg kill Jan?" Natalie asked in a trembling voice. Though she had developed disgust for Greg, the thought that she was engaged to a killer all that time was too horrible to contemplate.

"I don't know. I'm sure we'll hear the whole story soon."

They followed Ryan in silence. Once inside Poppie's apartment, Natalie hugged the woman. No words were necessary. Deep down, she hoped that it was Bill who shot Jan, and not Greg, though no matter which of the two murdered the man, she still felt responsible.

Poppie clung to her. Natalie sensed the woman's grief and loneliness. Bitter remorse filled her heart that she was the cause of all this heartache. "Poppie, I'm so sorry. If there is anything I can do, please tell me," she said softly.

Poppie stepped out of Natalie's embrace and smiled, though the smile did not erase the sadness in her eyes. "Thank you, Natalie. No, there is nothing anyone can do now. Jan is gone and life goes on. Please, sit down. Ryan, you may use the telephone to call the police." She served them each a glass of iced tea and busied herself in the kitchen.

It took Ryan a while to get through to the police. Natalie quietly listened to his conversation but when she heard a pot crash to the floor in the kitchen, she jumped up to find Poppie in tears. "Poppie, do you need some help?"

"Stupid pot. It slipped from my hands. I'm sorry. I seem to cry at everything lately," she tried to smile through her tears while she spoke.

"I understand. Here, let me pick up the potatoes," Natalie said and started to retrieve the potatoes that rolled in all directions. "Poppie, what happened that horrible day?" she asked when she set the pot on the sink. "If you don't want to talk about it, it's okay—"

"I don't mind. It's good to have some company. I get far too lonely here." Poppie paused to take a head of lettuce out of the fridge. "They wanted information about you and Ryan. We couldn't tell them much except when the Jeeps were left here and that you'd all gone into the jungle. Then the one man wanted to know where you were heading and we couldn't tell them because we didn't know. He became very angry and started hitting us. How could we tell him anything? And then the skinny man shot Jan. He wanted to shoot me too, but the other one stopped him."

"The skinny one?" Natalie asked. "Was his name Bill?"

"Yes, I think so. I was in such a state I don't remember the details. They shoved me against the shelves and cans fell on my head. I was unconscious for a long time. When I finally came out of it, I had to slither on the floor like a snake to get to some broken glass. Somehow I managed to cut my bonds."

Natalie felt relieved. Though she had lost all respect for Greg, she was gratified that at least it wasn't he who pulled the trigger. "What are you going to do now, Poppie? Are you going to open up the store again?"

"No. It's up for sale. After it's sold, I plan to move back to Pretoria and live close to my family."

"That will be better for you. I'm so glad you have family to support you, Poppie," Natalie said.

"We've not seen each other for a long time. But we keep telephone contact. Do you like meatloaf, Natalie?"

Natalie smiled. "Poppie, right now any home cooked meal will taste like a gourmet dinner from the classiest restaurant on earth."

Poppie turned down the boiling potatoes and started the peas and carrots. "What did you eat all the time you were in the jungle?"

"Wild rabbit, or sometimes a bird of some kind. And fruit, lots of fruit and coconut."

"How did you cook?"

"Over a fire. The meat or fowl was very bland, but after a while I didn't miss salt or spices anymore. I must admit that at times I longed for a hearty steak, vegetables and a baked potato, or even a juicy hamburger and fries."

"That makes my meatloaf sound quite plain," Poppie said wistfully.

"Your meatloaf will taste like the best tenderloin on this planet."

Before long, the teasing aroma of baking meatloaf tickled her nostrils. Her stomach agreed with her words. It growled and rumbled, asking for the kind of food it had not seen for weeks.

While Poppie tended to an apple pie, Natalie

mashed the potatoes. Suddenly, Poppie asked her, "Natalie, are you and Ryan in love?"

Natalie's hand stopped in mid air. "What makes you ask that, Poppie?"

"Just the way he looks at you and you at him. "Are you getting married?"

"He hasn't asked me," Natalie said with a rueful grin. "I hope he will when we get back to Johannesburg."

"I hope so too. That man has been alone far too long."

Natalie dropped some butter into the pot and continued to mash. "He's very closed about his past. I think he's been badly hurt when he was young and is afraid of commitment."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there. We've known him for years, but like you say, he's very closed about his personal life and we never probed." Poppie took the meatloaf out of the oven and put it on a platter. "Well, dinner is ready. I'll put the apple pie in the oven. Will you set the table?"

Ryan was still on the phone when Natalie started setting the table. She listened to his end of the conversation and heard they had to stop at the police station to give their statements. After he'd finished talking to the police, Ryan called home. Natalie heard by his answers that something had happened there. When he hung up, she asked, "Are Mamete and Tomy okay?"

"Yes, they are," he said through tight lips. "But Tomy needed stitches, they knocked the elevator attendant unconscious and those animals made a mess of the place. I'm just glad they're both alive. Tomy reported the assailants to the police. We'll have to go to the police station in Johannesburg, too, and make a statement."

"I feel terrible about it all. If only I hadn't – "

"Stop it, Natalie. It's over. It wasn't your fault. If anyone is to blame it's me. I'm the one who hired you."

During dinner, Poppie told the men what happened. She also mentioned that the store was up for sale and she couldn't leave until it had been sold.

She cut the pie and topped each wedge generously with vanilla ice cream. "It's getting late. Would you like to stay the night? That'll give you a good night's rest before heading back."

Ryan looked at Basilio and Kwame and then at Natalie. "What do you think? Shall we take a vote?" He didn't need to wait for them to answer. Each in turn nodded and smiled. They welcomed the chance to sleep in a normal bed--or at least the couch.

"Poppie, how much is the asking price for the store?" Ryan asked.

"I'm selling it outright. The goodwill, inventory, store and property are worth about fifty thousand rand. But I'll take any reasonable offer. Do you know someone who might be interested, Ryan?"

Natalie noticed his little secretive smile, even if no one else did. She wondered what he had in mind.

"Indeed, Poppie, I think I know someone that would be interested in buying you out. I'll work on it when I get back home," Ryan said in a reassuring tone. They talked till late at night. It was obvious that Poppie really suffered from loneliness and despair. By the time they all retired for the night, her spirits had lifted remarkably and she could actually laugh with them.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

hey stayed with Poppie two days. During that time, Natalie found Ryan distant and uncommunicative. Most of the time he seemed lost in a world of his own. It worried her. Several times she tried to prod him to find out if anything was bothering him, but all she got was a vague answer that his mind was already busy with the book. Poppie had given them the guestroom, and Basilio and Kwame slept in their sleeping bags in the living room on the couches. At night he made love to her quietly, but even during that intimacy, Natalie found him changed. Their sex was sex, that's all. It wasn't like it had been before.

Poppie cried when they said their good byes. Ryan patted her on the shoulder and said reassuringly, "Don't worry, Poppie. Soon you'll be with your friends and family. I promise I'll look after the sale of your property when we get back to Johannesburg."

Natalie waved until they rounded a bend and Poppie disappeared from sight. "Ryan, are you serious about knowing someone who would want to buy the property, or were you just trying to reassure Poppie?"

"I don't make idle promises, Natalie," he replied irritably.

"So you do really know someone then who would want to live there?"

"No. I'll buy the place myself so that Poppie can return to her family and friends."

"That's very generous of you. Why didn't you tell her that you were planning to buy it?"

"Because she would have refused my offer, knowing full well that I'd be doing it just to help her. I'll have my lawyer take care of it so that she doesn't know I bought it."

"I guess we have a lot of work ahead of us when we get back to your place," Natalie said trying to make conversation.

"I'll have a lot of work. You'll be free to do what you want until I've completed the first draft."

"How long will that take you?"

"One month, two months. Hell, I don't know. I'm sure you can find things to occupy your time. You can use the Jeep and go sightseeing while I'm working."

Natalie felt disappointed. She'd hoped to be working alongside him but when she thought about it she realized that Ryan would have to compile the first draft before she could do anything to help.

The drive back to Johannesburg was uneventful. After they stopped at the local police station and had handed over the diamonds and given their statements, they drove straight through, only stopping occasionally to pick up food and coffee. The closer they got to their destination, the deeper her feeling of dread and abandonment became. Ryan barely talked to her. It was almost a relief when Basilio took his turn driving because at least he chatted with her and pointed out areas of interest. Sleeping in the Jeep wasn't easy. She woke up constantly and thought she'd never appreciate a bed more.

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Ryan's thoughts were not on his book. They were on Natalie and the love he felt for her, but the idea of a permanent relationship frightened him. It gave him claustrophobic feelings. He knew she expected more, especially after he promised to love her forever, but could he give her more? Did he want to give her more? His indecision plagued him and caused his aloofness. He knew it bothered her, but at this point there was nothing he could do to ease her misgivings until he made a decision about their future together. Several times he wrote her a letter, only to tear it up again. Why was he having such difficulty communicating with her now?

It wasn't until they arrived in Johannesburg that Ryan decided that he did not want to get married. But neither did he want to lose her. How he would propose to keep their relationship free, he had no idea. It wasn't that he wanted to date other women

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and the thought of losing her was something he didn't even want to contemplate, but he just wanted her to stay with him as his secretary, as his partner, rather than his wife or fiancée. He had no idea what the future held. The jungle had an attraction, an inner pull that he couldn't fight. Even if he changed his style and wrote stories set in other locations, he'd always be drawn back to the jungles. Marriage would tie him down. Natalie would not want to accompany him all the time and neither would he want to leave her and so their relationship would suffer and possibly end in divorce. Neither of them could be happy that way. If they could retain a free relationship and not have to account to the other about their goings or comings, then it could possibly work.

After they arrived in Johannesburg, the four of them had lunch at a nice little restaurant and Ryan and Natalie said their goodbyes to Kwame and Basilio there. The two men were anxious to return to their families.

"Now begins the serious work, Natalie. Let's go to the police station and then home," Ryan said as he stood up.

"Home as in your penthouse, I presume," Natalie snapped.

"Well, yes. Surely you didn't think I meant Canada?"

"I still don't know what my job entails. What do I do when we get to your place?"

"First of all, I'm going to write, using my notes and yours. After I finish the first rough draft, I'll give it to you and you can edit and correct and make suggestions. Then I polish and expand."

"What do I do while you write that first draft?"

"It'll take me a while. You can use that time to explore the city," he said and impatiently grabbed her chair to indicate that he wanted to leave.

Stubbornly she remained seated. "So I just hang around and do nothing? I'd prefer to fly home and return when you're ready for me."

"No. We agreed on twelve months. I expect you to stay the full year," he said stubbornly. "While I'm writing, you can do whatever you want, Natalie. Are you going to come or do I have to bodily remove you from that chair?"

His hand reached out but she was too fast for him. "It seems now that we're back in the city your insufferable attitude has returned as well," she snapped. "What happened to the man I got to know and love in the jungle? Did we leave him behind?" Gathering her purse, she slung it angrily over her shoulder and stood up. Muttering furiously to herself, she walked toward the Jeep.

A sardonic smile played on his lips as he followed, unlocked the door and held it open for her. "The jungle does strange things to people," he said softly.

"Tell me about it!" Natalie snapped while she climbed into the Jeep. They drove to the police station first and made their statements. After they signed them and left the station, Ryan drove to his apartment building in silence much to her aggravation. Stubbornly she too remained silent, though deep down she ached to reach out to him, to touch him, to ask him what was wrong. What happened to their love? Why was he acting this way?

Ryan drove into the underground parking. "I see Mamete and Tomy are out. Their car is gone," he commented as he pulled into his parking spot.

Natalie was glad he'd finally broken the intense silence. "They have a car?" she asked.

"Well, it's actually my car but for their use. Matter of fact, I'll ask Tomy to drive you around while you're waiting for me to finish the first draft."

"Thank you," she said while she stepped out of the car and waited for him to unload the Jeep.

"I'll carry my backpack," Natalie offered.

"That's okay. I'll carry it. You must be tired," he stated.

"Yes, I do feel tired," she admitted. "It'll be nice to sleep in a bed and have the commodities of home."

"I guess roughing it wasn't your cup of tea," he said a sarcastic smile twisting his lips.

Natalie didn't like his triumphant look or his crooked smile. "You must admit that this safari wasn't quite what it was supposed to be," she snapped.

"No. I hardly counted on your boyfriend following us or on a bag of diamonds hidden in your bag. Still, it'll make a good story."

"You're not going to use that in your book, are you?" Natalie asked, shocked at his statement.

"I sure will. Don't worry. I'll change the names and locations. This book is fiction, remember?"

The elevator door opened and they walked into Ryan's penthouse. "I must call my mother," Natalie said.

Mamete came rushing out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. "Master Ryan, Missy, I'm so glad you're home."

"We're glad to be home, too, Mamete. How is Tomy?"

"He's fine. The stitches are out and his headache is gone now. He went to the store to get some things for me."

"It was all my fault," Natalie said softly. "I'm so sorry, Mamete."

Ryan looked at her sharply. "Natalie, I told you to stop that nonsense. Let's just be thankful we all came home alive. None of it was your fault."

"Greg didn't come home," she couldn't help saying.

"Neither did his accomplice, but I guess they got what they deserved."

"But Greg wasn't a murderer. Bill killed Jan."

Ryan's expression was full of incredulity. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. Greg kidnapped you and treated you like shit. Have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. I just don't think he deserved the fate that he got."

"I beg to differ." Quickly he changed the subject. "Mamete, we've already eaten. I'm going to my study now. Thank you for worrying about us."

Mamete left the living room to return to the kitchen. "Missy, would you like a cup of tea?" she called out to Natalie before entering.

"I'd love a cup of tea, Mamete."

Ryan started to walk away. "I think I'll call my

mother now," she called after him.

"Yes. Why don't you do that? I'm going to have a shower, unpack my stuff and lock myself in my study after that. The sooner I get this book over and done with, the better I'd like it."

"Ryan, it sounds as if you're not looking forward to writing this novel."

He stopped for a moment to answer her, "To be honest, I don't. I never liked the idea of changing my style in the first place. I'm a non-fiction writer. I have a gut feeling this novel will be a fiasco. It could possibly mean the end of my career as a writer. I think I told you that before."

"I think you're being too pessimistic. You're a good writer and I'm sure this book will be quite exceptional," Natalie said and walked to the telephone. She heard his footsteps recede toward his bedroom and called out to him. "Ryan, before you start writing, I'd like to talk to you. Please? We really need to," she said softly.

He turned to face her. "Yes, we do need to talk, Natalie. But for now I must concentrate on the book. After I'm done, we'll have more time. I must meet the publisher's deadline."

"This is important. I love you, and –"

"I love you, too," he answered in a brusque tone. "But there's one thing you'd better learn now. When a writer is on a deadline, don't nag him about anything. We will discuss our relationship later."

Gratified that she at least got an admission of love out of him, she dialed her mother's number and when her mother's sleepy voice answered, remembered too late that it was the middle of the night in Canada.

"Natalie? Is that you, child? What time is it?" Leslie said stifling an audible yawn.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I forgot the time difference. How are you?"

"I'm fine now. Greg – "

"Don't worry, Mom. Greg won't be bothering anyone anymore," Natalie told her.

"Are you sure? I would never have suspected him of being such an animal. He threatened to kill me, Natalie."

"I'm sorry, Mom. Apparently Greg was using me to smuggle diamonds from Africa to Canada. They were hidden in my flight bag."

"How did you find out? Did you give them to him?"

"Mom, it's a long story. I'll tell you about it in a letter. No. I didn't give him the diamonds. As for Greg, he died in the jungle."

"The jungle? What do you mean?"

"I'll write you, Mom. I just wanted to make sure that you're okay. Have you been watering my plants?" Natalie asked.

"Yes, I have, but—"

"Thanks. I might be home sooner than you think. I'll write you as soon as I'm rested."

"Natalie, but how –"

"I have to go now, Mom. I love you," Natalie said cutting her mother's words short. Leslie was still asking questions when Natalie put the phone down.

Natalie walked to the guestroom feeling rather dejected and homesick. Ryan's curt declaration of love

had hardly lifted her spirits. Something had changed since they left the jungle. More than anything she wanted to just pack up and go home, to run away from possibly getting hurt again, but she'd signed a one-year contract to work for Ryan. Wistfully she thought about the job she'd given up and the money she'd have to give back to him if she decided to quit now.

The thought of leaving him brought tears to her eyes. Wiping them away with an angry swipe of her arm, she headed for the shower.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

yan, after he telephoned his lawyer and gave him instructions to buy Poppie's property, sat behind his desk and stared at the empty computer screen. He glanced at his notes and with an angry swipe sent the notepad flying off the desk. It landed in the wastebasket. The words wouldn't come. Even the title eluded him.

Angry at himself, at life in general, he stood up and walked to the bookshelves that lined the far wall. One of the shelves held a row of bottles. He grabbed the brandy and a glass and poured himself a stiff drink. He downed it in one gulp. The fiery liquid burned all the way down to his stomach. Within minutes, it soothed his troubled mind and turbulent thoughts. He poured another brandy and sipped this one slowly.

His glance drifted over a row of pictures that stood in front of the books. Some were of his parents—one picture was of himself as a baby. The last picture he reached for and glanced at thoughtfully. It showed him leaning over a fence at the zoo. Beside him, radiantly sending him a smile stood Nattie. He remembered the day well. It was their annual outing and that year, Matron had chosen to send them all to the zoo. Nurse was given permission to bring her young daughter. They had so much fun that day. Natalie reminded him of Nattie. He had the same protective feelings toward her as he had for that little girl, so long ago.

Carefully he placed the picture back on the shelf and walked back to his desk. Thoughts of Natalie flooded his mind—their love, his feeling of desperation when he thought he'd lost her, his pain for her when they found her. *I love her so much*, he thought. *Why can't I give her a full commitment? Will she agree to an open relationship? That's all I can offer her right now. I've been a bachelor far too long*—

Pictures of the first time they'd made love flashed before his eyes. Passion suddenly flooded his body. Desperately, he tried to quell it and the urge to rush out of the study and take her in his arms but he didn't succeed. His cock had jumped to attention and he needed release. With a sigh he pulled the skin back and forth until he came. It wasn't the same, it wasn't Natalie he'd just made love to, but it would have to do for the time being. After the release of his passion, he stalked the floor for a while until his muse started to talk in a little voice in his mind.

Slowly he pulled the chair away from the desk and sat down. A story line began and within minutes his fingers flew over the keyboard.

#### Chapter Twenty-Seven

ive weeks had gone by. Natalie sat at the table toying with her breakfast. Time seemed reduced to a crawl and she was painfully bored. Tomy drove her to wherever she wanted to go, but even sightseeing was starting to weary her. She tried to read, had even bought some embroidery materials to pass the time, but it seemed that nothing could hold her attention. Ryan had only shown his face once in all that time and that was only for seconds. He'd opened his door and called out to her to bring him her notes. When she handed him the notepad, he glanced at it absentmindedly and quickly closed the door. Mamete told her that this was quite normal when he was writing. She always left his food outside the study door after a quick knock.

The study was adjacent to his bedroom and at times they heard the shower indicating that he was taking a break. But he never came out, nor did he answer the telephone.

Mamete topped off the cold coffee. "You're not eating, Missy," she commented.

"I don't feel too good lately, Mamete, and I wish

you'd stop calling me that. My name is Natalie." She'd told Mamete so many times to call her by her first name, but she stayed Missy.

"You miss Master Ryan," Mamete said. "You are sad because you love him."

Natalie glanced up at Mamete and saw the concern on her round face and reflecting in her ebony eyes. "You are very observant, Mamete."

"Yes. Mamete knows. Master Ryan loves you, too. Why are you sad?"

Natalie couldn't help herself any longer. She needed to talk to someone. "We fell in love in the jungle, Mamete, but now that we're home, everything has changed. I don't know what is wrong."

"Nothing wrong, Missy. Master Ryan is always like this when he writes a book. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. I will ask Tomy to take you out today. He needs to bring some food and soup to my sick cousin in Soweto. You can go with him."

"Okay, that will get my mind off things," Natalie agreed. "I'll go and get ready."

"Eat your breakfast first, Missy. You can't go gallivanting in the hot sun on an empty stomach," Mamete fussed.

To satisfy Mamete, Natalie ate a piece of toast and drank her orange juice. Soon after, the food began to roll in her stomach and she quickly left the table with the excuse that she had to get ready to accompany Tomy.

When she got to her room, she made the bathroom just in time. The nausea had started just a few weeks ago and usually attacked her in the mornings. At first she'd blamed it on nerves, but now she knew that something else was wrong. She'd missed two periods. Suspicion nagged at the back of her mind that she was pregnant, but she refused to acknowledge the thought and blamed the absence of her monthly cycle on the trauma and stress she experienced when Greg and Bill kidnapped her.

After she showered, she inspected her body in the full length mirror that graced the bathroom door. Nothing had changed. "It's just a flu, or the aftermath of stress," she told herself softly and quickly walked into the bedroom to get dressed.

"Where would you like to go after Soweto, Missy?" Tomy asked her.

"Langlaagte," Natalie answered without thinking.

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"Langlaagte? That's on the other side of Johannesburg. Why do you want to go there?"

Why had that name slipped from her lips, she wondered. "Oh, I visited there once a long time ago. I'd like to see it again." It was a lame explanation but the only one she could come up with.

"Master Ryan went to school in Langlaagte," Tomy told her.

"Really? That's interesting," Natalie said wondering which school he attended.

"This is Soweto," Tomy said as they left the city to enter a native community. "Its population most of the time ranges between two to five million. Mine workers come and go, that's why the population count fluctuates so much."

Soweto was a rather dreary, dirty place. Natalie was dumbstruck at the poverty that faced her. Since apartheid was no longer part of South Africa, she assumed that things had gotten better for the natives, but what she saw now shocked her beyond belief. The homes were nothing more than metal shacks, some rusted badly, others almost falling apart and held together by pieces of wood that were dug into the ground as supports for the walls. They passed several pumps, indicating there was no running water in the shacks. Porta potties were scattered among the shacks.

"Your cousin lives here?" she asked softly.

Tomy nodded. "Yes, many of our relatives live here. If the men are lucky, they find work in the mines and are gone for a long time. Many of my people are poor, Missy."

"I can see that. What about school? I see so many children in the streets."

"Some children need to stay home to help their mothers, or to baby-sit the younger children if their mother works. Master Ryan helps as much as he can, but there are so many that need help."

"I'm sorry, Tomy. It makes me sad to see such poverty."

"Yes, Missy. One day it will change," Tomy said and stopped the car near one of the shacks. "I won't be long. You wait in car, Missy?"

"Yes, I'll wait," Natalie said. She waited until Tomy disappeared into the shack before getting out of the car. Slowly she walked along the dusty road. The dismal sight was heartbreaking. A young boy sat in front of a shack. He held a wooden bowl in his hands and ate from it with his fingers. Large chunks of glutinous white porridge disappeared into his mouth. He licked his lips as if he was eating the sweetest delicacy. A baby crawled out of the open door. The lad took a handful of porridge and stuffed it into the baby's mouth. The boy looked to be about twelve, the baby probably about eighteen months. The lad's shorts hung on his bony hips, held there by a frayed rope. The baby was clad only in a grubby diaper. The white porridge spilled on the baby's chubby chest and stood out against his ebony skin.

Suddenly the boy noticed the white woman staring at them. He stood up, scooped the baby onto his hip and quickly ran to the pump.

Natalie walked on slowly until a crowd of small children surrounded her suddenly and begged her for pennies. She dug in her purse and scooped a handful of change that she usually just threw in the bottom. As she held it out to them, they fought for it, accidentally knocked her hand and spilled the change on the ground. Within seconds they were fighting for the treasure.

A woman came out of a shack carrying a baby on her back. She yelled at the children and they scattered within seconds. Some silver change still lay in the dust. Natalie noticed some of the children hiding beside shacks and knew that as soon as she got back into the car, they'd come back for it. She sighed at the poverty that surrounded her.

"Missy Natalie, you shouldn't leave the car," Tomy

shouted.

She spun and headed back for the car. "Why not, Tomy? It's broad daylight."

"It's better not to," he said.

Natalie got back into the car. Tomy turned the car and they drove back toward Johannesburg leaving a cloud of dust behind them. She glanced back and saw the children scouring the road for the change. "I wish I hadn't gone along with you, Tomy," she said.

"This is a part of South Africa that most tourists do not get to see," Tomy said bitterly.

"I understand," Natalie said.

"Now we go to Langlaagte."

Understanding that Tomy wanted to change the conversation, Natalie kept quiet, but what she'd just seen stayed in her mind until they arrived in the town where she attended school so long ago.

Langlaagte had changed. She'd spent time in Johannesburg so many times when she overnighted between flights, but never had she had the desire to visit Langlaagte or New Canada. Neither place held nostalgic memories, except for Robert. Suddenly a thought occurred to her. Thinking about Robert and Tomy's statement that Ryan had attended school in Langlaagte seemed to point at the possibility that Ryan had lived in the orphanage in New Canada. "Tomy, can you drive on to New Canada?" she asked.

He frowned. "Missy, that's another hour's drive. Why do you want to go there?"

"There is an orphanage in New Canada I want to visit," she answered.

Tomy shook his head at her strange request. "I'll

never understand women," he muttered. "Okay, I'll drive you there, but we can't stay too long. I have work to do at home."

Natalie smiled. "Ryan wouldn't know whether you did the work or not, Tomy. He's hardly bothered with the household right now."

"It's a matter of principle, Missy. I have chores I need to complete. And Master Ryan doesn't announce when he is finished and comes out of his study quite unexpectedly."

"I'm sorry. We can go there another day if you like," Natalie apologized.

"We're already halfway there. We might as well go on now."

The countryside they passed looked all too familiar, arid, sparse vegetation and in the distance, the koppies. She noticed how many more mounds of yellow sand had appeared over the years. It brought back vivid memories of that fateful day when the little boy climbed them and died. She shuddered.

New Canada had changed too. The road leading to it was now tarred and newly built houses had turned it into a small town. Once, it had consisted of only the orphanage and the stationmaster's house. It didn't take long for Tomy to find the entrance to the orphanage.

It was exactly as she remembered it. Even the grounds had not changed. Tomy pulled up before the steps of the large rectangular verandah. "I'll wait for you, Missy," he said and reached in the back for his newspaper.

Natalie walked up the steps and looked at the

shiny, tiled verandah. The ceramic tiles she was forbidden to roller skate on in case the wheels of the skates marked them were still the same. She glanced at the windows of the single room she and her mother had occupied. She had spent so many hours in that room, reading, drawing and wishing they'd go back to Canada.

She opened the double doors and stepped into the large dining room. Even it was exactly the same, with the same furniture and the old piano against the far wall, the wooden floor highly polished gleaming without a scratch. *Strange how well I still know this place*, she thought, walking down a long corridor. She stopped before the door to Matron's office. She knocked on the door, half expecting to hear Matron's cutting voice, but instead a male voice answered.

"Come in," a deep voice boomed from inside.

Hesitantly she opened the door. "Good afternoon," she said to the man behind the desk. He looked to be in his late fifties. A shock of gray hair crowned his head. His round face beamed with a broad smile.

"Good afternoon, yourself," he said. "It's not often that we receive visitors in the middle of the week. How can I help you?"

"I don't know if you can," Natalie said while she approached the desk. "A long time ago, my mother was the nurse here for about a year. I lived here too. During that time I became friends with a boy. After my mother and I left here we lost touch and I'd like to find him again after all these years."

"Isn't that interesting. My name is Willem de Haak. What is your name?" "I'm sorry. I'm forgetting my manners. Natalie Dubois."

"Your accent tells me you're not from here. America?" Willem asked.

"Canada. We weren't in South Africa very long. Do you think you can help me locate him?"

"I don't know. We have a room where we keep all the old records. I suppose I can take a look. What was the lad's name?"

"Robert Lowell. He was around twelve at the time I lived here."

"I see. Would you care for a cup of tea while you wait?" Willem asked.

"Thank you, that would be nice." Now that the queasiness had left her stomach, she suddenly felt thirsty and hungry.

Willem pushed an intercom button and spoke to someone in the kitchen. "Betty, we have a guest. Please bring tea and scones to my office," he asked.

What a change, Natalie thought. Matron would have ordered the girl to bring the tea rather than ask. I wonder if conditions in the home have changed at all for the boys, but I dare not ask.

"Please excuse me while I go and hunt for that file," Willem said. "When Betty brings tea and scones, feel free to help yourself. Hopefully it won't take too long. Thirty years ago you said?"

Natalie nodded. After Willem had left the office, her eyes scanned her surroundings. The office was the same, though some plants were added. They gave it a friendlier atmosphere. She couldn't spot the whip in its familiar corner or anywhere else and hoped that whipping was no longer applied.

A woman entered the office carrying a large tray. "Good afternoon, Miss," she said with a friendly smile as she put the tray on the mahogany desk. "Would you like cream and sugar?"

"Just black, thank you," Natalie said with a smile. The aroma of the freshly baked scones teased her nostrils. The one good thing she remembered about the orphanage was its large kitchens, where she could always find some fresh baking, its daily baked bread, homemade buttermilk and butter. But one day Matron found her in the kitchens and all hell broke loose. After that, the black girls would smuggle her some fresh baking and a glass of buttermilk, which was supposed to be only for Matron and her family.

After Betty left the study, Natalie helped herself to the fresh scones and homemade jam. Carefully she packed two in a serviette and stuffed them into her purse for Tomy. She'd finished her second cup of tea by the time Willem returned.

"I found the lad's file, but I couldn't find any record about you or your mother. I suppose Dubois is your married name?" he asked, glancing at her ring finger.

"It is, yes."

"I did find records of a Leslie O'Conner, a nurse who worked here many years ago and she had a young daughter."

"That's us," Natalie smiled.

Willem sat behind the desk and opened the file. "Robert Lowell was here until he graduated from high school. It says here, he applied for a scholarship at the university. His full name is Robert Ryan Lowell Jamieson. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. I don't know if he was accepted at the university or not. We have no forwarding address."

The teacup shook in Natalie's hands. It rattled on the saucer and she quickly put it down on the tray. "Robert Ryan Lowell Jamieson?" she asked trying to stay calm. "So many names."

"Yes. That was his full name but he was registered as Robert Lowell. For some reason his mother wanted him to carry her maiden name as well as her married name. There is a note attached to his registration papers concerning that."

"Thank you," Natalie said. "You've been more help than you realize."

"I'm glad. I'm sorry I couldn't supply you with a forwarding address," he said with a smile.

"I can inquire at the university," Natalie said in a soft voice. "Thank you again. Good afternoon, Willem."

Quickly she left the office. While she walked out of the building her thoughts raged. *Robert and Ryan are one and the same. That's why he always seemed so familiar. What happened to my sweet young friend? What has made him so bitter and arrogant? Why did he change his name? I wonder if Willem de Haak even realizes Robert and Ryan Jamieson are one and the same* –

Tomy leaned over to open the door for her. "You were a long time, Missy."

"I'm sorry, Tomy, but I got what I came for. I brought you some fresh scones. I'm sorry, I couldn't put a cup of tea in my purse," she joked. "Thank you. I have some juice that Mamete packed for me. We must head for home now," he said while munching on a scone.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

wo more weeks passed before Ryan finally came out of the study. Natalie spent those weeks mainly at home. During that time, she thought much about Robert and the man he was now. She wondered how he would react when she introduced herself as Nattie. Would he be happy? Did he even remember the little girl who adored him so? It was almost as if fate had brought them back together—

She was reading a book when the door of the study opened and Ryan walked into the living room. He pulled the book from her hands, pulled her up into his arms and gave her a tight hug. "I'm done," he said in a triumphant tone and swung her in a circle, then danced around the room while still holding her.

"Ryan-you're squeezing me to death! Put me down-" Natalie laughed, joy washing through her heart.

After he set her on her feet he held her for a few minutes and gazed into her eyes. Natalie saw lights dancing in his eyes and felt the old Ryan that she'd gotten to know in the jungle had come back to her. "Ryan?" she said softly, questioning.

"Yes, my love," he answered.

His words caused her heart to sing. "How did it go? The writing, I mean."

"It went very well once I got going. But you can give me your honest opinion after you've edited it and read the whole thing," he bent and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. "I'm starving. How about I take you out to dinner?"

"That sounds good. There's something I need to tell you," she said and felt lost suddenly when he let her go and walked to the bar to pour a glass of wine. "Would you join me?" he asked.

"It's a little early for me, but you go ahead. You deserve to celebrate."

"What did you want to tell me, Natalie? I'm sorry. I interrupted you, but you've got no idea what a relief it is that I've finished this manuscript. Well—at least the first draft."

"It can wait until later." She didn't want to spoil this precious moment of happiness. Unsure how he would take the news that she could be pregnant, she decided to keep her news to herself as long as possible before telling him.

"Would you like a cocktail before we leave?" he asked her.

"No thank you. I'll just have some orange juice."

He brought her a glass of orange juice and deposited a disk on the table. "Here is the disk. You can start on it first thing in the morning."

"What is the title?" she asked.

"I haven't come up with a title yet. Maybe you can

think of something suitable after you've read it."

"I can't wait," she said enthusiastically.

"I'm quite proud of my efforts. I hope the publisher will think so too. It wasn't easy to change from nonfiction to fiction after all these years. Why don't you go and get ready and we'll go and celebrate."

"I thought celebration came after the book was completely done. Don't you have to revise it, polish and edit after I'm done?"

"Yes, of course, but the hardest part is behind me. Put on your prettiest clothes. I want to take you to one of our best restaurants."

"Good thing I packed some of those unnecessary items that you told me not to bring," Natalie said with a smile. "I did think to bring some dresses."

"I ordered a computer for you," Ryan told her. "That way, I can already start editing and you can work on the book on your own PC."

"Are you going to shut yourself away from the world again?" she couldn't help asking.

"No. Editing doesn't take as much concentration. Lady, if you're going to be living with me, you'd better get used to a writer's strange ways."

"Yes, I guess I'll have to," she said softly while a song entered her heart. He did want her. It was just his writing that kept him away from her and so aloof. "Okay, I'll go and get dressed."

Ryan watched her trim figure as she left the room and felt quite satisfied with himself. He'd said the right words and caused happiness to make her eyes dance. Her heartstrings were not difficult to tug. Tonight, after dinner, he'd talk to her about their relationship. Now that she was in the right mood and he had come to terms with this new phase of life, it shouldn't be too difficult.

Natalie hummed softly while she dressed. All her fears and misgivings had disappeared to make place for happiness. If this was Ryan's way of life, it was something she would have to get used to. Living together – the words brought her a sense of joy. Had he meant marriage? Surely after she told him about her suspected pregnancy, he would ask her to marry him? For a moment she contemplated spending the rest of her life in South Africa, but quickly put that thought aside. Perhaps they could come to an agreement, six months here and six months in Canada.

The long, royal blue gown she'd chosen to wear clung to her body and showed off her slim figure and small waist. It was strapless, with just a hint of seductive swelling above the neckline. Around her neck she wound a matching chiffon scarf that cascaded down her back to the floor. Her hair she kept loose. It flowed around her shoulders. He liked it that way—as she gazed at herself in the mirror she noticed how the gown accentuated the blue of her eyes. A soft glow colored her cheeks a delicate pink. Matching high-heeled shoes and a small blue purse completed the outfit. She grimaced at the reflection. If her suspicions were correct, she'd soon have to wear looser-fitting clothes.

Taking a deep breath, she left her room and walked down the stairs to the living room. Ryan stood with his back to her gazing out of the windows. "Ryan, I'm ready," she said softly.

He spun around, started to walk toward her but stopped suddenly. His eyes roamed over her body from head to toe openly admiring her. "Natalie, you're breathtaking," he said in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"Thank you, Ryan," she smiled. "You don't look half bad yourself." She actually thought he looked very handsome. The white dinner jacket and white shirt caused the tan on his face to stand out. The beard was gone and he was clean-shaven. When he smiled and the dimple in his cheek showed, it caused her heart to somersault in her chest. Now she saw the resemblance to the boy she'd known.

"Only half bad?" he asked.

"Well, if it wasn't for the ponytail, I'd almost say you look very handsome."

"That ponytail really irks you, doesn't it?"

"Well, a man your age – "

"Hey, that's enough. Come here, you rascal," he said while stepping toward her and pulling her into his arms.

He kissed her then, long and lingeringly. His lips set her heart racing. It was the first real kiss since the jungle. "I don't think I want to go out," he whispered against her lips.

Natalie pulled away, reluctantly, but sanity overpowered her desire to give in to him. "Ryan, we do need to talk," she said determinedly. "And I'm hungry."

"Yes. So we do. And I'm hungry, too, and you look so gorgeous I want to show you off to the world." His fingers played with a lock of her hair for a moment before he cupped her arm and led her to the elevator. "Natalie, you're so beautiful. I don't think I've ever seen you like this. There is a glow in your eyes that wasn't there before. An inner beauty that has surfaced," he said while they waited for the elevator.

His words acted like soothing balm on her heart, healing all her insecurities. She didn't have a chance to reply. The elevator doors slid open silently and Ryan ushered her inside. It stopped on the next floor and more people got in, so they rode the elevator down to parking in silence.

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"Your usual table is ready, Mr. Jamieson," the hostess said, leading them to a secluded table.

The restaurant was on the fifth floor of a tall building. It was called 'White Gold Restaurant', appropriately named after the city's source of income. Their table was by a window and gave them a magnificent view of the city. While the hostess lit the candles on the table, Ryan glanced at the wine menu but put it down again. "Please bring me your best bottle of champagne," he asked. "We have something to celebrate."

The hostess smiled. "Have you finished another book, Mr. Jamieson? Congratulations."

"Thank you. Yes, I've finished another book, but we're also here to celebrate something else. This is my secretary, Miss Dubois," he introduced her.

The hostess's eyes flew from Natalie to Ryan and

back again. Natalie smiled shyly though his introduction had disturbed her somewhat. Was she always to be known as his secretary?

"Ah, you've acquired a secretary. Pleased to meet you, Miss Dubois. I suppose we'll see you here quite often now," the girl sent Natalie a friendly, though curious smile. "I'll go and get the champagne."

After the hostess was out of earshot, Natalie looked at Ryan and said, "Ryan, I don't want to drink anything alcoholic. My stomach hasn't been behaving lately."

"Nonsense. Tonight is special. A glass of champagne won't hurt you," he decided. "Would you care for an appetizer, Natalie?"

"No thank you. It'll spoil my appetite."

"How about if I order chicken wings and we'll share?" he asked.

"Sounds good. I love chicken wings."

A waiter arrived with the champagne. He poured some in a glass for Ryan to taste, then filled both their glasses. Ryan frowned when he lifted his glass and held it out to Natalie for a toast and noticed her picking up the glass of water. "To a fruitful working relationship," he said and lightly touched her glass with his own.

What about us? Our relationship? Natalie wanted to say, but she remained quiet and sipped the cool water.

"Natalie, what's wrong? You're not drinking your champagne," he finally commented.

"One of us has to drive home tonight and I want to keep a clear head," she answered.

"I see. Well, if you expect me to drink that bottle by myself, you're the designated driver for sure." He promptly took her glass of champagne and drank it down. "You're very quiet. We're supposed to be having a good time."

"We're also supposed to talk, Ryan," she said quietly.

"Yes, we are. But, let's have fun first and then leave the serious stuff till later," he said with a disarming grin.

Natalie only had one of the chicken wings. They were rather spicy and she didn't want her stomach to get upset again.

During dinner, Ryan monopolized the conversation. He talked about his book, the jungle, everything that had happened, the diamonds, anything but their personal relationship. Natalie tried to listen with interest but found her thoughts wandering off more than once to couples dancing on the dance floor. Soft, romantic music playing in the background was supposed to set an atmosphere for them, but she could hardly call their dinner date romantic.

Until he asked her to dance.

At first, she could tell that he hadn't danced in years. His steps were rather rusty. But slowly his body attuned to the music and he pulled her tighter into his arms. She rested her head against his shoulder. When he bent and rested his cheek against hers, her heart hammered in her chest. Would he finally ask her?

"Natalie, my love, you're the most beautiful

women in this restaurant tonight. All eyes are upon you," he said in her ear while nibbling on the lobe.

"You're exaggerating," she said.

"No. We make a striking couple, don't you think?" he held her away from him for a moment and looked deeply into her eyes.

"You're not too conceited!" she retorted.

"Will you spend the night with me tonight?" he asked.

She hesitated. "The night?" *What about spending my life with you*? she thought.

"Yes. After what we experienced in the jungle, do you find that so strange?"

Natalie didn't answer. She longed for him. To spend a night in his arms was what she wanted, but she wanted more than just a night.

"Let's go home, sweetheart. You're setting my blood on fire," he said.

"We haven't talked, Ryan."

"We can talk later," he hedged.

She let it go at that. It obviously wasn't the right time to talk about anything, let alone dump her suspicions in his lap.

Even though she argued to let her drive, Ryan insisted on driving home himself. He wasn't drunk, she knew that, but he was over the alcohol limit.

After they stepped into his apartment, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to his bedroom. He turned on the lights on his nightstands and dimmed them to a romantic glow. Gently, he set her on her feet and claimed her lips while his hands fumbled with the zipper of her dress. It slid soundlessly to the floor. She felt the silky material pile around her legs. Every instinct in her cried to stop this, to make him talk, but she'd so longed for this moment, for his touch, that her heart overpowered the reasoning of her mind.

His hands cradled her buttocks and pulled her tight against him. "I've hungered for you so," he whispered in her neck and he lowered her gently onto the bed.

Then why didn't you come to me sooner, she thought but banished the thought as soon as he joined her and claimed her lips. She closed her eyes, shutting out her surroundings and thought for moments about the first time they made love, under the waterfall. It was as if the sounds of the jungle came to life right there in the bedroom. It thrilled her; his gentle touch excited her, his lips drew her soul into his body and she arched against him, wanting him, urging him to take her.

When he kneeled between her legs, his eyes held hers. They were black with passion and she felt herself drowning in their depths. The desire in them alone brought her to heights of ecstasy she never imagined possible. He teased her with his hands, his fingers inside her vagina, his thumb on her clit, until finally she begged him to take her. Digging her fingers into his buttocks, she pulled him into her. "Ryan, oh Ryan, hold me? Please? Take me? Now?" she begged when he still held back.

He drove into her then, filling her, touching the very core of her inner being, not only her womanhood, but her soul. She wrapped her legs around his waist and only felt whole when he gathered her into his arms and moved slowly within her. She met him, thrust for thrust until all sanity left her and she screamed with ecstasy when final release came. They surfed the waves of love together, as one, riding the crest of passion until they crashed down to gently roll onto a silent beach.

"Natalie, my love, my sweet jungle goddess," Ryan murmured in her neck. His breathing had slowed and he held her silently in his arms for a long time.

They made love many times that night, until Ryan finally told her she'd worn him out. "I'm not a spring chicken anymore," he said with a laugh and kissed the tip of her nose. "Tomorrow it's your turn to work and mine to relax. I love you, jungle maiden," he said softly. "Goodnight, my love."

"Goodnight, Ryan. I love you," Natalie murmured and curled up against him.

He drew the sheet over them and cradled her in his arms. "I love you so much," he murmured drowsily.

Their naked limbs entwined, still softly murmuring their love for each other they fell asleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

atalie woke up with a start. For a moment she thought that it was all a dream, but then she saw that she was in Ryan's room, in his bed and when she reached out, she felt his naked body beside her.

Sunlight filtered through the drapes. When she glanced at the clock she saw with a start that it was close to eleven. They had slept late. She leaned on an elbow and studied the man next to her. He looked so innocent in his sleep. She remembered the boy she had known, Robert, and tried to find his features in Ryan's face. Now that she knew, she saw the resemblance, and his eyes--they had remained the same except for the darkness that sometimes shadowed them, the pain she couldn't identify. But maybe she could now. Knowing what kind of a life those boys in the orphanage had led, she could imagine what it would do to them and what memories would plague them the rest of their lives. And Lord knows how he was treated after she and her mother had left the orphanage. How could she ever get him to open up to her? To talk about the

problems that plagued him?

Her fingers traced the outline of his lips. Suddenly, his eyes opened and he looked up at her.

"Mmmm, you can wake me like that every morning," he said softly and gathered her into his arms and crushed her against his chest. "That was quite a night, sweetheart. You wore me out," he quipped.

"I didn't hear you protesting. Every morning? Do I sleep in here now?"

"Natalie, there's something I want to tell you. I didn't want to spoil last night so I kept it till this morning."

"Go ahead, fire away," she said though she felt apprehensive at his words.

"I want us to spend our lives together, but I think we should retain our freedom. I mean, my life is so different from what you're used to. I want you to have the freedom to go to visit home for a couple of months while I go gallivanting off into the jungle, or whatever other setting I choose to write about."

She was very quiet for a few minutes until he prodded her for an answer.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he asked.

"You want us to live together but you want to be free to do whatever you want and go wherever you want without having me like a ball and chain around your neck. Is that right?"

"No. Not quite. I just don't think you want to go traipsing all over the country with me and I don't expect you to. Look at the danger I put you in this time. My life is so different, Natalie. Look at how I shut myself away while I write. Were you happy while I was in my study all that time?"

"No," she had to admit. "But, you were already distant before we returned. I felt it. And that's what made me unhappy. I thought you wanted to end our relationship."

"Never," he said firmly and kissed her on the lips. "I love you so much, it hurts."

"But you don't want a permanent commitment? What about family?"

He frowned. "You mean as in children? Honey, I'm getting too old to raise a family now."

She felt her heart sink and thought about the new life she was almost sure she carried within her. "What if I became pregnant?" she asked carefully.

"Surely you've taken precautions?" he asked with a worried frown.

She didn't answer him. "Ryan, when you were in the orphanage-"

His eyes darkened, he gently pushed her aside and sat up. "I don't want to talk about that time of my life. I've told you that."

"But, Ryan – "

"It's time to get up," he said brusquely.

The moment was gone, along with his tenderness. "I'll go to my room to shower and dress," she said.

"You'll find your new computer all set up," he replied. "I've got some business to attend to today, so I'll be busy."

Confused, she jumped out of bed and felt her stomach suddenly churn. Wrapping herself in a sheet, she ran from the room. She made her bathroom just in time.

Filled with disappointment, she showered and got dressed. As he promised, the new computer sat on a brand new desk near the French doors. "It must have been delivered last night, while we were out," she said softly while she inspected the new equipment.

Before she started on the book, she went to the kitchen for coffee. Mamete had breakfast ready for her. The fresh bacon and eggs smelled delicious, but she wasn't hungry. Mamete poured the coffee and sat down opposite her.

"What is wrong, Missy? You and Master Ryan were happy last night."

"How do you know, Mamete?"

Mamete smiled. "I saw you come from his room, Missy."

"Oh."

"But now you don't look happy."

"Mamete, he just wants me to be his mistress. I can't handle that. He says he loves me, but he wants to be free."

"Master Ryan has been free a long time, Missy. His last engagement broke off because he was gone a long time. While he was gone, she married another man. He was deeply hurt."

"Then she didn't love him enough," Natalie said.

"No. She didn't, but it turned Master Ryan into a bitter man for many years. You are the first woman he has loved since."

"So he doesn't trust me enough to know that I would still be there when he returns from his excursions," Natalie said softly.

"Yes. I think that is basically his problem. Perhaps if you give him time, prove to him that you are faithful and will wait for him - "

"I don't have time," Natalie said and fought to keep her tears under control.

"You should tell him about the baby, Missy."

"You know?"

Mamete smiled broadly. "I have had children. I know the signs."

"I tried to tell him this morning. Ryan doesn't want a family."

"Maybe you should wait a little longer until he is in a very good mood."

"And in the meantime my belly grows—No, Mamete, that is not the solution. I don't know what to do. I'll have to think hard about this." She gulped down the last of her coffee. "Anyway, I'd better start doing the job he hired me for."

Mamete stood up and took some cut-up melon from the fridge. She poured a glass of milk, put the fruit in a bowl and placed them both on a tray. "Take this with you, Missy. You need the vitamins now."

"Thank you, Mamete. You're very sweet. Promise me you won't say anything to Ryan?"

"It's not my place, Missy. God will give you the right answer. Pray. I will say a prayer for you, too."

"I will. Thank you," Natalie smiled. Taking the tray she returned to her room. With distaste she looked at the glass of milk. It had never been one of her favorites, but she knew she had to drink it now. Pinching her nose like when she had to take medicine when she was little, she gulped it down. A shudder ran through her after she finished it and quickly she popped a piece of melon into her mouth to rid herself of the taste.

## Chapter Thirty

atalie turned on the computer, brought up the word processing program and inserted the disk. She waited for it to load and gazed at the first lines on the screen. "As soon as he saw her, he knew this was the woman he wanted for the job—"

The first sentences glared at her and for a moment she stared at them numbly. Shaking her head in disbelief, shocked, she continued to read the full description of herself, their first meeting on the plane, their meeting in the restaurant and her acceptance of her job as secretary to Ryan Jamieson, the writer. He'd given her a different name, but it was her, Natalie Dubois, nevertheless. She didn't edit. As she read on, word for word, fury enveloped her like a shroud. Everything was there. The first time they made love, the second time, all described in painstaking detail.

She didn't finish reading the account of their lovemaking. Furious now, she shut off the computer, took out the disc and clenched it in her hand. "Who the hell do you think you are, Ryan Jamieson? You used me, you arrogant pig. I was nothing but a research package!" She paced the floor while her thoughts raged and her pulse surged with adrenaline.

Ryan didn't come home until late afternoon. By then, her fury had calmed somewhat. She sat in the living room, waiting for him.

He seemed surprised to see her lounging on the couch. "Surely you're not finished yet?" he asked as he bent down to kiss her on the forehead.

She waited for just the right moment.

He poured himself a cocktail and casually walked over to sit next to her on the couch. "What do you think of it so far?" he asked putting an arm around her shoulders. He pulled her against him.

The fury that she'd tried so hard to control now erupted. She wrenched out of his arm, jumped up from the couch and swung to face him. "You want to know what I think of your damned book?" she yelled. "You really want to know what I think of it?" She pulled the disk from her pocket and waved it before his eyes. "Let me show you!"

"Natalie, let me explain. I—"

"Explain? Tell me that you used me as a research guinea pig? Go ahead, Ryan. Explain!" she yelled. "You're the writer, after all. I'm sure you can come up with something believable!"

"You don't understand, I—"

"Oh! But I do understand all too well. Was last night another of your experiments?" She walked to the balcony and held the disk up high. "Here is what I think of your book," and tossed it into the air. It tumbled down to the distant street below.

"Natalie, you're being unreasonable. Please – "

"I'm unreasonable?" she cried. "You think it's

normal that you hire a secretary, then proclaim your undying love to her and describe it all in a book for millions to read? Isn't that what all writers do, Ryan? They write about life, about the things they know? Well, you can find yourself another guinea pig. I'm leaving."

Ryan tried to grab her arm. She violently shook his hand off with a vehemence that stunned him.

"Natalie, I'm sorry. I should have explained to you. I love you. I thought you'd be honored to -"

"To have our love life described in detail? Are you kidding me? Ryan Jamieson, there's a whole lot you have to learn if you're going to write romance stories. If you wanted to include me in your book, you should have asked me. I never would have agreed to come along. This was a set-up from the beginning. That's why on the plane you asked me to marry you. And now that I want to marry you, you've decided you'd rather keep me as a mistress!"

Out of breath, she stopped for a moment. "Of course, it's all clear to me now. You never wanted to get married in the first place, but you thought it was the only way to get a woman to accompany you into the jungle. When I came along and suggested a secretary, you jumped at the chance. And now you'd like to keep me around for further experiments? No, Sir! And to think that you made me traipse through territories inundated with wild animals, through the jungle, climb and sleep in tents when there are roads we could have traveled with the Jeeps!" She took another breath. "I saw your maps, Ryan. I found roads leading to near every place we've been. What was the purpose in putting me through such grueling torture? Did it amuse you? Well, this toy's batteries have just died. I'm going home!"

"But it isn't like that. How would we have gone to the river? No roads lead there. We always go on foot. And I felt attracted to you from the moment I set eyes on you."

"Yes, so the book explains. Sorry, Ryan. I'm breaking the contract. I'll send you the money you paid me in advance. Have a good life. I hope you find another willing substitute to experiment with!" She swung around and stalked out of the living room.

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Ryan gazed after her. He felt stunned. She meant everything to him so why didn't he run after her, take her in his arms and tell her so? Stubbornly, he sat on the couch trying to make sense out of everything that she had thrown at his head. He gulped the drink down and stood up to pour another. "Maybe she's having a period," he muttered as he sipped the straight brandy. "Women can be so unreasonable. She'll come out soon and apologize."

"When hell freezes over, I will!" Natalie had caught his last words.

Ryan noticed the packed bag and her suitcase. "You're serious about leaving," he said, still feeling stunned.

"You're damn right, I am," she hissed. "And don't bother getting your self-righteous ass over here to help me with this suitcase. I'm sure I can manage." The elevator door opened silently. Natalie lugged the suitcase into it and slung her flight bag over her shoulder. "Good-bye, Ryan, alias Robert Lowell. I don't know where that boy has gone, but he sure as hell doesn't exist anymore," she snapped just before the elevator doors closed.

Ryan stared at the descending numbers lighting up on the elevator panel. "Robert Lowell? How the hell does she know about that?" he asked aloud. "Mamete. She's been talking to Natalie and told her," he said in an angry voice and stalked off to the kitchen.

"Mamete, did you tell Natalie about the orphanage and my other name?" he barked.

"No, Master Ryan. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then how the hell would she know? You're the only one I've ever talked to!" he shouted.

"Natalie asked Tomy to take her to the orphanage, Master Ryan. He drove her to New Canada."

"But how would she know about that place?" he growled. "Unless she's been snooping in my personal belongings, but that was impossible. I was in my study the whole time."

"Master Ryan, you are very angry."

"You're damn right, I'm angry. She just left me high and dry and broke the contract."

"Why? I heard her shouting. She sounded furious."

"Because I wrote in my book about our love affair. Now is that unreasonable, or what?"

"If she didn't give her permission, it's not unreasonable." "Damn it, you women all stick together. Well, I'll just have to look for another assistant. She's on her way back to Canada."

Mamete shook her head. "But you love her."

"What the hell does love have to do with a business arrangement?"

"Master Ryan, is that all it was? Just a business arrangement? Was Missy aware of this?" Mamete asked carefully knowing full well that nothing but his ego had been hurt.

"Yes!" he shouted. "No! Dammit! I love her and don't want to live without her!"

"Then you'd better go and stop her before it's too late," Mamete advised.

He stared at her. "She threw the disk down into the street."

"As I would have done," Mamete said in a firm tone.

"I have another copy."

"Good for you, Master Ryan. But that doesn't get you your woman back."

He paced the black and white tiled floor shaking his head. "She means everything to me. Doesn't she know that?"

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

He stopped pacing and looked at Mamete. "Why can't two people of our age just live together and be happy?"

"Are you afraid of marriage, Master Ryan?"

"Stop with that damn master bit. I've told you a hundred if not a thousand times to just call me Ryan. And how does she know the name Robert Lowell? Why was she investigating me?"

"Sir," Mamete said, refusing to call him by his first name as years of training had taught her. "You're wasting time. If you don't hurry, she'll be gone."

"I don't need a woman who investigates my past," he said in a stubborn tone.

"Then you'll have to live with what you've done," Mamete said patiently. She ached to break her promise to Natalie and tell him about the baby, but she remained silent.

"I just don't understand that what I did was so terrible. I wrote about our beautiful love affair. I used different names. Why would she get so angry?"

"If you don't understand yet, then it's of no use me trying to explain," Mamete said. "Now if you want to stop her, I suggest you go to the airport."

"No. I won't grovel!" he shouted and left the kitchen.

"Pigheaded men," Mamete grumbled and stirred the stew that was simmering on the stove.

## Chapter Thirty-One

atalie was lucky. A flight for Vancouver was about to leave and there was a cancellation. Hurriedly she paid for her ticket, went through customs and boarded the plane just as they were about to close the gates.

The stewardess who greeted her was none other than Tammy. Natalie sighed. All she needed right now was an inquisition.

"Natalie! We heard that you quit your job with the airline. Why didn't you tell any of us?" Tammy asked.

"It was a sudden decision. Sorry," Natalie smiled.

"Sudden isn't the word for it. Sarah is on this flight too. What were you doing in Johannesburg?"

"Eh—a holiday. I'm planning to look for a ground job as a secretary."

"Oh. You'd better go find your seat. We're taking off soon. I'll come and talk to you later."

Natalie hastened to find her seat. She stuffed her flight bag into the compartment above, and sat down beside an elderly gentleman and businesswoman. Of all the stewardesses that worked flights between Vancouver and Johannesburg, why did she have to be so unlucky to catch Tammy and Sarah?

She didn't care that her seat was second class or next to the aisle. Quickly she fastened her seatbelt and closed her eyes when Tammy appeared to do her take-off spiel. The words drifted over her head. She'd heard it so many times and right now, all she could think about was the nightmare she was leaving behind.

Once again, she'd allowed herself to be vulnerable, to be bamboozled by a man. She'd opened herself to love and believed that she finally met her soul mate. *Soul mate indeed*, she thought. *I was nothing more than an experiment, a tool for him to use to help him with his new literary style. Well, he can go experiment elsewhere. I'm sure there are many willing victims out there!* 

Desperately she tried to stop the thoughts and concentrated instead on the future. Unconsciously she put her hand on her belly and wondered if a pregnancy test would result in positive. She was almost sure. A smile played on her lips at the thought that after all this time she was having a baby.

Her ears plugged. She opened her eyes and swallowed hard a few times. The announcement flashed that they could undo their seatbelts and she quickly undid it. Sarah approached down the aisle and a sigh escaped her lips.

"Natalie! Tammy told me you were on board. Whatever possessed you to quit your job?"

"I wanted to do something different, Sarah."

"What were you doing in Johannesburg?"

"A holiday was long overdue. I've spent so many nights in Johannesburg but never really explored the city and surroundings. I took an extended vacation."

Sarah grinned. "Did you meet anyone while you were there?"

Pain shot through Natalie's heart when she uttered the denial. "No. I wasn't really interested in meeting another man."

"Whatever happened between you and Greg? You two were an item for a long time," Sarah said. "I thought for sure you'd two would make up." A nearby passenger queried her. "Oops, I'd better go. I'll talk to you later," she said and hastened to attend to the passenger.

Natalie was glad that Sarah had to attend to her work, though she knew the two stewardesses would approach her again. For the time being, at least, they'd be kept busy and would leave her alone. Her heart felt leaden at the realization of the distance she was putting between herself and the man she loved. She'd alienated him. Their brief interlude was over and she could look back on it as something one could only experience in a dream.

Or a nightmare.

For most of the flight she tried to sleep. Fortunately the plane experienced turbulence and several passengers became airsick and needed Tammy's and Sarah's attention. The two women left her alone.

When the captain announced that they were approaching Vancouver airport, Natalie's throat constricted.

Home.

Soon, she would be back in her own apartment and start a new life.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

atalie stood in the middle of her living room and looked around. This was home, but for some reason, she felt like a stranger in her own apartment. A sense of utter desolation overwhelmed her and for the first time she allowed her tears to flow freely.

Resolutely, she pulled herself together. "You said you'd never shed another tear over a man," she told herself. "What's the matter with you? Stop whimpering like a teenager. It's over. Get on with your life."

She walked to the sliding doors, unlocked them and stepped out on the balcony. "The concrete jungle," she said softly as she gazed at the sprawling city of Burnaby. "Ryan was so right. I feel stifled now. I don't belong here anymore." Her words caused her eyes to pool again. She swallowed hard, but she could not get rid of the lump in her throat.

That night, she cried herself to sleep. Her efforts to stop the tears were useless. It wasn't self-pity that caused the pain. The realization that she'd alienated herself from the man she loved, that her soul mate was lost to her forever, tore her apart.

"Nattie! You're home!" Leslie exclaimed the next morning when she walked into Natalie's bedroom to water the hanging plant.

Natalie sat up with a start. She rubbed her eyes that felt as if they were full of grit. "Mom, you startled me."

"Why didn't you phone me?" Leslie said as she hurriedly set down the watering can and rushed to the bed to hug her daughter.

"My phone is disconnected, remember?" Natalie said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. Her stomach did a somersault and when Leslie let go off her, she ran for the bathroom.

Leslie gazed after her daughter with worried eyes. She'd noticed the dark rings under Natalie's eyes and obvious signs of tears. Quickly she walked to the kitchen and made coffee.

Natalie splashed cold water onto her face. She dabbed at her swollen eyes with a wet washcloth and grimaced at her reflection. "Natalie, you look like shit," she said softly. "Must be the party animal look."

When she left the bathroom, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee greeted her. "Mom, you're an angel," she smiled and gave her mother a brief hug.

"You don't have any cream," Leslie said.

"No. I just got home last night. There is a can of evaporated milk in one of the cupboards. That will do."

"Nattie, you don't look too well and I thought I just heard you throwing up. Are you sick? Is that why you came home early?" Leslie asked worriedly. Natalie took the mug of coffee Leslie handed her and sipped from it. She savored the rich cinnamon blend. "Mom, I think I'm pregnant," she announced.

Leslie almost choked on her coffee. She spluttered, coughed and put her mug on the coffee table. "Pregnant? So you and Greg made up after all?" she asked.

"Mom, I told you. Greg died."

Leslie digested this news for a moment. "Then who is —"  $\,$ 

"The man I worked for. Ryan Jamieson."

"I don't understand. I'm happy you're finally going to have a baby, but why did you choose a total stranger to father a child? And how did Greg die? You know, he became so violent when he tried to find out where you were. He threatened to kill me."

"Mom, I'm not even sure I'm pregnant. I think I am because I haven't had my periods for some months and I've been waking up feeling sick every morning."

"That sounds like morning sickness to me," Leslie said knowingly. "When I was pregnant with you, it lasted about three months. But what happened to Greg?"

"A lion killed Greg. It's a long story, Mom. You'd better get a refill before I start telling you everything," Natalie said and held out her empty mug. "Can you fill mine up too, please?"

Leslie listened patiently while Natalie told her the whole story. When she finally stopped talking, Natalie got up to get more coffee. "That's it, Mom. Now you know all of it." "You really love this man, Nattie. That's why you've been crying. Does he know about the baby?"

"No. I didn't tell him because he made it obvious that he didn't want a family." Natalie walked back to the couch and sank down on it. "I do love him, but I'll get over it. He used me, Mom, and I'll never forgive him for that."

Leslie shook her head and gazed at her daughter thoughtfully. "Are you sure that you were only an experiment? That he used you for his book? Maybe it started out that way, but by the sounds of it, he fell in love with you too."

"Then why didn't he ask me to marry him? Why did he write about our love in detail? Like I want the whole world to read about my sex life!" Natalie pulled a bitter face.

"Honey, I can't believe you're thirty eight. You're so naive. Of course a man like Ryan would shy away from the thought of marriage. He travels a lot, so doesn't really have time for a wife and family, and he's been a bachelor all his life. Men are strange creatures. You have to know how to handle them. Exploding about his book certainly didn't help to endear you to him."

"Mom, I thought about it a lot last night. When he asked me to marry him on the plane, he was quite serious, though it would have only been a marriage of convenience. Surely that tells you something? His publisher asked him to change his style. He didn't tell me that it was changing to romance. He used me for research, mother. If I had accepted his crazy offer in the first place, I bet he'd be begging me for a divorce right now."

"But you suggested he hire a secretary. And because of Greg stalking you, you took the job when Ryan offered it to you. So, aren't you to blame for this whole affair, too? You were playing with fire when you went traipsing off into the jungle with three men. And is it really a romance novel?"

Natalie felt exasperated. It was almost as if her mother was sticking up for Ryan. "No, it's mainstream fiction. Romance is a secondary part of the story. You don't want to understand. Don't you know how hurt I felt when he suggested we live together? How painful it was for me to hear that he didn't want a family when I suspected that I was carrying his child? And then when I read his book, all the details of our love affair—"

"Why don't you make an appointment with the doctor, Natalie? At least you'll know for sure," Leslie said trying to change the subject.

"All I need to do for now is buy one of those pregnancy tests. I'll do that today."

"Would you like me to stay a while?"

"Thanks, Mom. I'll be fine. I have lots to do today. I need to unpack, buy groceries, not to mention look for a job and a different place to live. This apartment is barely large enough for me, let alone for two of us," she said with a wan smile.

"Where do you plan to move?"

"I don't know yet. I've developed a hatred for the city. Maybe I'll look for a little house in the country. It depends of course where I find work."

"First thing get your phone hooked up. I can't even

call you," Leslie complained.

"Maybe I should get my cell phone reconnected. If I'm going to move anyway, it would be a waste of money to pay connection charges for the regular phone twice."

"Right. Why don't you do that today? And let me know what the test shows? I guess I'll go then, if you're sure you don't need my help."

"I'll be fine now, Mom. Thanks anyway. It helped to talk about it all. Thanks for listening."

Leslie smiled. She stood up, walked over to the couch and kissed Natalie on the forehead. "Isn't that what mothers are for? Now hurry up with that good news. I don't dare be happy until you've confirmed it."

Natalie locked the door after Leslie left and leaned against it for a moment. Talking about her experiences had helped but it had not lessened the pain.

The first thing she did that day was to get her cellular phone reconnected. Then she went shopping, picked up a paper and last of all the pregnancy test.

As soon as she arrived back home, she did the test. Her suspicions were soon confirmed. It showed positive. She called Leslie immediately.

"Grandma? You can start knitting," she said.

"Really? I'm so happy, Nattie," her mother said her voice heavy with emotion. "But you'd better go and see a doctor right away."

"You know, Mom, it's sad that this baby won't have a father, but I'm happy, too. I love Ryan, no matter what he's done to hurt me and at least I'll have part of him. I was going to return the advance wages he paid me, but now I'm going to keep the money. I don't think I want to go back to work just yet. Maybe I'll stay home during my pregnancy."

"You'd better go and see a doctor and make sure everything is all right," Leslie advised.

"Yes. As soon as I've found another place to live I'll look for a doctor. I'll be fine for the time being."

"Don't wait too long, honey. Older women having babies can be risky."

"I know, Mom. Please don't tell anyone yet? Let's just keep it between us for now. I know you're dying to call everyone, but I don't want anyone to know yet."

"Okay, I won't tell anyone just yet though I'm dying to tell your aunts. They're always bragging about their grandchildren and -"

"Yes, and pretty soon you can brag about yours too," Natalie interrupted. "I'll call you later, okay?"

After she hung up the phone and made herself a cup of tea, she opened up the newspaper and started to look through the ads. Most of the houses listed were in the city and suburbs and the rents were astronomical. After she reviewed the short list of homes in the country, she decided her best option was to call a realtor.

She called several. None of them had houses for rent in her price bracket. Listlessly she leafed through the Vancouver Sun. A full-page ad caught her eye. 'Country Homes at affordable prices. Stop paying rent. Invest in your own property,' was the headline. Pine Acres was a new development just past Hope. Natalie saw the mortgage payments listed at the bottom of the page. Her eyebrows shot up. They were less than the rent she was paying now, and that was for a three bedroom home. The photograph of the development looked picturesque. Down payment was only five percent of the total price, but she could afford more if she cashed in her saving bonds. Quickly, she mentally calculated her savings and how much she'd need to keep in the bank for cost of living.

Still musing over the photographs, she dialed the realtor's number. "Good afternoon, I'd like to speak to someone regarding your ad in today's paper for houses in Pine Acres."

Within half an hour the buzzer rang. The realtor, an older man with silver gray hair, keen blue eyes and glasses, first showed her some pictures and floor plans. Then he offered to drive her to Hope to view some of the homes.

It was a two-hour drive to Hope. Natalie gazed at the passing countryside, and unwillingly her thoughts dwelled on the beauty of the jungle and Ryan—

### Chapter Thirty-Three

yan paced the floor. Natalie had been gone a month and he'd not heard from her at all. Several times he tried to phone her, but her number was still disconnected.

The first week after she left, he locked himself in his study and stubbornly worked on the book. Desperately he tried to put her out of his mind, but he couldn't.

Neither could he concentrate on the task at hand. Each paragraph he edited and polished brought back memories. Finally he yanked the disk out of the PC, closed the program and called his editor.

Judy Harrison was adamant. She would not listen to his arguments that he couldn't write romance, that mainstream fiction wasn't his style.

"You signed a contract, Ryan. I want to see that book on my desk within three months. You have a deadline. Stick to it!"

"Judy, let me make it a non-fiction, like the others. It'll be different, I promise."

But he couldn't budge her. He tried to start from scratch using Natalie's notes and his own, conjured up a heroine in his mind and used different situations, but somehow, it always read the same. This was his and Natalie's story, not some imagined hero and heroine.

Mamete knocked on the door. "Master Ryan, your lunch is ready."

"Take it away, Mamete. I'm not hungry. Maybe you can make me a pot of coffee instead?" he asked through the closed door.

Mamete shook her head. "Stubborn man," she muttered and carried the tray back to the kitchen. "He's starving himself to death. If only I hadn't promised Missie not to tell him about the baby."

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Four months later, Ryan still didn't have a completed manuscript. Judy Harrison had phoned several times and was furious. "Ryan, you've been with us so many years. This is the first time you've ever breached a contract. Smarten up! The publisher is getting impatient. We have this book slotted for December," she told him.

"Look, the book is a flop. Just tell him that I can't do it," Ryan had replied. "My career as a writer is over. I can't even turn it into nonfiction. I've tried."

"Non-fiction is not acceptable. You know that. Look, at least send me a preview. A synopsis, anything at all."

But he hadn't sent her anything. He couldn't. Natalie's words had dug deep into his heart and after he thought about it, he had to admit she was right. Maybe she wouldn't have been so angry if he had told her from the beginning that he planned to base the story on their experiences.

If he could have admitted that it had started out as an experiment and he'd not expected his feelings to run so deep, would she have forgiven him?

He reclined in the lay-z-boy, a near empty bottle of brandy on the floor next to him, a full glass in his hand. With brooding eyes he stared at the computer.

Suddenly his eyes lit up. "That's it!" he said triumphantly. "I'm going to finish the book and bring it to her. She can do with it what she wants. It's her story, too."

He walked into his bedroom and headed straight for the bathroom, poured the brandy down the sink and peeled his clothes off. He grimaced when he saw his reflection in the mirror. He'd grown a beard. Living on alcohol and coffee had given him a haggard appearance. The skin under his eyes was puffy and shadowed from lack of sleep.

After having a shower, he felt refreshed. Now invigorated and filled with ideas he was anxious to work on the book.

After he was done, he pushed the intercom button. "Mamete, please cook me a huge dinner and the blackest coffee you can make. I'm turning the phone off. Please take messages for me."

He worked forty-eight hours straight until his eyes burned and his body screamed in protest. Allowing himself only an hour's rest in his chair, he continued to abuse himself until he finished the book. The last chapter spoke of all his misgivings, his feelings for Natalie, how much he missed her and finally the one subject he tried to fight all this time. He wanted to marry her and spend the rest of their lives together. When he finally typed The End, he heaved a sigh of satisfaction, saved the book on disk and hit the print button. Within minutes the printer was working at a furious pace.

Feeling satisfied that the book was completed and that he knew what he would do with it, he left his study for the first time since Natalie had left. Mamete, busy kneading dough, looked up in surprise when Ryan walked into the kitchen. He strode up to her and gave her a bear hug. "Mamete, I'm going to Canada!" he told her.

"Put me down, Master Ryan. You're squeezing me to death," she laughed. "And you're getting dough all over your shirt."

Ryan set her back on her feet and helped himself to fresh coffee. "I'm going to Canada to get Natalie, Mamete."

"So you've finally come to your senses," she grumbled while washing her hands. "About time, too."

"There's one problem. I don't know where she is. Her phone is disconnected and the operator hasn't got a new number for her. Maybe she's moved and has an unlisted number now."

"Maybe she had to move," Mamete said with a knowing smile.

"What do you mean? Have you heard from her, Mamete?" Ryan asked while grabbing a freshly baked scone. "No. I haven't heard from her. Why don't you call her mother? Surely she would know."

"I don't have her phone number and neither do I know her last name," Ryan said.

"But, Master Ryan, Missy called her mother from here. The phone number will be on the bills."

"Mamete, you're an angel!" Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You didn't want to talk to nobody," she muttered. "You were just as stubborn as a mule."

Ryan didn't hear her last remark. He was already on his way to the mail tray and looking for telephone statements. His bills were paid automatically via the bank but he received statements every three months.

His hand shook as he pulled the last two statements out of the envelopes. He ran his finger down the row of long distance numbers until he found one to Canada. That had to be the one. He marked the number with a red pen and picked up the phone.

As he dialed the number, his heart beat loudly in his chest. The phone rang a long time before someone answered. A sleepy woman's voice said, "Hello."

"This is Ryan Jamieson. I'm sorry for disturbing you in the middle of the night but I'm trying to find a phone number for Natalie Dubois. Are you her mother?"

Leslie woke up in a hurry. "Yes, I am. Mr. Jamieson, I don't think-"

"I'm coming to Canada. I want to see Natalie. Can you give me her address? Her phone number?"

"That's not a good idea. I don't think she wants to

see you, or even hear from you. I'm sorry, but—"

"Look, I'm getting on the first available flight. You could save me a lot of time and money. If I have to hire a private detective to find her, I will."

Leslie made a sudden decision but first she needed to ask him. "Mr. Jamieson—"

"Ryan," he interrupted.

"Ryan, do you love my daughter?"

Ryan was taken aback for a moment but answered honestly, "Yes, I love her more than life itself. It was my own stubborn stupidity that drove her away."

"Thank you. I'll give you my address. When you arrive in Canada, please come and see me." Ryan quickly wrote down the address.

"By the way, my name is Leslie."

"Thank you so much, Leslie. I'll be seeing you soon!"

He hung up the phone and walked back to the kitchen. "Mamete, you're a genius. I have her mother's address. I'm going to book a flight now."

"Make sure you don't mess it up this time, Master Ryan. That girl loves you."

"And I love her," Ryan said with a broad smile.

"Then you'd better marry her," Mamete stated briskly.

Tomy came into the kitchen for his coffee. "Ryan, you've finally come out of your hibernation!"

Tomy had dropped the Master a long time ago, much to his wife's disgust.

"Yes, Tomy. I'm going to Canada to bring back Natalie."

"What if she doesn't want to live here?" Tomy

asked.

"Mm, that's a possibility I hadn't thought of yet."

"Ryan, it takes two to make a relationship work. Two to make decisions. You've been on your own a long time but if you're serious about Natalie, you'll have to change your ways."

"Oh, I'm serious, Tomy. You'd better believe I am. Tell me, did she ever talk to you during your excursions into the city?"

"Not much. Mainly about life here in general."

Ryan poured another cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. "Where did you take her?"

"Wherever she wanted to go. One day she had me drive her to New Canada of all places. She wanted to visit some orphanage."

Ryan's eyebrows shot up. "That reminds me of something. Did you tell Natalie anything about me, Mamete? About my years in the orphanage, or my other name? I know you denied it before, but don't worry, I won't get mad at you."

Mamete stopped peeling the potatoes and turned to face Ryan. "Never. You told me all that in confidence. I haven't even told Tomy."

"Then how on earth would she know those things about me?"

"Master Ryan, you do talk in your sleep sometimes," Mamete said with a broad grin.

He looked at her doubtfully. "She said some really strange things the day she left." He gulped down the remainder of his coffee and stood up. "I'm going to book a flight right now." Then a thought occurred to him and he voiced it with a broad smile, "And pay a visit to the jeweler!"

### Chapter Thirty-Four

A atalie pulled into the driveway of her property. Not only had she bought a house, but she'd also invested in a small car. As always when she drove in, she stopped for a moment to admire her house with pride. It was partially brick and the rest was light blue vinyl siding. She'd worked hard that summer to landscape her front yard and had planted bulbs in anticipation of spring. She'd also planted shrubs and trees. The backyard she had professionally landscaped.

The house stood on half an acre. It had three bedrooms, a den, dining room, living room, en-suite bathroom, main bathroom and a full basement. The basement was unfinished, but that was on her list for a future project after the baby was born and she'd gone back to work.

Her neighbors on both sides were younger couples who had bought their first home. She got along well with both of them. Linda, who lived to the left, was expecting her second child in six months. She'd already promised Natalie that she would baby-sit when Natalie returned to work. The pregnancy progressed with no problems. She'd had several ultrasounds and everything was fine. Her blood pressure remained stable, and she watched her diet and went for daily walks.

Once a week, Leslie visited. Together, they decorated the nursery and bought baby furniture.

She got out of the car with difficulty and grimaced. Soon, she wouldn't fit behind the steering wheel. She'd even asked the doctor if there was the possibility of twins, but the ultrasound only showed one baby.

The doctor calculated her due date to be mid January. He went by the baby's size, because Natalie had no idea when she'd last had a period. She stopped taking the pill after breaking up with Greg and it had thrown her cycle out of whack. She remembered having a light period in the jungle, just after they had begun their excursion, but after that she'd seen nothing.

A shiver ran down her back as she punched in the number on the security panel. The sky above was a heavy gray, promising snow.

The phone started to ring as she walked into the kitchen and dropped her bag of shopping on the counter. Quickly she grabbed it off the wall. It was her mother.

"Hi, Mom. I just got home. I picked up these cute pajamas for the baby and some more sheets. You'll see them tomorrow."

"Natalie, that's why I'm phoning. I can't come tomorrow. I've got unexpected company arriving."

"Oh, what a pity. I was looking forward to your

visit. Anyone I know?"

Leslie changed the subject. "What did the doctor say? You did have an appointment today, didn't you?"

"Yes. Everything is fine. The baby is kicking up a storm. I'm sure he's going to be a football player."

"What makes you so sure it's a boy?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm only seven months and the doctor says the baby is big. He's very active."

"So were you, dear. Active, I mean. You weren't a big baby by all means. Seven pounds is about normal."

"I can't wait until it's here. I'm having difficulty sleeping. It almost seems as if the baby sleeps mostly during the day and decides to kick like crazy at night. And the pressure on my bladder is terrible."

"Are you sure the date is right, Nattie?"

"No, I'm not sure at all, but the doctor seems sure."

"Nonsense. Sometimes doctors think they know everything. Maybe the baby will come earlier."

"Now that would be a bonus."

"I'll call you later tonight, Nattie. I need to clean house."

"Must be important company," Natalie said. "Is there a man in your life?"

"Eh-you might say that, but it's not what you think."

"Mom, if you found someone who can make you happy, I'd be glad for you. You've been alone a long time."

"No one can ever replace your father, Nattie. He was the love of my life."

"I know what you mean now," Natalie tried to fight the sadness that suddenly attacked her.

"I'll call you tonight, dear."

Natalie put the phone down and leaned against the counter for a moment. Everything was perfect in her life. She had her own home, a car, and a baby to look forward to. Only one thing marred her perfect little existence. The love that she couldn't forget or put in the past where it belonged. It stayed with her, night and day. Sometimes she'd get up in the middle of the night and look at the pictures that Kwame and Basilio had taken of the two of them together, and the shots she'd taken herself of their campsite, of the three men, of Ryan by himself.

Now, her mother's words brought the longing back into her heart. The desire to phone Ryan was strong. She gazed at the phone and reached for it but pulled her hand back angrily.

Quickly she packed the groceries away into the cupboards and walked with the sheets and baby pajamas to the nursery.

She sat in the white rocking chair and rocked slowly. With the help of her mother, together they had painted the room a sunny yellow. A bright border with circus animals bisected the walls. Stuffed animals hung from the ceiling. Her mother had embroidered pillows with nursery rhymes. They lay scattered on the light yellow carpet. Frilly white lacy curtains graced the large window and the drapes were white with yellow and orange suns and moons.

The crib was white. She'd found a comforter and matching bump pad with circus animals. It was made

up, ready for her baby. She stood up and wound the mobile that hung above the crib. It was a happy room.

For a moment, her hand stroked the small pillow while she listened to Brahms's lullaby. She closed her eyes and imagined a small head on that pillow and smiled. *Who will he look like*? she wondered.

The baby kicked hard, as if telling her that he was satisfied with the room. Natalie smiled and stroked her belly for a moment. She felt a large bump in the hollow of her hand and wondered if it was a foot or his head.

Still stroking the bump, she left the room and went to the living room. She opened the drawer of the large, light oak coffee table and removed an album. Slowly she opened it. On the first page was a color photo of Ryan that she had enlarged in a weak moment.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

yan rang the bell and waited impatiently for the door to open. An older version of Natalie stood before him, except for the eyes. Her mother's eyes were brown. Silver gray hair framed a sweet face. He guessed Leslie to be in her late fifties. Her eyes summed him up, until she extended a hand and said, "Ryan, I presume?"

"Yes. Seems I've brought snow with me," he said with a grin.

Leslie glanced at the driveway. "I see you've rented a car. How good are you driving on snowy roads? Do come in. How rude of me to stand here babbling at the door."

Ryan followed her into a cozy living room. He glanced around feeling immediately comfortable in this house. A fireplace with a roaring fire in it lent an air of homeliness to the room.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable and I'll get you a cup of coffee," Leslie said.

"I'm really anxious to get going. Are you going to give me Natalie's address now?" he asked.

"After you've had a cup of my coffee," Leslie said.

She wanted to talk to him before giving him Natalie's address.

Ryan waited impatiently. He walked to the mantle and looked at the row of pictures on it. One was of Natalie when she graduated. His eyes remained glued to the young woman for a while before his gaze roamed lazily over the other pictures. A baby. He presumed it was Natalie. A wedding picture of Leslie and her husband. His gaze strayed back to the graduation picture. His fingers traced the line of her lips for a moment.

Leslie came back into the room carrying a tray. "Do sit down, Ryan. Would you like cream and sugar?"

"Yes, please." He was about to sit down when he spotted the picture at the end of the mantle. He stared at it with a faraway expression. "It can't be," he muttered softly.

"What can't be?" Leslie asked wondering what he was talking about.

"That picture, on the end of the mantle."

"That's Nattie when she was ten years old. Wasn't she adorable?" Leslie said proudly.

Ryan took the picture of the mantle with shaking fingers. "Nattie?"

"Yes, our pet name for her. She didn't become Natalie until she grew up."

"Leslie, what is your last name? You never told me."

"I'm sorry. It's O'Conner."

"Oh, Lord. Now it all becomes too clear." Ryan intently studied the picture.

"I'm afraid you're talking in riddles."

"Does the name Robert Lowell mean anything to you?" Ryan asked watching her face. Her expression confirmed his suspicions.

"Why, yes," she said after a moment's thought. "He was one of the lads in the orphanage. Nattie used to play with him. Such a sweet boy. Nattie never heard from him after we left South Africa."

"Leslie, my full name is Robert Ryan Lowell-Jamieson. I became Ryan Jamieson when I sold my first book."

"Well I'll be—" Leslie stepped forward to look closer at his face. "Yes, now that I know I see the resemblance. "Good lord, isn't it a small world! You and Nattie, after all this time! Isn't it romantic?"

"If she'll have me."

"Well, that depends entirely on you, Ryan. What do I call you now?"

"You can call me whatever you want, but I'm so used to Ryan now and the name Robert doesn't hold pleasant memories for me. Do you know that Natalie visited the New Canada orphanage while she was staying with me? I found it quite puzzling. Now I know."

"You didn't tell her you were Robert?"

"No. That's why I was so puzzled. Natalie must have gone to the orphanage to find out what happened to Robert Lowell. I was registered under my full name there and they must have told her. Leslie, it's good to see you after all these years. I understand now why you looked familiar when I saw you. I thought at first that it was because Natalie resembles you, but that wasn't it. You are Nurse O'Conner, the only employee, besides the native staff, during those troubling years who ever had a kind word for any of the boys."

"I'm glad you always thought of me with such fond memories, Ryan," Leslie said, moved by his words.

"So Natalie never got any of my letters?" he asked.

"No. We never received any mail from South Africa."

"I bet that ogre of a matron never mailed them."

"Probably not. Do you remember that older lad, I think his name was Terry," Leslie said.

"Yes, I remember him. He was almost eighteen and due to leave soon."

"Right. Well, he wrote a letter to a girl, one of the lasses who came to the folk dance. In it, he opened his heart and wrote her all his grievances about the orphanage. Matron read it. That night he got such a whipping he couldn't sit down for a week. I felt very sorry for him."

"I wonder how many of the letters actually did go out? What was the sense in having us all sit in the dining room and making us write letters?" Ryan said bitterly.

"I know. And the good food that matron and her husband kept for themselves and divided among their family. It was a sad state of affairs."

"Well, maybe we can talk some more another time. I'm anxious to go and see Natalie now and set things right between us."

Leslie wrote the address on a sheet of paper and gave him directions how to get to Natalie's house. "I

wish you good luck, Ryan. She's very stubborn. I know she loves you deeply, but pride has stopped her from calling you."

"I know. I'm stubborn, too, and proud. It's something we have to overcome, both of us, if we are to make a life together."

"You'll find her quite changed, Ryan," Leslie said with a mischievous smile.

"How?"

"You'll see. Now off with you. Phone me tonight and let me know how things went?"

"I will," he promised.

"Drive carefully," she called after him, but he was already in the drivers seat and started the car.

She watched him drive away and smiled. Soon, she'd get a phone call from her daughter with happy news –

### Chapter Thirty-Six

atalie heard a car pull into the driveway. She frowned. "I thought Mom was having company today?" she said aloud and walked to the living room window to look out.

It was dark. She couldn't see the person who sat quietly behind the steering wheel. Neither did she recognize the car. "Who on earth is that?" she wondered.

She didn't have to wonder long. Her heart leaped when Ryan's tall frame stepped out of the car. *How did he find me*? she thought. *Why did he come*? *The feeling of joy was replaced by suspicion. Maybe he's come to get the money I owe him. Well, he's not going to get it.* 

Forcing herself not to look at him anymore, she pulled the drapes and walked away from the window to the top of the stairs. She sat on the top stair, her chin on her knees and waited.

The doorbell rang. Once. Twice. A pregnant pause, then again. Only this time it didn't stop ringing. Ryan kept his finger on the button.

Natalie covered her ears but it could not drown out the penetrating sound. She couldn't stand it anymore. She walked down the stairs and stood behind the door. "Go away, Ryan!" she shouted. "I don't want to see you." The baby leaped in her belly as if in protest.

"But I want to see you. Open the door!"

"No! Go find yourself another guinea pig."

"You're all the guinea pig I want, my love. Open the door!"

"No!"

"Dammit, if you don't open that door I'll kick it in!"

She heard his fists on the door and what sounded like a kick. "I'll call the police. Go away!"

"Nattie, I want to marry you! I love you!" he shouted.

Natalie stepped back. "Nattie?" she said softly. "I'll never marry you as long as I live! What's the matter? Couldn't you find anyone else to take my place? Not one willing woman to experiment with? You need some more romantic experience, Mr. Jamieson?"

"Nattie, stop it! Open this damn door!"

"How many copies has the book sold so far, Ryan? Is our love affair making world headlines yet?"

She knew darned well that the book had not come out because she inquired regularly at the bookstore, only to hear that Ryan Jamieson's new novel had not been published yet.

"Natalie, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" he shouted. "The damn manuscript is in the car. It's yours. You can do with it what you want!"

"I don't believe you!"

"Then come out and see for yourself!"

The phone started to ring. Natalie ignored it. The answering machine clicked in. It was her neighbor, Linda. She'd heard all the commotion and was worried. "Natalie, are you okay? Do you want me to call the cops? Natalie, are you there?"

Natalie walked up the stairs as fast as she could. The doorbell kept ringing and Ryan relentlessly pounded on the door. Quickly she grabbed the phone.

"Linda, it's all right. Sorry about the racket."

"Are you sure? I'll call the police for you."

"No. Don't do that. I'm sorry about the noise. It'll stop shortly."

"Are you sure you're okay? You sound strange."

"I feel strange. I have to go now. I'll call you back later, Linda."

Holding her belly, she walked down the stairs as fast as she could. It sounded like Ryan was throwing his full weight against the door now, but it was solid. She knew it wouldn't give easily.

He rattled the doorknob. The alarm started to go off.

"I'm not going to give up, Natalie!" he shouted. "I love you. Marry me!"

With trembling fingers she tried to disengage the alarm to stop the piercing sound. Between the wailing siren, his shouting and the bell, the din was deafening. Several times she punched in the wrong number until she finally hit the right code.

Slowly her hand reached for the deadbolt. She pulled the door open suddenly and stood behind it. Ryan had just been ready to throw his weight against the door. He came crashing into the foyer and fell flat on his face. The wind sent snow flying in after him. For moments she stood frozen, still hiding behind the door until the absurdity of the situation made her burst out in uncontrollable laughter.

Ryan scrambled up with an expression like an affronted tomcat. "Ouch. This foyer needs carpeting," he muttered as he brushed himself off.

"I quite like my marble tiles, thank you," Natalie snapped.

"But they're like rock!" he said.

She looked into his eyes and was lost. They were a warm brown and shone with love for her. "Ryan-"

"Natalie, will you marry me?" he asked. "Dammit, woman, say something. Come out from behind that door and close it. It's cold out there."

The scent of his cologne drifted toward her. She drank in the sight of his face, of the familiar dimples in his cheeks, the ponytail she hated so much and now wanted nothing more than to undo and tangle her fingers in his hair.

He reached out and pulled the door from her hand. It slammed shut. He reached for her but stopped short and stared. "You've gained a lot of weight," he said while his eyes raked her body.

"Yes, I have," she answered softly. "But I'll lose it soon."

He grabbed her then, by the shoulders. His fingers dug into her flesh while he shook her slightly. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't give me much of a chance," she said softly.

"Bullshit. All you had to do was say, "Ryan, I'm pregnant. Was that so hard?"

"Yes. Especially after you told me you didn't want a family." "I'm sorry. No, I gave up the thought of a family a long time ago. But if you'd told me you were pregnant—"

"It's a baby, Ryan. The baby you didn't want anymore."

"Not on purpose," he barked. "But that doesn't mean I would have abandoned you and not wanted my child."

"You made it clear that you didn't want a permanent relationship. What was I to do? And then the book -"

He crushed her to him then being careful not to squeeze too hard. "Sweetheart, I did want it and I didn't. I've been a free spirit for so long. The decision to commit myself wasn't made lightly, I assure you, but I can't live without you. We belong together, you and I. Without you I am but half a man."

She realized how hard it was for him to utter these words. Suddenly her heart opened up to him and overflowed with all the love she bore him. "Ryan, yes. I'll marry you," she whispered softly.

He didn't hear her. He was still prattling on about the time she left him. "If only you'd told me then. I was just a stubborn mule and wouldn't bend. You should have made me, and then I would -"

"Ryan!" she almost shouted. "Yes! I'll marry you!"

His fingers were in her hair. He held her head back and gazed into her eyes. Her lips were parted ready for his kiss. He claimed them then in a crushing, desperate kiss filled with all the pain and longing of the past months.

The phone rang again. Linda's voice drifted from

the answering machine.

"Natalie, are you okay? I'm coming over."

Natalie ignored the answering machine. Ryan scooped her into his arms and carried her up the stairs. She rested her head against his shoulder and inhaled his familiar male scent. "I love you," she said softly against his warm neck.

Neither of them heard the front door open or Linda step into the foyer.

He lowered Natalie to the floor and set her on her feet. "You'll never know how much I've missed you," he said and claimed her lips again.

Linda gazed up at the two at the top of the stairs and smiled. She always wondered who Natalie's mystery man was. Now she knew. Softly she closed the door and left the two lovers alone.

Ryan's hand stole down to Natalie's belly and rested there. "I guess I'll have to marry you in a hurry now," he murmured against her lips while his other hand dug in his pocket for the small velvet box it contained. He snapped it open and pulled the ring out. "Give me your hand, Natalie," he said softly.

Her eyes were luminous with tears as she gazed at the ring he placed on her finger. The two-carat diamond sparkled up at her. "Ryan, it's beautiful. You came prepared—"

"Of course I came prepared, silly goose," he said and pulled her toward him.

Suddenly she pushed him away. "Just a minute. What about the book? What happened to it?"

"I told you. It's in the car. I never sent it to the publisher. And I couldn't write another one. Not that I didn't try, but since I write about real things, I couldn't come up with an imagined story to take the place of ours. It's yours, Natalie. You can destroy it, read it, keep it as a memento, whatever you want."

"Go ahead and send it away, my love. I'm so happy, I want to shout it out to the world."

"You're not mad about the book anymore?" he asked carefully.

"Of course I am!" she said but her eyes belied the statement. "But I want you to add to the ending."

"You never read the whole thing," he murmured against her cheek.

"No. But I will now and I like books to have happy endings."

"Are we going to stand at the top of the stairs all night or are you going to invite me in?" he asked.

"You're wet," she stated and started to laugh. "And so am I."

"No wonder. You left me standing in the snow for an hour." Reluctantly he let go of her and took off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. He picked her up, carried her into the living room and lay her gently on the floor before the fireplace. Carefully he pulled the damp sweater over her head then pulled her slacks down to expose her swollen belly. He sat on his knees beside her and stroked the taut flesh in wonder, tracing each vein so visible under the fragile taut skin. "When?" he asked softly.

"Soon, I think. The doctor says I have two months to go, but I think he's wrong." The baby kicked then. She watched his eyes light up at the sudden movement against his hands. "Nattie, oh Nattie, I've never felt so happy and so at peace," he said and lay down beside her.

She curled against him. "Welcome home, Ryan, Robert, after all these years, welcome home."

"I have to call your mother," he murmured against her lips.

"Later," she said, deep down thankful that her mother had been instrumental in bringing them together.

"All that time I was with my Nattie, the little girl I cared for so much, and I didn't know it. I always thought there was something familiar about you, but I couldn't put my finger on it."

"Yes," she said softly. "I felt it too. Isn't life strange? I guess we always belonged together. It just took a long time before we found each other."

"All those wasted years," he said and claimed a kiss.

"Learning years, Ryan. We're both home now."

"Home is where the heart is, and my heart is with you. It always was."

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

uch to Leslie's chagrin, they married very quietly on Christmas Eve. Leslie had always dreamed of a beautiful, large wedding for her daughter. Instead, there were just Ryan and Natalie, Leslie and Linda and her husband as witnesses.

Natalie wore cream maternity slacks and a lacy cream top. It was the most suitable outfit she could find. Before the ceremony, they attended the candlelight service. The minister had not needed much persuasion to marry them. He'd taken one look at Natalie's belly and agreed to marry them after the service on Christmas Eve.

After the service, they went downstairs for traditional hot chocolate and goodies. It seemed to take forever until the last members of the congregation left the church basement. Natalie knew most of the older members. She'd attended the church for many years until her job as stewardess took her away from home most Sundays.

When they'd entered the church, she noticed heads turning and the whispers, but she hardly cared.

Proudly she walked beside Ryan and sat beside Leslie in the second pew from the front.

Downstairs, quite a few people approached them and looked for an introduction. Some were awed, as they had read Ryan's books.

"Are you two ready?" Pastor Fitzgibbons asked. "It's late. You two are the first to ever marry on Christmas Eve. Did you know that? At least in this church."

"We're ready, Pastor," Ryan said and squeezed Natalie's arm.

They followed the pastor up the inside stairs and took their places before the altar. Linda and Greg stood beside them. Leslie sat on the front pew, tears already soaking her cheeks.

The baby was unusually quiet that evening. It worried Natalie a little. She was so used to the turbulence in her belly that to feel no movement at all was strange. All day she'd had an aching back. Ryan had rubbed her back several times, and it relieved the pain a little. But now, standing there listening to the pastor's long speech, the pain returned in full force.

Putting her arm through Ryan's, she leaned on him. He looked down at her and patted her hand.

"Ryan Robert Lowell-Jamieson, do you take Natalie Dubois as your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold -"

The church spun around her for a moment and she swayed on her feet. Ryan noticed and steadied her.

"Natalie Dubois, do you take—"

Looking into Ryan's eyes she repeated her vows then placed her father's ring on his finger. "I now pronounce you man and wife. Let us pray," the pastor's voice boomed through the empty church.

Pastor Fitzgibbons congratulated them. "Mr. and Mrs. Jamieson may God bless you both," he said.

They signed the papers. Linda and Greg signed as witnesses and then Ryan could just catch Natalie in his arms as she fainted.

"Something is wrong," he called out to Leslie. "She hasn't felt well all day, complained about terrible backaches. I have to take her to the hospital."

"Back labor," Leslie muttered. "She never realized she's been in labor all day."

"I'll call an ambulance," the pastor said.

"No. I'll drive her myself, it's faster," Ryan said and stalked out of the church carrying Natalie in his arms.

She opened her eyes just before he put her in the car. "Ryan? What happened?"

"You fainted, darling. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"I'm fine now. I think it was just the overexcitement that did it," she said and leaned back against the seat while he fastened the seatbelt around her with difficulty.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Let's go home and celebrate," she smiled.

Leslie ran after them carrying Natalie's and Ryan's coats. "Honey, are you okay?" she asked worriedly as she handed the coats to Ryan.

"I'm fine, Mom. We'll see you at our place."

"I hope the roads have been cleared. You know how I feel about driving in snow," Leslie said.

"You can drive with us, Leslie," Ryan offered.

"No. After Christmas dinner tomorrow I have to go visit my sisters. I'd better drive my own car."

"Just follow us closely and drive slowly," Ryan advised.

"Greg and Linda have already left. Okay, I'll see you there," Leslie said and headed for her own car.

The freeway had been mostly cleared and salted though snow fell steadily from the sky and by morning the roads would be covered again. "Isn't it beautiful?" Natalie sighed. "I love a white Christmas."

"Isn't it always white?" Ryan asked.

"No. More than often it's just cold or rainy."

"Strange. I always imagined Canada cloaked in snow, especially at Christmas."

The pain in her back suddenly returned. This time it didn't stop at all and she gritted her teeth. "Ryan—" she got no further as she felt the urge to push.

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too, honey," he said while concentrating on the slippery road.

"I think the baby is coming."

"What?"

"The baby is coming. You'd better take me to the hospital."

"Isn't it too early? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she said through clenched teeth. "Hurry—"

"I shouldn't have listened to you and taken you to the hospital in the first place," he grumbled. "I'll have to get off the freeway." "Take the next exit. You can take me to Surrey Memorial," she said. "It's the closest one to here."

"Wherever that is."

"I'll direct – ooooh – Ryan – hurry – "

"Honey, I can't drive any faster. The roads are too slippery."

"So is this baby – it's coming – Ryan, stop the car –

Not being used to driving in snow, he braked too suddenly. The car spun, slid off the road and nosed into the ditch.

"Natalie, are you okay? We're in the ditch, honey," he quickly undid his seatbelt and checked to make sure she was okay.

"I don't care where we are. Help me -"

"Oh, Lord, what do I know about birthing babies," he said nervously.

"The seat – belt – "

Quickly he undid the seatbelt and searched for the handle to lean the seat back.

"My pants—" Natalie tugged frantically at the elastic waistband.

Leslie pulled up on the side of the road. She put her emergency flashers on and looked with consternation at the car that had nosed into the snowy ditch. The windows were fogged up. She saw no one emerge from the car and feared the worst. "Oh, dear God, let them be okay?" she said as she looked nervously for her cell phone. Her fingers shook as she dialed 911.

"An accident, on highway one. Send an ambulance," she shouted at the operator.

"Ma'am, your location?"

"Eh—near exit one-fifty-two. Hurry, I think they're hurt!" She closed the flap and threw the cell phone on the seat. Quickly she got out of the car and plowed through the snow. Several times she fell trying to climb down into the ditch.

Frantically, she tugged at the driver's door. It was locked. She swiped the snow off the window and pounded on it. "Ryan, Natalie, are you hurt?" she shouted.

The door opened just a crack. "Leslie, we're fine. I've unlocked the doors. Get in the back seat before you freeze."

Her heart calmed down and the awful feeling in her stomach settled. She yanked the back door open and climbed in. It wasn't easy to get into the back seat, as the car's rear end was much higher than the front. She hauled herself into the car. The wail of a newborn baby greeted her as she fell panting onto the back seat.

"Grandma, meet Holly. You just had a granddaughter," Ryan said, pride and emotion lacing his voice.

"I'll be—" Leslie said as she scrambled up and leaned over to look at the bundle Natalie held in her arms. The baby wailed lustily. She was wrapped in Ryan's jacket and was not at all impressed with the circumstances of her birth.

"Bless the Lord. I was so afraid when I saw you spin and veer off the road."

"Holly Jamieson," Natalie said softly. "Mom, look at her. She's beautiful."

"Just like her mother," Ryan said, "who can't do anything in a normal way. Sweetheart, I guess you belong in the jungle after all," he quipped.

"Law of the Jungle," Natalie said softly. "I just thought of a title for your book."

The sound of sirens approached, and soon red and blue flashing lights reflected within the car. In the distance howled an ambulance. Police opened the doors on both sides.

"Anyone hurt in here?" The one policeman asked.

"No, Officer. My wife just had a baby," Ryan said with a broad grin.

The two policemen looked at the wailing infant in Natalie's arms and smiled. "Merry Christmas," they said in unison and quickly closed the car doors to keep the cold out.

"Isn't that something?" the one officer said to the other as they climbed back up to the road to wait for the approaching ambulance. "This has just taken the edge of working night shift on Christmas. Just wait till I get home and tell the wife. A Christmas baby born in a car on the side of the road."

"Never mind your wife," said his partner with a grin. "I'm going to call the paper. This will make an excellent story!"

Ryan leaned over and placed his arm around Natalie's shoulders. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart," he said softly. "You've given me the most beautiful gift a man could ever ask for."

"And me, too," Leslie said from the back seat.