



Heat Force (Blackthorn Security #7)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Runaway bride, untamed jungle, and a brooding ex-soldier billionaire collide in this sizzling romantic suspense.

Lexi ditched her glitzy New York life and her high-profile wedding to follow her heart to a gorilla sanctuary deep in the African jungle. Life's simpler here—until Hawk shows up. A former soldier turned billionaire CEO, he's on a mission to fix his company's eco-friendly image, and the last thing Lexi needs is another rich guy who doesn't care. But why does his brooding intensity have her questioning everything she thought she wanted?

Hawk's mission? Boost his company's rep. But one encounter with Lexi, the fiery sanctuary worker, and suddenly, it's more than just business at stake. She's wild, passionate, and impossible to resist—and he's not the type to back down from a challenge.

When danger strikes and Lexi goes missing, Hawk will stop at nothing to save her. The jungle may be unforgiving, but he's not leaving without the woman who's captured his heart.

Adventure, steamy chemistry, and heart-stopping action collide in this unforgettable romance set in the wild heart of Africa.

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CHAPTER 1

The big black helicopter circled the clearing before landing. The rotor blades kicked up clouds of red dust, sending the gorillas in the nearby enclosures scrambling for cover. Many of the younger ones chattered frantically at the noise and sudden disorienting gusts of air.

Lexi stood at the edge of the clearing, watching. It was a half-hour flight from Goma, the nearest city with a functioning airport. The African sky was clear and blue, as it usually was at this time of morning. It had been the same when she first flew in, and the view of the thick canopy from above was so spectacular, she would never forget it.

Five men jumped down from the chopper, two in business attire and three in jeans and T-shirts. They proceeded to unload a bunch of equipment. The film crew, she guessed. For some reason, she'd expected more of them. Still, five was good. It would be easier to manage.

One of the two well-dressed men had to be the infamous "Hawk" Anderson. Engineer, visionary, CEO. The media painted him as an arrogant, demanding boss willing to venture where other mining conglomerates feared to go—trouble spots, unfriendly regimes, areas desperately in need of upliftment.

What kind of name was Hawk anyway?

She tried to get a good look at him but couldn't see clearly through the swirling dust.

Robert, the manager of the gorilla sanctuary and her boss, approached them with an outstretched hand. They exchanged pleasantries as the roar of the rotor blades wound down. Then she was beckoned over.

Taking a deep breath, she pasted a smile on her face and walked over to the men.

Here goes.

Maybe he wasn't the workaholic tyrant everyone said he was, she reasoned as the dust cleared. Her mother always used to say she was too quick to judge. Not all wealthy, successful, and powerful men were arrogant assholes. Apparently.

"Lexi, come and meet our new benefactor, Mr. Anderson."

The taller of the two men turned to face her.

"Please, call me Hawk." He flashed a self-deprecating grin, showing white, even teeth, and held out a hand. "Everybody else does."

Goddamn.

He wasn't anything like the chubby, middle-aged engineer she'd imagined. Late thirties, possibly early forties, but no older than that. Brown hair swept back from his face, a hard, chiseled jawline, and piercing blue eyes that took in a lot but gave nothing away.

She blew a hair off her face as she shook his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Rough skin, a hint of calluses on his palms. Hawk Anderson was a man used to working with his hands. She never would have guessed it by looking at him. Those pressed trousers fit him like they'd been custom made for him, and the white shirt

was expensive. Lexi recognized quality when she saw it.

Growing up, her mother had insisted they shop only at the best stores and wear the most stylish clothes. “Image is everything,” she’d been fond of saying, and in the wealthy political circles they moved in, it was.

She shuddered, releasing Hawk Anderson’s hand. Thank God she was far away from that world now. His world.

Africa was so different. It was a place of dense jungles, soaring mountains, and cobalt blue skies. A place where things like a friendly smile, a helping hand, and a sack of flour mattered. A place where most people couldn’t afford the necessities, let alone designer gear.

“This is Lexi.” Robert introduced her. “She heads up our veterinarian team.”

“How interesting.” Those blue eyes fixed on her, and she wondered what he was thinking. Probably something predictable, like how did a nice girl like her end up in a place like this?

Usala Park, the gorilla sanctuary where she worked, was in the middle of the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the most volatile countries in Africa. There were constant skirmishes with rebel groups, attacks on wildlife by poachers, and raids on local villages. Here, at the heavily guarded sanctuary, however, they were relatively safe.

Her friends thought she was crazy for taking a job out here. Her parents were convinced she was in the throes of a nervous breakdown, while Charles... She sniffed and smoothed down the surgical shirt she wore over her shorts and T-shirt. What Charles thought didn’t matter. Not anymore.

“Yes, I work in the clinic with the injured and orphaned gorillas.”

“A fellow American?” His gaze lingered on her hot, flushed face, dropping to her chest, where he scanned the nametag, then slowly rising back up again. She felt like he was stripping her bare. “You’re a long way from home.”

She self-consciously smoothed her hair down. It was coming loose from its ponytail, and she wore no makeup at all. Not even a hint of blush on her cheeks, or a touch of mascara to lengthen her lashes. Then, she scowled and straightened her shoulders. Why should she care what a man like Hawk Anderson thought? He was only here because his company needed the PR. Sponsoring a gorilla sanctuary in the country where they were negotiating a mining deal was a clever ploy to get the world on their side and sweeten the deal with the DRC government. She wasn’t buying his humanitarian bullshit.

“So are you.”

He chuckled and spread out a hand. “This is my job.”

Her gaze collided with his. “Mine too. I wanted to do something meaningful.”

A hard stare and he turned back to the perspiring man in the suit and blazer beside him. Of course, this jerk wouldn’t be interested in her reasons for being here; he was just making small talk. Hawk Anderson didn’t seem like the type to do anything unless it benefited him or his company in some way. “This is Jasper, my PR manager. He’ll filter the material through the proper channels once we’re back in New York.”

Jasper smiled, his glasses slipping down his nose. He couldn’t have looked more out of place if he’d tried. Nervous and edgy, his restless eyes kept darting toward the undergrowth as if he expected a wild animal to jump out at any moment.

“Welcome, Jasper.” Robert shook his hand, then gestured to her. “If you need any information about the medical services we offer at the sanctuary, just ask Lexi.”

She nodded. “Of course. I’m at your disposal. Anything you need.”

The PR guru removed his glasses, wiping them on a handkerchief he pulled from his blazer pocket. Lexi didn’t know people still used those. The poor guy was very much out of his comfort zone. His boss, surprisingly, looked relaxed and very much at ease despite the suit and stiff white shirt.

The film crew was introduced. Lexi tried to remember all their names. She was good with that, having grown up in a family where connections were important. There was Rex, the director of the documentary; John, the soundman; and Dan, an enthusiastic cameraman who could scarcely contain his excitement about being in Africa. “This is the most exotic location I’ve ever filmed in,” he said, eyes shining. “The jungle is just like I imagined. I can’t wait to explore.”

“I thought the same thing when I first arrived.” She smiled at his energy. Caution was necessary, however. “I’ve since learned that, while beautiful, it’s practically impenetrable and surprisingly easy to get lost in. If you do go exploring, be sure to take a guide with you. The caretakers are all locals and won’t mind showing you around. They know this part of the jungle like the back of their hands.”

“Understood.” He shot her an easy grin. “Lesson One: Don’t go wandering off alone.”

“You got it.”

She liked Dan. He was friendly, unlike Hawk, who she’d just noticed was watching their exchange even while still in conversation with Robert. She glanced pointedly at him, but instead of looking away, the corners of his mouth flickered upward before he

diverted his attention back to Robert.

Frowning, she hoped Hawk Anderson wasn't going to be a pain in her butt while he was here.

Robert was saying, "Why don't we go up to the Lodge and have some refreshments, then I'll give you the grand tour. Our medical center is only a fraction of the private reserve. Usala was originally started by the local community as an eco-project, but when funding dried up, it closed. Luckily, I was able to resurrect it." The clinic, staff quarters, canteen, and monitored animal enclosures were all in the same area, surrounding a large clearing in the jungle.

"It's larger than I expected," Hawk acknowledged, looking pleased. "And I believe it has many natural resources."

Lexi narrowed her gaze. He'd better not be thinking about the mining potential. "The endangered animals are our most precious resource," she cut in.

Robert shot her a warning glance.

Crap. He was desperate to make a good impression, and by jumping down their new benefactor's throat, she was ruining it. Lexi shut up and didn't say anything else.

"Of course," Hawk agreed, quirking an eyebrow as if he was surprised she had the audacity to challenge him. Well, she wasn't one of his minions, and out here, there were different rules. This wasn't corporate Wall Street, the next acquisition didn't matter. Out here, life often hung by a thread, and survival was the most important thing—for the people, the wildlife, and the sanctuary.

She forced a conciliatory smile and gestured toward the clinic. "I'd better head back. See you later."

“Lexi, perhaps you can kick things off by giving the men a tour of the clinic once they’ve settled in?” Robert looked at her expectantly. “Then I’ll take Mr. Anderson—sorry, Hawk—and the crew to the border patrols and show them the rest of the park.”

How could she refuse? She’d promised to help out in any way she could, and the sanctuary needed this investment. Without it, they wouldn’t survive.

Besides, once the orientation was over, they’d be busy filming, hopefully miles away from her little patch of the sanctuary, and she’d be left in peace. “No problem. I’ll be here.”

Robert beamed and gestured for the men to follow him. The Lodge, as it was known by everyone at the sanctuary, was where Robert and his wife lived. It was positioned at the end of a winding dirt track, half a mile from the clearing and surrounded by dense vegetation. To her surprise, Hawk gave her a curt nod before following Robert along the track.

Until later then.

She marched back to the clinic, feeling frazzled but not sure why. Hawk Anderson was not what she’d expected, with his intense physicality and piercing blue eyes, but he did have that typical wealthy businessman vibe, too. The arrogance and disdain that came with giving orders, with having people do your bidding.

She snorted. Good luck with that out here. If anywhere had the ability to kick some humility into the self-important jackass, it was this place. The next few weeks were going to be very interesting indeed.

CHAPTER 2

The walky-talky in the clinic crackled and Robert's staticky voice could be heard over the soft whir of the ceiling fan. "Come in, Lexi? Are you there?"

"I'm here, Robert." She picked up the device and held it to her ear. There was no cellular reception in the jungle, so the rangers, carers and other staff relied on two-way radio handsets to communicate.

"I've sent Hawk and his crew down to you, but there's been an incident in the field that requires your immediate attention."

"What's happened?" Her heart jumped as it always did when there was an incident involving the gorillas. Field interventions were almost always conducted by the field veterinarian, Noah, and his team, as they required hiking out to far-flung sections of the park, sometimes near the outer borders. It could be a day's hike to get to the injured gorilla, then they had to treat it, which often required anesthetics, and a certain degree of monitoring afterwards, and only once that was done could they make their way back to the center.

"The adult female mountain gorilla in Bongi's clan has an injury. One of the rangers reported her limping and trailing behind the rest of the family. It could be a snare wound."

She cringed at the thought of the animal suffering.

Those damn poachers!

“Where’s Noah?” she asked. The field veterinarian had more experience than her at handling interventions, and being local, as well as a man, he was less vulnerable than she was. It sucked, but that was the reality out here.

“His father passed away last week so he’s gone to his mother’s village to attend the funeral.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware.” Poor Noah. Her heart went out to him. He was a man of few words, but an excellent vet. His loyalty lay with the endangered mountain gorillas he treated. He hardly ever came into the sanctuary, preferring to sleep in the wild or in make-shift shelters with his beloved animals.

She took a fortifying breath. “So what do I need to do?”

The last field operation she had attended was three months ago, and she’d only assisted Noah then. This time, she’d have sole responsibility. Gulping, she tried to keep her nerves in check.

“Luckily, it’s not too far away,” Robert was saying. “Bongi and his family were reportedly ranging near the Elila River estuary, twenty miles south of here. You can take the Jeep for the first fifteen—after that you’ll be on foot. We have rangers operating in that area, so you shouldn’t encounter any resistance.”

Thankfully, there was a dirt track that ran south. There were no major transport links through the jungle, but Robert had tried to clear a small network of tracks to different sectors of the park, mostly to enable the rangers and medics to get to the gorillas quickly in just such an emergency. Unfortunately the rebels had cottoned on to this and also used them as short cuts. Part of the rangers’ duty was to prevent this from happening.

“I’m going to need a field team,” she said, thinking ahead. “One of the rangers for

close protection and to dart the mother, and an assistant to help with the procedure once she's sedated." She wasn't taking any chances with the rebels or with the injured gorilla. An adult female, particularly one in pain, could be extremely volatile.

Robert didn't argue. He knew the drill. "Edmond can accompany you. He's on his way down with Hawk and the crew. Get one of the carers with medical experience to assist you." He hesitated, then said, "It might be a good idea to take Hawk with you. Give him a first-hand account of the work we do in the field."

Shit. Really? Like she wasn't nervous enough without that judgmental idiot looking over her shoulder. Still, she supposed she could see it from Robert's point of view. Their new benefactor was coughing up a hell of a lot of money for the sanctuary. He deserved to know what it was being used for.

"Sure, Robert. I'll let him know he can tag along." Maybe he wouldn't want to? Then she gave a derogatory sniff. Who was she kidding? He wouldn't miss an opportunity to take a peek at the land and all those lucrative natural resources.

Suddenly, there were a hundred things to do. Lexi asked Patrick, one of the other resident vets, to send her a junior who could assist with the treatment. Patrick was in charge when she was away, so he had to remain at the sanctuary.

Next, she dashed to her room to change. Denim shorts were not conducive to jungle treks, unless she wanted her legs ripped to pieces. She checked her hair, wiped a dirty smudge off her face, and exchanged her surgical shirt for a lightweight rain jacket. It would help keep the mosquitos at bay, as well as keep her relatively dry in the likely chance of a sudden downpour.

Back in the clinic, she packed the medical kit, including animal tranquilizers from the locked office cupboard, along with the dart gun.

“Hello?” Hawk’s deep voice rattled from the front entrance. He rapped on the door as if to confirm his presence. “You ready for us?”

Lexi emerged from her little office, backpack slung over one shoulder. “There’s been a change of plan,” she told him, watching his eyebrows shoot up. “There’s a field emergency I have to attend to. One of the mountain gorillas has been injured. I’m sorry but we have to postpone your tour of the clinic.”

Hawk didn’t miss a beat. “Sure. Your work has got to take priority.”

Beside him, Jeremy breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re welcome to tag along,” she offered, gritting her teeth.

Please say no .

“That’s okay.” Jeremy balked at the prospect. “We don’t want to get in the way.”

She smiled, genuinely this time. “It’s probably for the b?—”

That deep, gravelly voice. “I’d love to come along, if you have space.”

Ugh.

“You sure? It’s a hike.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Damnit.

“Fine. You can keep watch while we perform the intervention.”

“Keep watch for what?” Jasper’s cheeks had turned bright pink from the humidity.

Lexi kept her voice even. “When we treat a member of a gorilla family, the head of the clan can sometimes act aggressively. They’re very protective creatures. If he goes into a charge, we want to be sure we know he’s coming.”

Jasper glanced at his boss. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Hawk?”

Lexi was enjoying herself now. “There are also the rebels that we have to watch out for. Sometimes they trespass on sanctuary land and use the roads to cut through the park. They can be a dangerous, unpredictable bunch.”

Jasper shook his head. “Hawk, I strongly feel you should rethink this.”

Annoyingly, his boss didn’t so much as flinch. “I’ll be perfectly alright, Jasper. It’s a great opportunity to see what my money is going towards.” He turned toward Lexi. “This is what you do, right? This is it—the real deal.”

“Yep.” Lexi gave a curt nod. “The real deal.”

Jasper threw up his hands. “Fine, don’t listen to me.”

Hawk patted him on the back. “Your concern is noted.”

Lexi wondered at their relationship. Jasper seemed more of a friend than a PR Manager, but it was clear Hawk did exactly what he pleased, regardless of his friend’s advice.

The task ahead was strenuous and risky. How would the pampered businessman fare? Hopefully, Hawk would get that kick up the butt sooner than she’d anticipated.

A short time later, one of the park's all-terrain Jeeps rolled to a stop in front of the clinic. Hawk was waiting outside, but Jeremy had disappeared, along with the rest of the crew, who'd gone on a scouting mission with Robert.

The driver's name was Edmond, one of the courageous park rangers who saw off poachers and rebels on a daily basis. He was a tough ex-soldier in his early thirties and had been working at Usala ever since she'd been here.

"Habari, Edmond." Lexi greeted him in Swahili, his native tongue. It was one of the few words she'd learned, but in this region, almost everybody spoke it. Most locals were fluent in French, too, but she wasn't any better at that.

Edmond gave her a friendly nod, then eyed the newcomer. "This is Hawk Anderson," she said by way of introduction. "He's a benefactor," she added, unsure whether the ranger would know what that was in English.

"Bienfaiteur," Hawk said in perfect French. "Comment allez-vous?"

Lexi arched an eyebrow. The man could speak French. She was even more surprised when Edmond replied. He didn't usually talk a lot, even to his fellow rangers.

Where had he learned that?

Going back into the clinic, she picked up the two medical backpacks. She hadn't gotten farther than the porch, when Hawk lifted them off her shoulders.

"Thanks," she said, her entire body tingling at the sudden connection. Out here, she'd gotten used to pulling her own weight and didn't need the help, but the bags were heavy, so she wasn't totally ungrateful for his assistance.

Hawk handed the bags to Edmond who secured them in the back of the vehicle. The

ranger had come prepared, and wore a tactical vest, pouches brimming with spare magazines and a compact radio.

Her assistant, a junior field veterinarian called Philipe, hurried out, carrying a folded-up gurney and the rifle. These went in the back too.

Lexi nodded to Hawk. "Time to go."

She got into the front passenger seat beside Edmond, who was driving. Hawk, much to her dismay, sat directly behind her, alongside Philipe. It was probably her imagination, but she could feel him staring at the back of her head as they set off along the muddy dirt track.

The frequent rainfall and brutal humidity had pockmarked the ground, and the Jeep danced over potholes and cracks like it was on springs. Lexi knew to hold on, acutely aware of Hawk bouncing around directly behind her.

"Do you go out in the field often?" he yelled, over the roar of the engine.

Lexi half-turned in her seat. "Not really. Noah, our in-field vet, usually does these interventions, but he's unavailable."

"So your job is mainly in the clinic on the base?"

"That's right." She frowned, swinging back again. Did he have a problem with that? She might not have a lot of field experience, but she was a qualified veterinarian from one of the best colleges in New York state. Lexi braced herself as they went flying over some exposed roots. There'd been no question that she'd go to college, although her parent's had been startled at her subject choice.

"I'm not paying a goddamn fortune so you can work on a farm," her father had

complained when she'd announced it.

Luckily, her mother had intervened. "It's unique, dear. It'll make her more interesting, and there's a lot of money in ranching. She might be able to find a husband that way."

As it turned out, Charles was the furthest thing from a rancher, unfortunately. He was a politician with grand aspirations. She was just a means to an end for him. Her father was his way in. He'd never loved her, despite what he'd said. She just hadn't seen it.

Lexi shook her head at the memory. She saw it now, though. Crystal clear.

Thankfully, Hawk fell silent after that, because it was impossible to hear anything over the metallic whine of the engine. Leaves the size of frying pans slapped into the sides of the vehicle and low-lying branches scraped across the roof. The Jeep creaked and groaned but kept going at a steady pace.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but was just shy of forty-five minutes, Edmond slowed to a halt and killed the engine. After the roar, the sudden silence was deafening. Lexi let her ears adjust to the rhythm of the jungle—the chirrup of insects, the rustling of leaves, and the occasional bird song.

"Are we there?" Hawk leaned forward to peer through the windshield. Ahead was an impenetrable wall of dense foliage.

"No, but we've run out of road. It's on foot from here."

Climbing out, she went around to the back and opened the door. Grabbing a medical backpack, she hauled it onto her back, while Philipe took the other, and picked up the gurney. "I'll take that," Hawk offered.

At his surprised look, Hawk added, “I’m not carrying anything.”

Lexi masked a grin. Fine. Let him struggle with that. The jungle was hard enough to trek through without having your hands full.

She turned to Edmond, who had removed a semi-automatic rifle from behind his seat and slung it over his shoulder. “Ready?”

He nodded, securing the dart gun into a side compartment of his well-worn pack, the tranquilizer darts nestled beside it.

“Is that an SA58?” Hawk asked, studying the weapon on his back.

Lexi frowned. He knew guns? The smooth-talking, corporate New Yorker looked like the last person on earth to know weapons.

Edmond patted the stock of the rifle and replied in French, words she didn’t understand. Hawk nodded, and pursed his lips, clearly impressed

Lexi narrowed her gaze, their mysterious benefactor was full of surprises.

“Let’s go.” She glanced at the gathering clouds. It looked like rain. Not surprising out here, where it rained most afternoons. Sudden, drenching downpours that didn’t last long but often took you by surprise. She’d gotten used to them now, along with the humidity and the bugs.

Edmond gave a gruff nod and set off down a barely discernable track that led deeper into the jungle. Lexi followed, keeping a sharp eye out for hostiles—both human and animal. The foliage clawed at her legs, and she was glad for the cargo pants. The first time she’d done this, she’d been cut to shreds.

Hawk followed behind her, carrying the gurney, while Philipe brought up the rear.

They weren't even ten minutes into their walk when a loud, booming explosion overhead made them halt.

"Was that thunder?" Hawk asked, incredulous. He looked upwards, surveying the darkening sky.

"Yeah."

Everything out here was louder, bigger, or more extreme than anywhere else. The jungle seemed to pause, as if drawing a breath.

Any moment now.

Lexi pulled up the hood of her rain jacket and seconds later, the heavens opened.

CHAPTER 3

They kept going, despite the downpour.

Hawk didn't mind the rain. In fact, in this heat, he relished it. It reminded him of his days in the SEALs—trudging through jungle training, sweat dripping down his back, boots squelching through the mud. That had been a long time ago—it felt like a lifetime now.

The familiar resolve settled on him. The exertion calmed him, and his mind zeroed in on the task at hand. When you were put to the test, you focused on the little things—the elements you could control. The path ahead, the next step, the feel of the wetness on your face.

It felt good. Fuck, it felt amazing.

For the first time in God only knew how long, he felt alive.

“You okay?” Lexi turned her head. She'd been marching ahead of him, backpack on her slim frame, boots steady and consistent. She had an easy walking style that he admired—especially from behind. Smart, sassy, and cute in a dynamite package, even without makeup and her hair still pulled back in that schoolgirl ponytail.

“Great,” he grinned back, then saw her frown, confused.

She made a refreshing change from the endless string of pampered, coiffed, and self-absorbed women he usually dated. Not by choice, mind you—they were the only

women he met, the only ones who hung out in his social circles. Unless he started online dating or paid for the service, he was unlikely to meet anyone else.

Lexi.

He wondered what that was short for. Alexandra?

There was something about her... the fierce defense of the sanctuary, her passion for her job, her love of wildlife... Something that struck a chord in him. Maybe because it reminded him of when he used to feel like that.

But that sensation had long since faded. Running a company, solving problems, driving a desk had made sure of that. He'd thought that was what he wanted—a way to make a real difference instead of kicking down doors and taking out the bad guys. That was important, but he quickly realized there would always be more doors, more bad guys.

Power. That was the way to make a real difference.

Except, was he?

Sure, he built dams in developing nations, bridges in mountain towns, and power plants in the desert. He also owned mines, like the one he was hoping to purchase here in the DRC, one of the world's most dangerous hotspots and one with the worst humanitarian record.

But was he changing the lives of the people who lived there? Or had he conveniently forgotten about that, caught up in the stressful whirl of commerce, share prices, and budgets? He made a mental note to revisit his early mission statement, to make sure he was doing what he'd set out to do, no matter what his shareholders thought. The thought cheered him.

“I’d forgotten how good it felt to be out in nature,” he said by way of explanation, then gave a low chuckle. Water collected on giant leaves and poured onto other giant leaves, cascading in mini-waterfalls down to the ground. “Even in the rain.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “I love it too.”

With that hood over her head, her eyes looked enormous, and he noticed they were a dark, forest green, the same color as the jungle around them.

“Is that what brought you out here?” He shifted the gurney to his other arm as he fell into step beside her.

“Kind of.” She kept her eyes on the trail ahead. Steam from the sunbaked ground curled around their ankles, turning the path into a mud bath. “I wanted to use my qualification and thought this might be a good place.”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“What?” she said, a tad defensively.

He nodded to the tangled mesh of foliage on either side. “This isn’t the first place most people would think to go. It’s kind of in the middle of nowhere.” Not to mention dangerous.

A hint of a smile played on her lips. “I’m not most people.”

Clearly.

He gave a knowing nod. “So, what are you running from?”

She slipped in the mud, teetering off balance, and would have fallen if he hadn’t shot

out his free arm to steady her. “W—what makes you think I’m running?”

“Come on. You’re obviously well-educated, you’re from upstate New York, and you travel out here, to the most dangerous place on the planet? There’s got to be a reason.”

She scowled. “What are you? A linguist or something?”

He shrugged. “I’ve got a thing for languages, yeah. It helps with my work.”

“Mining?”

“Engineering, actually,” he said. “Mining is only part of what we do.”

“Is that why you’re here?” she asked quietly. “You’re scouting the place for development?” Her question was punctuated by another clap of thunder, like an omen from the gods.

“Of course not,” he huffed.

“Really?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Look, Usala desperately needs funding. Your equipment is outdated, you need to hire more staff, and your facilities need upgrading. Robert has grand plans to get the community involved in the sustainability of the park, which I happen to think is a brilliant idea. I’d like to help him with that.”

Those witchy green eyes narrowed. “What’s in it for you?”

He hesitated. “My company needs to raise its corporate image. We’ve had some bad press lately, after... Well, after an unfortunate incident for which we took full

responsibility. This documentary will help raise our profile and show people that we care about the environment—and the world around us.”

“You mean it will satisfy your shareholders?” she put in.

He gave a wry grin. “That too. The bottom line is we can help each other. It’s a win-win.”

“A win-win. Right.”

They hiked on. The rain felt like it was lessening, and the rolling thunderclaps were getting further away. After a while, she turned back to him. “So, what happened?”

“Huh?” He frowned, unsure what she meant.

“What was the unfortunate incident?”

“Oh, that.” He ground his jaw. What the hell... It had been in all the newspapers anyway. “The short version is, we were removing the drilling structure from a salt mine when it sprung a leak. The lake flooded the mine, killing five miners who were trapped inside.” He closed his eyes briefly, trying to stem the flood of guilt that always hit him when he thought about it.

“That’s awful,” she whispered.

“I know.” He didn’t need her to tell him that. He lived with it every damn day. “Thankfully, due to effective evacuation procedures, the rest of the men escaped. But five dead are five too many. We compensated the families for their loss, of course, but how do you make amends for something like that?”

She met his gaze. “You can’t.”

“No.” He looked away. “You can’t.”

The path widened, and Edmond stopped swaying his machete.

“Are we there?” Hawk called, breaking the silence.

Edmond didn’t turn around. “Soon.”

Soon turned into another half an hour. Edmond was seemingly guiding them by instinct alone. He had no GPS, nor even a compass.

“How does he know where the injured gorilla is located?” Hawk came up beside Lexi again. Staring at her cute, denim-clad ass was doing strange things to him. Making him think things that he shouldn’t. Thoughts that would just get him all hot and bothered.

“Robert gave us coordinates,” she replied. “A couple of rangers spotted the troop near the estuary.”

“Troop?”

She gave an amused nod. “Yes, but they’re mostly docile.”

“Except for the alpha male,” he remarked.

She eyed him, surprised. “Sometimes he can be volatile, which is why we have the dart gun.”

“I thought that was to subdue the injured gorilla?”

“It is, but it works well against a charging silverback, too.”

He snorted.

Minutes later, Hawk heard the sound of rushing water, and almost like a smoke screen, the vegetation parted, and they were facing a river about the width of a narrow street. It flowed quickly, spurred on by the sudden rainfall. On the banks foraged a group of mountain gorillas.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, coming to a stop. They looked so majestic against the backdrop of the forest, that for a moment, all he could do was stare.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Lexi murmured, her eyes gleaming.

“That guy is enormous.” Hawk stared at the head of the family, a majestic adult male reaching up into the branches in search of food. He was easily Hawk’s height and must have weighed close to three hundred and fifty pounds.

“That’s Bongi,” she said almost lovingly. “He’s the leader of the group, the alpha male. Excuse me.”

She moved over to where Edmond stood, watching a female and two infants who were playing at her feet. She looked sluggish.

“That must be the injured female,” he heard Lexi say.

Edmond began moving toward the injured female. The gorilla retracted her lips over her teeth and made a sound that was a cross between a wince and a growl.

“She’s hurt her leg,” confirmed Philippe.

Bongi, the head of the pack, was studying them closely, deciding whether they were a threat or not.

“Big Daddy’s seen us,” Hawk warned, standing very still.

“Keep watching him,” said Lexi, “and if he makes any sudden moves, yell.”

Hawk nodded, his eyes glued to the male.

Edmond raised the rifle to take a shot at the female. He pulled the trigger, releasing a sedation dart with a soft pop.

Hawk didn’t take his eyes off the silverback, not even for a second. Adrenaline made his heart thud in his chest, and he relished the sensation. The female made a low growl, so he figured Edmond’s dart had hit its mark. Moments later, there was a soft thud as the gorilla keeled over. Big Daddy took a few steps toward her, then stopped again. He looked wary, but Hawk didn’t think he was going to charge them. Not yet, anyway.

“Let’s go.” Lexi crept through the low-lying bush toward the unconscious gorilla, Philippe close behind her.

Before she touched the animal, both she and Philippe pulled on surgical masks and gloves. Hawk knew this was more to protect the animals than themselves. He’d heard gorillas were very susceptible to human bugs.

He watched as Lexi checked the gorilla’s vitals to make sure it was sufficiently sedated. It was. Then they went to work.

Hawk was impressed—that didn’t happen often. Not only had Lexi shown stamina and courage by coming out here, but she was also now attending to the wounded animal with its three-hundred-and-fifty-pound mate looking on. That took guts.

Edmond had repositioned himself, his rifle now locked on the male.

Hawk relaxed and watched Lexi inspect the wound. Maybe there were other ways to make a difference. She was making a difference to this gorilla's life, ensuring it would live another day, raise its young, continue the species, which were close to being endangered. Still, she wouldn't be able to do it without the resources he was providing to the sanctuary.

"It needs stitching," he heard her say to Philippe, who delved into his medical bag to retrieve the necessary tools.

Lexi cut the hair back around the wound and sprayed it with a strong disinfectant, or at least, that's what he presumed it was. Philippe handed her a curved needle, and she got to work. Carefully, with absolute concentration, she stitched up the skin on the prone animal's leg.

The entire procedure took about fifteen minutes, during which time Big Daddy got increasingly restless. The massive ape shifted from foot to foot and began circling the group of humans.

"He's on the move," warned Edmond in a low voice. Hawk felt the hair on his arms stand up. He braced himself for the charge.

Lexi glanced at the male gorilla but didn't stop what she was doing. "I'm almost done. A few seconds more."

The gorilla made low, threatening noises and beat his chest, clearly agitated. Philippe put a hand on Lexi's shoulder. "We go now."

"Give me the antibiotic." She held out her hand. "Quick, I don't want this to get infected."

Philippe handed her a vial of amber liquid, which she quickly injected into the gorilla's

thigh. She was barely done when he retrieved it from her and shoved it, along with the rest of their equipment, back into the backpack and zipped it up. He knew the silverback was going to charge.

“Gotta go, Lexi,” Hawk called as Edmond crouched to take aim. “Bongi’s not happy.”

The infants began chattering loudly, momentarily distracting their father from his imminent charge. Philippe grabbed Lexi’s arm, and together they backed into the vegetation that immediately closed around them, obscuring them from view.

“Come,” Edmond said, motioning for Hawk to back away too. He did as he was told, keeping his eyes on Big Daddy, who had now swung his attention back to his injured mate.

Edmond was the last to leave, walking backward, not lowering his rifle until they had backtracked at least twenty yards down the path.

Hawk exhaled in a low hiss. “That was intense. I thought he was going to charge there at the end.”

“He would have if we’d been any longer,” Edmond confirmed in French. “They’re patient if they sense you’re helping, but then instinct takes over.”

“That snare left a nasty gash,” Lexi said, frowning. She tugged off her surgical gloves with a loud snap. “But the antibiotics will prevent infection until the wound heals.”

“Bon travail.” Edmond squeezed her shoulder. It was the only physical contact Hawk had seen the stoic ranger offer, and it obviously meant a lot because Lexi’s face lit up. Damn, she was gorgeous when she smiled like that. Dimples appeared in her flushed cheeks. He hadn’t noticed those before. For a fleeting moment, he wondered what it

would take to make her smile at him like that.

“Yeah,” he said out loud. “You did well under very stressful conditions.”

Unfortunately, his words didn’t have the same effect as Edmond’s. She acknowledged his compliment with a curt nod of her head. “Thanks.”

Then she turned back to the ranger. “Take us home, Edmond. We’re done here.”

CHAPTER 4

By the time they got back to the clinic, Lexi felt like she'd been hit by a freight train. The jungle, once a vibrant wash of emerald greens, had surrendered to night. Shadows swallowed the forest, and the only sounds were the persistent hum of insects and the occasional distant call of something wild. The rain had left the air thick, clinging to her skin like a second layer.

Robert was already pacing when they pulled up, his face tight with impatience. He didn't even wait for Lexi to climb out of the Jeep.

"How'd it go?" he called, sharp and urgent. "Did you find her?"

"Right where the ranger said," Lexi replied, tugging her bag from the seat beside her. "It was definitely a snare wound, but she'd managed to get free on her own. I couldn't find any sign of it around where they were ranging."

Robert's jaw tightened. "Will she make it?"

"She should. I stitched her up and gave her a shot of penicillin to keep infection at bay. She'll need monitoring, though. Maybe the trackers can check on her in a few days to make sure she's healing properly?"

"I'll see to it," Robert assured her. "Great work, Lexi."

Hawk had already pulled the gear from the Jeep's trunk and stacked it on the clinic's patio. He stood quietly beside the pile, but she could feel his presence—steady,

watchful, like he was filing away every detail. Her insides coiled as their eyes met, but then Robert walked up to him, diverting his attention.

Lexi let out a soft breath. Why did she find him so damn disconcerting?

“This is exactly why our work here at Usala matters,” Robert was saying. “That gorilla would’ve died from infection in a few weeks without medical intervention, and with so few breeding females left in the population...” His voice dropped. “Every single life counts. There are less than eight hundred mountain gorillas left in the world. Eight hundred.” He shook his head.

Lexi left them to talk, the exhaustion finally catching up to her. Her legs felt heavy as she entered the clinic. All she wanted to do was take a long, hot bath and scrub off the mud, sweat, and tension of the day.

As much as she didn’t want to admit it, that volatile male gorilla had frightened her. Her instincts had screamed at her to run, but she couldn’t—not with Hawk watching. She’d forced herself to stay calm, to finish her work. Hawk might have been new to Usala, but he didn’t seem the type to give much credit to anyone who couldn’t hold their own. And if he doubted her, the center’s credibility would be on the line. So, she’d done it. She’d trusted Edmond to cover her if things went sideways. But damn if it hadn’t shaken her.

And now, instead of collapsing into bed, she had to show up at the Lodge for dinner. It was an official welcome for Hawk Anderson, and his team. She sighed. The man was already unsettling enough without a formal sit-down.

The Lodge was the only source of light in the otherwise pitch-black forest. Lexi was last to arrive having first checked on the two infant gorillas currently in the clinic before leaving them with their carers for the night.

She'd cleaned up too, trading her mud-splattered field gear for one of the few dresses she'd brought from New York. It was emerald-green, the shade that brought out her eyes, with thin straps and a soft flow that skimmed just above her knees. Gold sandals and a delicate chain completed the look. Her hair, damp from her rushed bath, had dried into soft, wild waves that framed her face as she entered the lodge.

"Lexi, darling, you're here!" Estelle, Robert's wife, greeted her with a warm hug. She was a sturdy woman in her mid-forties with tanned skin and bright eyes. She had a white streak of hair flowing from her temple, mixing with the rest of her long, chestnut tresses. It was strikingly unusual and completely natural. A genetic blimp, Estelle had told her when they'd first met. "Come on in, everyone's out on the deck."

"Thanks." Lexi's stomach tightened when she saw the small group gathered outside. Her eyes were drawn to him first.

Hawk stood at the edge of the deck, a bottle of beer in his hand, his head tilted back as he laughed at something Jasper said. He was stupidly handsome, wearing those beige chinos and a crisp white shirt like he was on the cover of some outdoorsy lifestyle magazine.

Estelle leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Hawk hasn't stopped singing your praises since he got here."

Lexi blinked at her. "Really?"

"Oh, yes," Estelle said with a wink, "You've got an admirer there, honey."

Lexi rolled her eyes but followed her onto the deck. Hawk turned as she approached, his gaze flicking over her, slow and deliberate, before he met her eyes. The corner of his mouth tugged upward, and damn if her pulse didn't kick up a notch.

“Lexi,” Robert said, breaking the moment. “Glad you could make it. Is Patrick joining us?”

“No, he’s looking after the infants,” she flashed Dan, who was also gawking at her, a quick smile. “Did you guys have a good day?”

He beamed. “The best! You look amazing, by the way. Love that dress.”

She flushed. “Thanks.”

He proceeded to tell her all about their excursion until Hawk stepped forward. “Can I get you a drink?”

She glanced up at him. “Sure. A beer would be great.”

He leaned across Dan to grab a bottle from the ice bucket. After opening it, he handed it to her, his fingers brushing hers. Electricity shot through her body, firing her blood. Dan, effectively cut off and having lost his train of thought, turned to talk to Rex, leaving her with Hawk.

“That is a beautiful dress,” he murmured, so only she could hear. “You look like a forest nymph.”

Was that a compliment? She wasn’t sure.

“Um, thanks.”

“How about that tour of the clinic tomorrow?” Hawk asked. His closeness was making her overheat.

“Of course,” She took a step back, out of his magnetic field. What was it about this

guy that had her all hot and bothered. She didn't even like him. "Nine work for you?"

"Perfect." His smile lingered, and she had to force herself to look away.

"I heard about your little adventure this afternoon," Jasper said, joining them. The air immediately cooled. "I'm glad it went according to plan. Hawk hasn't stopped talking about it."

Really? Lexi shot a glance at Hawk, who she could have sworn colored slightly. He puffed out his chest. "It was beneficial seeing the type of work that goes on here, that's all."

At least she wasn't the only one hot under the collar.

"I'm glad you didn't encounter any hostiles," Jasper said.

"Only an angry gorilla." Lexi met Hawk's eye.

His mouth quirked.

"How bad is the political situation?" Jasper asked, unwilling to let the subject go.

Grimacing, Lexi looked at Robert for help. That was a landmine of a question, and she wasn't about to step on it. As an American who'd been here less than a year, she didn't know where to begin.

"It's... unpredictable," Robert said carefully. "There are multiple rebel groups operating in the area, and violence flares up every so often. Sometimes it spills over into the sanctuary, which puts the animals at risk."

"And your own lives?" Hawk's gaze locked on Robert, narrowing slightly.

Robert hesitated, then shrugged. “Our work here is important, even the rebels know that. They don’t usually target us directly.” His eyes flicked away.

“Usually?” Jasper’s voice cracked on the word.

“Can’t the army do anything to stop them?” Hawk asked, reading between the lines.

Robert shot him a tired smile. “The rebels used to be the army. Renegades, mostly. They broke away and now fight to control this part of the country. The government forces aren’t exactly well-trained or well-fed, so containment isn’t really an option.”

“What about the UN?” Hawk leaned back against the railing. He looked almost relaxed, though Lexi caught the sharpness in his eyes. “Don’t they have peacekeepers in the area?”

Someone had done their homework.

Robert sighed. “The UN does what it can. But the roads are a nightmare—half of them are blocked by the army or the rebels, and most of those roadblocks are just excuses to extort money from travelers. It’s dangerous to move around. Even with UN backing.”

Estelle returned, wine glass in hand. “Robert got ambushed on the road to Goma a few months ago.” Robert shot her a warning look, but she didn’t notice. “He was shot in the shoulder.”

“Shot?” Jasper blurted out. All eyes turned to Robert.

“It was just a graze,” Robert said quickly, brushing it off with a wave of his hand. His tone was light, but Lexi didn’t miss the way his jaw tightened. She knew his shoulder still gave him trouble.

“It doesn’t happen very often,” she said, trying to smooth over the sudden tension. She glanced at Hawk, hoping they hadn’t scared him off, but his expression was one of intrigue. His eyes gleamed in the glow of the deck’s lanterns.

“It’s like the Wild West out here,” he muttered, taking a pull from his beer.

Lexi dropped her gaze to his hand holding the bottle. Big hands. Confident grip. For a split second she pictured them running over her body, and gulped, pushing the unwelcome thought from her mind.

He caught her eye, and she glanced away. Why wasn’t he rattled like a normal person? Jasper looked like he wanted to bolt, but Hawk just seemed... curious and maybe a little bit excited, like this was all just a big adventure to him.

Before she could say anything, Estelle broke the tension with her cheerful voice. “Dinner is ready! Let’s head inside.”

Lexi saw Robert exhale, relieved to leave the topic behind. She couldn’t blame him. There was no pretty way to talk about the chaos in the DRC, no version of this story that didn’t leave you feeling hollow. Sighing, she followed the group inside.

The conversation during dinner mostly revolved around the documentary, filming locations, and storylines. The crew were excited to get started, and Lexi let their enthusiasm fill the space, content to stay quiet.

Every so often, she caught Hawk looking at her. Not long stares—just glances. Subtle, but enough to make her pulse skip. She didn’t return them, though. She wasn’t sure she wanted to encourage whatever unspoken thing had started between them.

The truth was, Hawk reminded her too much of the men she’d left behind in New

York. Sharp suits, flashy smiles, and ambitions that left no room for vulnerability. The kind of man who could charm a room but wouldn't stick around when things got messy. He might've been wearing chinos instead of a tailored suit, but he still felt like one of them . All image, no substance.

And yet, there was something about him that fascinated her. The way he stayed calm when everyone else got stressed. The way his questions, even the surface-level ones, seemed to carry a weight of curiosity.

When dinner wrapped up, Lexi took the first chance to excuse herself. She thanked Estelle for the wonderful meal, said her goodnights, and slipped out into the warm night air. The road back to her cabin was quiet, save for the symphony of jungle sounds. The high-pitched chirping of crickets, the distant hoot of an owl, and the rustle of leaves as something moved in the undergrowth.

At first, the noises had unnerved her. The dark felt alive, like it was watching her, waiting to pounce. But now, the sounds were familiar, even comforting. The jungle was vast and unpredictable, but it was also steady in its own way, unchanging in its rhythms.

She reached the door to her cabin and paused, noticing something white on the mat.

A letter.

It was postmarked New York.

Lexi sighed, scooping it up. She already knew who it was from. Her mother's letters were as predictable as they were exhausting.

By the time she'd opened it and settled into bed to read, her eyelids were heavy. Her mother's words were neat and precise, the tone a familiar cocktail of criticism and

thinly veiled guilt. Then came the sucker punch, written in a bolder, told-you-so manner.

Charles was getting married.

Her chest tightened for half a second, then... nothing. No heartbreak, no pang of regret. Just a quiet acceptance. Of course he would marry. Of course it was Elizabeth Carlton-Ross, one of her mother's socialite friends' daughters. Charles had always been a prize, a politician destined for greatness, and Elizabeth would make the perfect accessory.

Lexi tossed the letter onto the nightstand, rolling her eyes at her mother's parting advice to "watch her skin in the harsh African sun." As if that was all she needed to worry about out here.

Shutting off the lamp, she sank into her pillow. As she lay in bed, listening to the jungle's lullaby, one thought crossed her mind before sleep took her. Hawk Anderson had rattled her more in one day than Charles ever had.

And she wasn't sure if that was a good thing—or a very, very bad one.

CHAPTER 5

“T oo early for you?”

The deep voice carried through the open window, stopping Lexi mid-motion as she prepared the equipment for her morning rounds. A shadow moved across the sunlight spiling across the clinic floor. She didn't have to look up to know who it was.

“Your timing's perfect,” she called back, drying her hands on a towel before squirting a generous amount of hand sanitizer into her palms. “Come on in.”

Hawk stepped through the door, looking infuriatingly refreshed, his khaki shirt rolled up at the sleeves, the morning sun catching on his dark hair. Behind him, Jasper shuffled in looking disheveled in a rumpled shirt with dark circles beneath his eyes and scratching at a red welt on his arm.

“How did you sleep?” Lexi asked, politely. “I hope the Lodge was comfortable.

“Perfectly,” replied Hawk, then he added with a wry smile, “Although it seems Jasper had a run-in with a mosquito.”

“More like a swarm of mosquitoes,” Jasper groaned, holding up his arm to show off a collection of angry bites. “They wouldn't leave me alone.”

Lexi winced sympathetically. “Are you using the mosquito nets? Estelle has them in all the rooms.”

“Yeah.” Jasper threw his arms in the air. “And I’m taking the malaria meds like clockwork. They still got in somehow.” He frowned at Hawk. “Strange you didn’t have the same problem.”

“Guess they liked you better,” Hawk said smoothly, glancing at Lexi. There was a flicker of dry amusement in his voice. She suppressed a smile. Who knew he had a sense of humor?

“Why don’t you both wash up?” She nodded toward the sink. “Disinfectant’s over there. I’ll show you the recovery room once you’re ready.”

After a few minutes, they followed her down a short hall to the room where two orphaned baby gorillas were playing with their carer. Mto, the younger of the two, caught sight of her first and made an excited noise, his long arms outstretched.

“The carers look after the infants twenty-four hours a day,” Lexi explained, slipping into tour-guide mode. “Right now, we’ve got two orphans, a male and a female. Mto and Misha, and an older gorilla recovering from a gunshot wound.”

Hawk raised an eyebrow. “How long until they’re released back into the wild?”

Lexi reached down to pick up Mto who immediately wrapped his little arms around her neck, his soft fur brushing her skin. “It depends. First, they have to recover their strength—and from the mental trauma. From there, we move them to an outdoor enclosure to help them transition. But whether or not they’re released depends on their chances of survival.”

“Do a lot of them make it?” Jasper took an uneasy step back as Lexi placed Mto on the steel observation table. He looked like he wanted to stay as far away from the baby gorilla as possible. Hawk, on the other hand, moved closer.

She glanced up, surprised. “Not enough. The younger ones are easy targets. Mto, for example—he was caught in a snare. Poachers are their biggest threat.”

“Do you need a hand?” Hawk asked.

Lexi hesitated. She didn’t know what to make of this helpful, almost soft-spoken version of him. In some ways, she preferred the cool, detached businessman. At least she knew how to deal with men like that.

But this... this was confusing. And distracting.

“Sure.” She forced her voice to stay steady. “Pass me that blood-pressure monitor.”

Hawk reached for the device and handed it over. His fingers brushed hers briefly, sending a faint jolt up her arm. She pretended not to notice and busied herself with wrapping the cuff around Mto’s small, furry arm and taking the reading.

“Want to hold him while I write this down?” she asked, more out of curiosity than necessity. Would he still be so composed with a wild animal in his arms? Patrick looked up in surprise.

Interestingly, he nodded. She handed Mto over, half expecting the little gorilla to squirm away. Instead, it made a soft, gurgling sound and clung to Hawk’s chest like they’d known each other for years.

“He likes you,” she gasped, unable to hide her surprise. The baby gorilla displayed his teeth in what looked like a grin.

“You don’t have to sound so shocked,” Hawk replied, stroking Mto’s back tentatively.

Lexi didn't reply, too busy watching the way he held the little gorilla—gentle, confident. The cold, arrogant businessman had a way with animals. Now that, she would never have guessed.

From the corner of the room, Jasper broke the moment. "They're big for babies."

"They are." Lexi held a thermometer under the gorilla's arm and put her fingers over his pulse. "Even an infant gorilla can weigh up to a hundred pounds. Mto's just over a year old, and Misha's closer to two." She paused as she counted, aware of Hawk watching her with that same focused intensity he always seemed to have.

Jasper snapped his fingers. "They'd be amazing on camera. Can we bring the film crew in here?"

Lexi frowned. "I don't know. The orphans are still recovering. Too much noise could stress them out."

"The public would love them," Jasper insisted. "They're the heart of this place. It's exactly the kind of human-interest story we need to show people why this sanctuary is so important."

She hesitated. He wasn't wrong, and the sanctuary did need the publicity. The more people who knew about the plight of the endangered gorillas, the better. "Maybe we should clear it with Robert first."

"We can get him down here too," said Jasper, warming to his subject. "He can say a few words about the work the clinic does, but we'll interview him outside, with the jungle as the backdrop."

"I'm sure Lexi knows more about the running of the clinic than Robert," Hawk cut in, handing Mto back to her with surprising care. "And she'd look a whole lot better on

camera.”

Something about the way he said that made her stomach flutter. “Oh no,” she insisted ignoring the back-handed compliment. “I’m more than happy for Robert to do the talking. He’s more proficient than me.”

“We’ll see,” Hawk said vaguely, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

“We can shoot you doing your morning rounds,” added Jasper. “You’re the resident veterinarian. The clinic revolves around you. It will also show the level of expertise they have here at the sanctuary.” What would Jasper say if he knew this was her first real veterinarian job?

“I’ll clear it with Robert,” Hawk said. “I’m meeting him for lunch at the Lodge.”

Lexi nodded, showing them out. She watched Hawk disappear down the path, his easy stride radiating confidence.

“See you tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder, his voice carrying easily on the humid air.

“Yep,” she replied, her stomach knotting with unease.

It wasn’t just the film shoot that had her on edge. Hawk, despite his cool exterior, was beginning to show a different side to his character that she hadn’t expected. Gentle, calm, competent. It was disturbing. She didn’t want to warm to him in any way, because if she did, she was very afraid she might just start to like him.

CHAPTER 6

Hawk had seen a lot of sunrises, but there was something different about this one. The early rays cut through the dense trees, casting long streaks of gold over the dirt path as he made his way to the clinic. The film crew had gone ahead to set up.

The jungle was alive with sound—birds, insects, the faint rustle of leaves in the humid breeze—it was so different to the traffic and chaos of New York.

When he arrived, the clinic was buzzing with activity, a stark contrast to the quiet building he'd toured yesterday. Cameras, sound equipment, and wires were everywhere. Rex, the director, was barking orders like a drill sergeant while his crew scurried around, setting up. Through the open window, Hawk caught a glimpse of Lexi pacing the floor, her brow furrowed. She looked... anxious.

"How's she doing?" he asked Rex.

"She's pretty uptight. We need her to relax and act natural," Rex muttered, raking a hand through his disheveled hair.

Hawk nodded. "Leave it with me." Being on camera was daunting if you hadn't done it before.

He stepped into the clinic, moving quietly enough that she didn't notice him right away. She'd stopped pacing and was digging through a small makeup bag, her movements stiff and awkward like she was gearing up for battle. Her hair was up in an efficient ponytail again, but tendrils had escaped and floated around her face,

softening her, making her look more vulnerable. More approachable.

She glanced up, startled, as he crossed the room.

“How are you holding up?” he asked. “You look a little pale.”

She frowned at the nickname but was too jittery to dwell on it. “I shouldn’t be, with all this makeup on.”

“You’ll be fine.” He took a step closer. “Just pretend we’re not here. Do what you’d normally do.”

“Easier said than done.” She twisted the hem of her surgical coat nervously.

He reached out and took her hands in his. They were small and feminine compared to his large ones, with tapered fingers tipped by neatly trimmed nails. Her eyes flicked up to meet his, but she didn’t pull away. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m so nervous.” She bit her lip, drawing his eyes. Full, luscious lips. He forced his gaze back to her face.

“Relax. This is no different to any other day at work.” She gave a stiff nod. “You look great, by the way.”

Her expression softened. “Thanks.”

“Ready?”

She gave a hesitant nod.

Hawk called to Dan. “Okay, let’s go.”

A moment later, the director, Rex, called out, “Action!” The cameras started rolling.

Lexi froze. Completely. She stood like a statue, those soft lips slightly parted, eyes darting between Dan and the camera like a deer caught in headlights. Hawk could almost feel the panic rolling off her.

“Cut,” he said gently. Dan lowered the camera.

“I’m sorry,” Lexi murmured, covering her face with her hands. “Maybe we should get Robert?—”

“You’ll be fine,” Hawk said. “What’s the first thing you do when you get to work?”

“I wash up, then check on the gorillas.”

“Then, go through the motions. Don’t look at the camera. Pretend you’re showing me, like yesterday.”

Dan added. “We’ll wait for you to start. Just give us a nod when you’re ready.”

Lexi blinked, swallowing hard, and Hawk could see the effort it took for her to pull herself together.

“You’ve got this.”

She nodded to Dan, then turned to the sink. Slowly, deliberately, she began washing her hands, the familiar motions helping to ground her. Hawk stayed back, out of the camera’s line of sight, but he didn’t take his eyes off her.

When she was ready, Lexi led the crew down the hall to the recovery room, where the two orphaned gorillas were waiting with Patrick. The scene unfolded smoothly from

there—Lexi worked with calm precision, checking Mto’s vitals and changing his dressing like she wasn’t being filmed. Hawk stayed just out of frame, but he could see she had it now.

She moved with a quiet confidence, her hands steady and sure, her focus entirely on the animals in front of her. It was almost like she’d forgotten the camera was there. He could see the connection she had with them, the way Mto relaxed in her arms, his soft noises of contentment filling the room.

Misha, the older of the two gorillas, was less cooperative. The little female wasn’t feeling well, and Hawk noticed the way Lexi’s expression shifted—concern creasing her brow as she took the gorilla’s temperature and prepared medication. She didn’t just care about these animals, she felt for them.

When Dan finally called, “Cut,” Lexi let out a breath she’d clearly been holding and gave Patrick more medication to administer later.

“That’s a wrap,” Rex said, glancing at his footage.

Dan grinned. “You did great, Lexi. Seriously. You’re a natural.”

She grimaced. “I felt like I was about to faint the entire time.”

“It didn’t show.” Hawk stepped forward, cutting Dan off. “You were impressive. Really.”

Her eyes flicked to his, skeptical but faintly pleased. “Thanks. I guess it wasn’t as bad as I thought once I got into it.”

Hawk saw his opening and took it. “Now that you’re warmed up,” he said casually, signaling to Dan, “how about a quick interview? Just a few words about the clinic,

what you do here.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I don’t know?—”

Before she could back out, he pulled a small microphone from his pocket. “Nothing heavy. Just the basics. You’ve got the best perspective on the work you do here.”

She hesitated, weighing her options. “I thought Robert was supposed to handle this kind of thing.”

“We’ll interview Robert later,” Hawk said smoothly, clipping the mic to her shirt himself. Damn, it was a mistake to get this close. He smelled her shampoo, warm and enticing, her heat, her warmth. Those forest green eyes staring up at him.

He cleared his throat. “This is your chance to talk about what matters to you. I promise, it’ll be painless.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. But I’m blaming you if I sound like an idiot.”

“Deal.” He stepping back as Dan repositioned the camera.

The interview went better than he could have hoped. Lexi started off hesitantly, but once she began talking about the clinic and the gorillas, her voice steadied, gaining strength. She spoke with a quiet passion, describing the challenges of their work and the impact of poaching with a mix of heartbreak and determination that was impossible to fake.

Hawk watched, captivated—not just by her words, but by her. The way her face lit up when she talked about something she cared about. The way her hands moved as she gestured, quick and precise, like everything she did had purpose.

By the time Dan called, “Cut,” Lexi looked stunned.

“That was great,” he said, smiling. He meant it.

“I can’t believe I just did that.” Her voice was a little breathless.

“You were incredible,” Dan told her. “I got some great footage. Wanna see?”

Her face softened, and Hawk scowled. He wasn’t even sure why Dan’s easy-going charm annoyed him, or her reaction to it. It wasn’t like he was interested in Lexi, even though he had to admit, she was totally his type. Natural, smart, compassionate and down to earth. He loved the no-drama surrounding her. She was exactly who she appeared to be.

Still, she was here. In Africa.

He was based in New York—and when he wasn’t, he was travelling to some of the most out of the way places on earth.

The best he could hope for was a fling, and while he wasn’t averse to that, she didn’t strike him as the one-night-stand, no-strings type.

“Let’s pack up and leave Lexi in peace,” he barked, sending Dan scuttling back to his camera.

It was ironic, really. Back in New York, women practically threw themselves at him. Yet here he was, thousands of miles from home, fascinated by the one woman who seemed immune to his charm.

He found he was smiling like an idiot as he watched her tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, her focus back on the gorillas. He’d always loved a challenge. If it was the

last thing he did, he'd get Lexi to open up to him. There was so much he wanted to know about her, and he didn't have that much time. A week, tops. But one thing he was sure of was that he didn't want to leave here without knowing her a whole lot better.

CHAPTER 7

Lexi watched Hawk through the open window, making sure to stay out of sight. She was still riding the high from the interview, but a kind of euphoria had settled in, and she was feeling pretty good about herself. She'd been a nervous wreck leading up to it, but she'd pulled it off. She could still hear Dan's praise and Hawk's steady, low voice telling her she'd done a great job.

Publicity wasn't her thing—never had been. Growing up in New York's social scene, she'd learned to hate the spotlight, unlike her mother, who thrived on it. Her family's name had carried weight, drawing cameras and questions everywhere they went. Lexi had always felt like an accessory, expected to smile and look pretty while everyone else played their roles. She chuckled softly, wondering what they'd say if they could see her now.

Her gaze drifted back to Hawk. He was standing a few yards away, deep in conversation with Jasper, his broad shoulders and easy stance commanding attention even when he wasn't trying. Gone were the crisp chinos and tailored shirt he'd worn when he first arrived. Today, he was in worn khaki pants and a plain gray t-shirt that clung just enough to hint at the strength beneath. It wasn't an outfit designed to impress, but somehow, it did.

Casual as his clothes were, he still carried that air of authority, like he could take charge of the entire sanctuary if he wanted to. Maybe she hadn't picked up on it before because she'd been too wrapped up in her own nerves, but now it struck her how comfortable he looked in this setting—as though the jungle didn't intimidate him in the slightest. That confidence, quiet and unshakable, was impossible to ignore.

As she watched, he broke off from Jasper and crossed the clearing toward a small boy crouched in the dirt. Lexi recognized him immediately—Moyo. The orphaned boy had been taken in by the sanctuary after losing his parents to the violence in the region. He was around eleven, maybe twelve, though he looked younger, his wiry frame swamped by a button-up shirt at least two sizes too big. His shorts were frayed and patched in places, and his feet were bare, calloused from the dusty ground.

Moyo was building something—a house of sticks, she realized. His tiny hands moved with precision, carefully balancing twigs on top of each other in what was clearly supposed to be a miniature home. Hawk crouched down beside him.

Lexi tilted her head, intrigued. Moyo kept his eyes down, unsure of what to make of the tall white man now watching him work. Hawk said something—she couldn't hear what—and the boy nodded in reply, his movements a little more hesitant.

Lexi smiled faintly.

Hawk didn't press him. Instead, he studied the little twig house, nodded, and then stood. Lexi frowned as he walked toward the edge of the jungle, disappearing into the trees.

What was he doing?

A few moments later, he reappeared with an armful of branches and leaves. Lexi leaned forward, resting her arms on the windowsill as curiosity got the better of her. Hawk dropped the pile next to Moyo and pulled a lethal-looking folding knife from his back pocket.

Crap. That was not something your run of the mill businessman kept in his back pocket. A calculator, maybe, but not a hunting weapon.

He knelt beside the boy again, opening the knife and showing him the various tools. Moyo's eyes widened, his curiosity outweighing his shyness. With slow, deliberate movements, Hawk began to build a new house, showing Moyo how to create a solid base with thicker branches before layering the smaller twigs for walls. He used strips of leaves to tie the pieces together, twisting the vines like he'd done it a hundred times before. Finally, he added a roof, draping palm fronds so they sloped just enough to keep out the imaginary rain.

Moyo sat in stunned silence, his small hands hovering uncertainly over the half-finished house. Hawk handed him a piece of vine and showed him how to tie a knot. The boy caught on quickly, his face breaking into a wide grin as the structure came together.

Lexi couldn't look away. The scene in front of her was so simple, so human. Moyo's laughter rang out as he clapped his hands, the house standing proudly in front of him. It was small and crooked, but to the boy, it might as well have been a palace.

When they were done, Hawk ruffled Moyo's hair affectionately before handing him the knife. Lexi's breath caught in her throat.

The boy just stared, his grin fading into shock. The knife was bright and shiny, and Lexi could see the hesitation in his eyes. This wasn't just a tool—it was a weapon and a treasure. Something extremely valuable.

Hawk smiled gently and unfolded the blades again, showing Moyo each one as if to say, It's yours. You can handle this.

Slowly, tentatively, Moyo reached out and took the knife, holding it in his open palm like it was made of gold. His wide eyes darted between Hawk and the knife, disbelief giving way to pure, unfiltered joy.

Then, with a laugh, the boy jumped to his feet and shook Hawk's hand so enthusiastically that even the stoic engineer cracked a grin. Without a word, Moyo spun around and bolted across the clearing, his laughter trailing behind him.

Lexi leaned back against the window frame, unable to take her eyes off him.

He straightened, brushed the dirt off his knees and watched the boy run off. There was no fanfare, no self-congratulation in his expression—just quiet satisfaction.

For a man so concerned with his company's reputation, he sure as hell had a way of surprising her. She'd thought she had him all figured out. Arrogant, self-assured, the kind of man who bulldozed his way through life without looking back. But moments like this made her wonder if there was more to him—if maybe he cared more than he let on.

"That was a nice thing you did today," Lexi said softly, her voice cutting through the low hum of conversation in the lodge.

The group had gathered for Robert's evening briefing, but Lexi's attention wasn't on the discussion. It was on Hawk, who leaned against the wall, a bottle of beer dangling loosely in his hand. He wore the same clothes from earlier, but the day had left its mark on him—his hair was windswept, giving him a rugged, untamed look, and the sun had kissed his skin, deepening it to a light golden brown.

"What do you mean?" His eyes slanted at her as he took a slow sip of his beer. She couldn't believe he was so at ease here, like the jungle was where he belonged, not some glass-walled office or boardroom halfway across the world.

"The pocketknife," she said, crossing her arms loosely over her chest. "The boy, Moyo."

“Ah.” His expression softened, and he glanced down at his beer, as though embarrassed she’d noticed. “So that’s his name. I was wondering... Every boy should have a pocketknife. I know I did when I was his age.”

Lexi couldn’t help the image that sprang to mind—Hawk as a kid, scrappy and determined, probably carving sticks or building forts with the same intensity he seemed to bring to everything.

“It was a kind thing to do,” she said, her voice quieter now.

“It was nothing,” he replied with a casual shrug, though she noticed the faint color that crept up his neck. He clearly wasn’t used to being thanked for something so small.

“What’s his story?” he asked, steering the conversation away from himself. “Why isn’t he in school?”

Lexi sighed. “Moyo’s an orphan. His parents died last year in a raid on one of the villages. Patrick bought him here, otherwise he’d most likely have been kidnapped by some rebel group and forced to be a child soldier.”

Hawk’s brow furrowed. “It’s fucking tragic, what happens out here.”

She couldn’t agree more. The situation was beyond tragic—lives uprooted, futures stolen, an entire generation left to fend for itself. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. And yet, this was reality here.

“Most of the schools around here have closed because of the conflict. The routes aren’t safe.”

“So he’s living at the sanctuary?” His tone had shifted, quieter now, but laced with

that same focused curiosity she'd come to recognize. He was always trying to piece things together, always searching for the full picture.

“Patrick’s family have taken him in. You know that African saying, it takes a village to raise a child?”

He nodded.

“Nowhere truer than here. He does odd jobs for the sanctuary, helps the carers when they need an extra pair of hands. It gives him a purpose, at least.”

He swirled the beer in his hand, his gaze drifting toward the open windows where the jungle stretched into the night, alive with the hum of crickets and the distant calls of wildlife. “It’s a damn shame,” he muttered.

She studied Hawk for a moment, his profile outlined against the warm glow of the lanterns. He wasn’t just making polite conversation—she could see that much. His questions weren’t for show. He genuinely wanted to understand, and that, more than anything, caught her off guard.

“You know,” she said after a pause, “I wasn’t sure about you when you first showed up.”

He turned to her, one eyebrow arching. “Oh? Should I be worried about where this is going?”

A laugh escaped her before she could stop it, and she shook her head. “I just mean... you seemed so polished. All business and image-focused. I figured you’d come in, get what you needed for your documentary, and leave without looking back.”

His lips quirked into a half-smile, and he leaned in just a fraction, enough that she

caught the faint, woodsy scent of his cologne. “And now?” His voice dropped like they were sharing a secret.

Her pulse quickened under his steady gaze. “Now, I think there’s more to you than you make out.”

He didn’t respond right away. For a moment, the space between them felt charged, the air humming with an unspoken tension that had been building since the day they’d met. His gaze lingered on her, tracing her face as though searching for something she wasn’t sure she wanted him to find.

“I have a reputation to uphold,” he said finally. “It doesn’t always allow me the leeway to be myself.”

“Was that the real you, today? With Moyo?”

“There are many sides to everybody’s personality.”

She acknowledged that truth with a tilt of her head.

“But I could say the same about you.”

Her breath caught. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Across the room, Dan caught her eye and gave her an easy grin, the leather thong around his neck making him look like he’d been here for years instead of days. She smiled back, grateful for the distraction.

Hawk scowled. “I think you do.”

Lexi turned back to him. He had a way of commandeering her attention. When she

was with him, it was impossible to concentrate on anyone else. He was still watching her, his expression unreadable.

“I make no pretenses about who I am.”

He was about to retort, when Robert’s voice rose above the low buzz of conversation. His tone was brisk, and Lexi could tell he was impatient to get the meeting underway. The filming schedule was a massive undertaking, involving extensive travel around the sanctuary, and she knew he had to anticipate the logistical challenges it would bring.

Behind him, Estelle followed with her usual stoicism, carrying a tray laden with a pitcher of lemonade and several glasses that clinked softly with every step.

“Let’s get started,” Robert began, but before he could say more, a sudden, frantic pounding on the front door shattered the calm.

Chaka, Robert’s black Labrador, bolted upright with a bark so loud and sharp it made Lexi jump. The dog tore out of the room, barking furiously, his claws clicking against the wooden floor.

“What on earth?” Estelle exclaimed, shaking her head as the commotion reached a fever pitch. “We’re not expecting anyone, are we?”

Lexi exchanged a wary glance with Hawk, whose sharp gaze was already locked on the doorway. His relaxed posture had stiffened, his body leaning slightly forward as if ready for action.

Blessing, the housekeeper, moved cautiously to the door. The pounding hadn’t stopped, and a low male voice could now be heard through the wood, urgent and strained. As soon as she opened it, chaos erupted.

A man stumbled into the entrance hall, his voice hoarse and broken, just as Estelle let out a sharp scream. Everyone rushed into the hall, but Lexi pushed through the crush of bodies to see what was happening.

“Erick!” she gasped, moving quickly to catch the man as he swayed dangerously on his feet. “What on earth happened? Come, sit down.”

The man was barely upright, his uniform—the dark green of the park rangers, with Usala’s gold badge still glinting on his chest—was torn and bloodied. His face was swollen, his cheek split open, as if he’d been in a brutal fight. His breath came in ragged gasps as he clutched his thigh.

“My leg,” he muttered, clutching his thigh. It was then Lexi noticed his trouser leg was dark with blood.

CHAPTER 8

Lexi glanced up as Hawk and Robert rushed to help. Together, they led Erick to the nearest chair, which he collapsed into. He was panting hard from his flight through the jungle to the Lodge. It must have been agony with an injury like that.

“Tell me what happened,” demanded Robert, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Who did this to you?”

Lexi bent down in front of him and carefully peeled back the torn, blood-soaked material to take a look at the wound. She cringed. It wasn’t good. A large gash, about five inches long, stretched across his outer thigh, displaying a good amount of tissue and muscle.

“He needs urgent medical attention.” She applied pressure to the wound. “Sorry,” she murmured as the ranger flinched.

“Can you do something to stem the bleeding?” Hawk crouched down beside her.

“Yes, but we have to get him to the clinic. He needs stitches.”

“It was a panga,” the ranger rasped, using the local name for a machete, the large, cleaver-type knife favored by tribes in eastern and southern Africa.

“It didn’t cut the femoral artery, thank goodness.” She glanced up at Erick. “If it had, you’d have bled out by now.”

He nodded weakly. “Rebels attacked the village. We tried to stop them, but they were too strong for us. There were too many this time.”

“Oh, Lord,” whispered Estelle, visibly paling. “Not again.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Hawk asked. Lexi saw genuine concern in his eyes.

“A smaller group were headed this way,” Erick warned.

A collective gasp went up amongst the group.

“We must warn the others,” Estelle said. “They’re going to want to go and protect their families, if they haven’t already.” Bad news traveled fast in the bush.

Hawk sprang into action. “I’ll go and issue the alert. Dan can come with me.” The cameraman nodded.

Lexi focused on Erick. “Let’s get you to the clinic. You’re going to need anesthetic and stitches. We’ve no time to lose.”

“I’ll bring the golf cart around,” Estelle said, matter-of-factly.

Robert put a warning hand on his wife’s arm. “Okay, but I don’t want you going with them. You need to stay here and secure the house and staff.”

She gave his hand a quick squeeze. “I know.” They’d rehearsed for this contingency many times. “You should call MONESCU,” she whispered. “Before it’s too late.”

Robert began barking orders. “Hawk, once you’re at the clinic find Patrick. He’ll warn the others.” Hawk nodded, no argument.

“Lexi, you know what to do once you’ve seen to Erick?”

She nodded. The shelter under the clinic had been well prepared after the last uprising.

He clapped his hands together. “Right, let’s go!”

The whole household swung into action. Within two minutes the golf cart was at the front door and Hawk and Dan lifted the injured ranger into it. Lexi had bound his wound, but was still applying pressure with her hand, which was now covered with blood. She jumped into the back of the cart with her patient, while Dan and Hawk climbed into the front, Hawk taking the wheel.

“What about me?” asked Jasper. “What should I do?”

“You and the rest of the crew stay here with us at the main house,” ordered Robert.

He flashed Hawk a worried look, then nodded and went back inside.

“Stay safe,” Estelle called, a catch in her throat, as they took off down the dirt track to the clinic.

Lexi peered into the jungle as they bounced towards the clinic, keeping her hand on Erick’s leg. Somewhere in the darkness, the rebels were approaching. She estimated they had twenty minutes at the most, then they’d have to take cover too. She had to work fast.

“What is MONUSCO?” Dan asked, as the clinic came into view. “Is that a United Nations thing?”

“It’s the UN peacekeeping mission in the area,” Lexi told him. “They do what they

can in these situations, but once the rebels are on the move, it's hard to stop them. The damage is usually done by the time the troops get here. The local communities are so inaccessible that response times are slow."

They skidded to a halt outside the clinic, the front tires kicking up plumes of dust and grit. Hawk and Dan lifted the ranger out of the car and carried him into the clinic.

"Put him on the operating table," ordered Lexi, going straight to the sink and washing her hands. The water ran red as the ranger's blood spiraled down the drain. After drying them, she pulled on a pair of surgical gloves and began to assemble the utensils she'd need to treat his leg.

Erick winced as they set him down, but didn't complain. He was a brave man, and he'd risked his life to come and warn them. "It'll be okay," she told him, praying she was right.

"We'll go and find Patrick." Hawk set off, Dan right behind him, leaving her to work. She cleansed the wound with disinfectant, gave Erick a shot for the pain, and then went to work stitching him up. She'd never operated on a human before, but it wasn't that different to gorillas, just less hair. She was so preoccupied with what she was doing, she didn't notice when Hawk came back into the room.

"Dan's gone with Patrick to round up the staff," he said, startling her. His gaze fell on Erick's leg and the tightly stitched wound. "Do you need anything?"

"What's the time?" She blinked, her eyes strained from the intense concentration.

"Ten thirty-five," he replied, without looking at his watch. He must also be keeping tabs on the time.

"We've got to get Erick to the shelter. If the rebels are heading this way, they'll be

here any moment.”

He nodded, watching as she bandaged the wound. As soon as she’d secured it, he asked, “Ready?”

She gave a hesitant nod and stood back. She’d done what she could. Erick still needed a real doctor to treat his wound, but it would last until they could get him to the hospital in Goma. Tony helped Erick off the table. The ranger cringed and sagged against him, his injured leg nearly useless. Tony put an arm around his waist to support him.

“Where’s the shelter?” he asked Lexi.

She grabbed a jar of antibiotics and some more bandages. “Out the back. There’s a hatch in the ground. It leads to a basement under the clinic. We can go through the office.”

Hawk half-carried a heavily limping Erick through the tiny office and into the dusty yard. Lexi darted around him and pulled a rusty wheelbarrow and some pot plants out of the way. “It’s underneath this.”

She raised the trapdoor and gestured for him to lower Erick into it.

“You get in with Erick. I’ll stay outside to put these back,” Hawk said, as he helped the injured ranger into the shelter. “Otherwise, they’ll know we’re inside.”

Her chest constricted with fear. “It’s too dangerous, Hawk. The rebels will find you.”

“They’ll find all of us if we don’t disguise this trapdoor.” He climbed back out and looked around. “What about Patrick and Dan, and the others? What are they going to do?”

“Patrick knows to come back here. Some of the staff will head back to their villages to protect their families, but the majority will stay with the gorillas. They’ll hide in the enclosure.”

“Okay, but you’re getting into the shelter.”

“But, I?—”

“Now, Lexi.”

She glanced up as something caught her eye. Through the thin, dilapidated fence, she spotted Moyo standing in the clearing, looking scared and confused.

“Okay, but first let me get Moyo.” Before he had a chance to restrain her, she darted back through the clinic.

“Fuck!” she heard Hawk mutter as he took off after her. He reached her before she stepped into the clearing. “Get your ass back to the shelter. Now! I’ll get the boy.” Before she could stop him, Hawk sprinted across the clearing.

At that moment, Patrick appeared with one infant gorilla in each arm. At his side were his wife and five terrified children. Dan was clutching the youngest by the hand. They could hear shouts and the sharp, staccato bursts of rifle fire emanating from the edge of the jungle. The rebels were here.

“Get to the shelter,” Lexi urged them. “Dan, go with them.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“I’ll be right there.” He nodded, and followed Patrick, the gorillas, and the children outside. She glanced worriedly across the clearing, where Hawk had scooped the

paralyzed child up in his arms.

There was no time. She had to close the hatch to the shelter or else they'd all be at risk. Racing out to the back, she pulled the trapdoor down and tugged the wheelbarrow over it. That would have to do.

Next, she grabbed a tranquilizer gun from the medical cabinet and darted back in time to see Hawk tearing across the clearing with Moyo clinging to his chest. The boy's wide eyes glistened with fear, his arms wrapped tightly around Hawk's neck.

Bursting through the clinic door, he thrust the trembling child toward her. "Get him to the shelter."

"It's too late. I've shut it up already."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Goddammit, Lexi!"

"I had to, Patrick and his family are down there, along with Dan and the infants. I couldn't risk their lives."

"But it's okay to risk yours?"

She glared back at him. "It was the only way."

"Shit." He glanced around. "Do you have any more weapons?"

A memory triggered. "Yes! There's a rifle in the golf cart, behind the driver's seat. I saw it on the way down here."

Before she could argue, he dashed back outside. The Jeep was only yards away, but the edges of the jungle were alive with movement. Any second now and the rebels

would emerge.

Lexi held Moyo in her arms and watched through the window as Hawk leaned over the side to grab the gun. Slinging it over his shoulder, he charged back inside just as the first line of rebels emerged from the foliage.

After he'd locked and bolted the door, he hunkered down beside them. Lexi watched in amazement as he flicked off the safety, checked the magazine, and chambered a round—all in a matter of seconds.

"I'm not even going to ask how you know how to do that."

"It's a long story," he muttered. "But right now we have to get you and Moyo somewhere safe."

There was the sound of glass breaking as a rock flew through the clinic window. "They're going to ransack the place," Lexi whispered, backing into a corner. "They always do."

"We need to get the hell out of here," Hawk said, his voice low and steady.

"The back way," Lexi whispered as she led Moyo out into the yard. The hatch was closed, the wheelbarrow firmly in place. Lexi ignored it as she slipped around the side of the office and through a hole in the fence. Behind it, was a dense layer of vegetation.

Moyo clung tightly to her hand, his eyes huge and haunted. Her heart broke for the boy. His childhood memories were filled with the terror of rebel attacks. She thought of her own indulgent childhood back in the States, filled with trips to the Hamptons and weekends at the Cape, and cringed at the comparison.

“Come on!” She beckoned to Hawk, who kicked some dust over the hatch for good measure before following her.

CHAPTER 9

Hawk followed her and the boy as they crept through the dense vegetation away from the clinic. Nobody would spot them in the darkness. Behind them, they could hear the shouts and cheers of the rebels as they trashed the clinic.

From what he'd been able to make out, there were five of them, all kitted out with what looked like Russian-made AK-47s. From his time in the SEALs, he knew that typically the weapons would be second-hand and poorly maintained. That gave him the advantage. On top of it, the rebels were untrained soldiers, which meant they were unpredictable, but also prone to missing their target.

It was hard to be quiet in the jungle, and three people fighting their way through made an inevitable rustle. Through the trees, backlit by the light in the clearing, Hawk spotted one of the rebels turn their way.

His breath hitched.

Fuck.

He dropped to one knee, settling the rifle against his shoulder as he scanned the tree line.

Lexi cradled Moyo against her chest. "Why are we stopping?"

"They know we're here."

The child whimpered, his small arms clutching her neck as she stumbled backward. “Oh, God. What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to run. Go!” His tone didn’t leave room for argument.

Lexi turned and ran, taking Moyo with her.

The rebel shouted and two others emerged from the clinic and came to join him in the clearing. They wore bandanas wrapped around their faces and in addition to the rifles in their hands, they had large pangas hanging from their belts. The rebel pointed toward the brush, shouting and gesturing.

Hawk waited, controlling his breathing, his finger poised over the trigger.

Then a shot rang out. They didn’t know his exact location, it was too dark amongst the foliage, so they were taking potshots in this direction. He hit the dirt as a bullet flew over his head and embedded in a tree behind him.

Shit, that was close.

He lay on his stomach and took aim. The rebels approached, cautiously at first, then speeding up as they grew in confidence. He had the benefit of the well-lit clearing behind them that silhouetted their forms. When they reached the treeline, he pulled the trigger and the first man went down, screaming and clutching his shoulder. It wasn’t a fatal shot, but it would render his shooting arm useless.

The others unleashed a hail of bullets into the undergrowth, but as he’d expected, they went high. Problem was, it drew the attention of the other two rebels inside the clinic. They came charging out, guns raised. He half expected to see more emerge from the jungle, but none did. Perhaps this was just one band on a rampage.

Hawk stayed down, poised for another shot. As they raced forward, he unleashed a shitstorm of his own, spraying up dust in front of them. He could have killed them outright, but he didn't need the complication.

They skidded to a halt, then scrambled backwards. He was the unseen enemy, and there was nothing more fearsome than that. They scrambled for cover, hiding behind the golf cart.

He was waiting for them to emerge, when he heard a familiar sound. Low at first, almost imperceptible against the hum of the jungle, but growing steadily louder—a rhythmic whump-whump-whump that sent a rush of relief through him.

A helicopter.

The rebels heard it too. Their movements faltered, their heads snapping toward the sound. One of them barked an order, his voice tinged with urgency. They broke cover, disappearing into the thick underbrush, shadows dissolving into the jungle, leaving their three wounded colleagues bleeding in the clearing.

For a few tense moments, Hawk stayed rooted in place, his rifle tracking the bushes, ready for one of them to make a last-ditch attempt. His breathing was steady, his mind clear, but his muscles were taut, every nerve on edge.

The whump-whump-whump grew deafening now as the helicopter came into land. Hawk emerged from the jungle and trained his weapon on the three injured rebels. "Don't even think about it," he warned, as one eyed out his rifle.

Hawk kicked the discarded weapons to safety as the chopper lowered itself into the clearing. The rebels wouldn't be going anywhere in their condition. The one with the shoulder wound was unconscious now, the two others writhing in agony, one clutching his leg, the other his arm. With proper treatment, they'd survive to fight another day.

Once the helicopter had landed, he pivoted and scanned the undergrowth for Lexi and Moyo.

“Lexi,” he yelled. “You can come out now.”

Then he spotted her. A white face peering from behind the brushes several yards away.

“They’re gone,” he called. “It’s safe.”

She stepped out, her arms still wrapped tightly around Moyo. Hawk wanted nothing more than to go to her, take her in his arms and tell her everything was going to be okay, but the sound of boots hitting the ground pulled his attention back to the clearing.

A team of UN peacekeepers jumped out, their weapons raised, their movements efficient and coordinated. The sight brought back a flood of memories—missions, deployments, nights just like this one in some godforsaken place. It felt like a lifetime ago.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and raised his hands in a gesture of calm as the nearest officer approached. “I’m American,” he said. “I’ve got three wounded rebels and a bunch of unarmed civilians here. The remaining fighters fled into the jungle when they heard you coming.”

The officer nodded sharply, signaling to his team to fan out and secure the area.

Hawk turned back to where Lexi stood, still clutching Moyo. Her hands were trembling, her breaths shallow, and her eyes were huge and haunted.

“You okay?” he asked.

She nodded, her eyes locked on his. Amongst the fear, he saw concern. She'd been worried about him. "Are you?"

For a moment, he didn't answer. A mix of affection and adrenaline coursed through his veins. Damned if that didn't feel good.

He exhaled, nodding. "Yeah. I'm good."

"You shot them?" She nodded to the three injured rebels on the ground. The UN peacekeepers were inspecting their wounds, before giving them some basic treatment and loading them into the helicopter.

"Yeah." He didn't excuse it. They'd been gunning for them. If he hadn't, they sure as hell wouldn't be standing here now.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. Hawk could tell she was about to break. Fuck propriety. Some things were more important. He opened his arms, and taking Moyo with her, she collapsed into them.

"You're not just an engineer, are you?" Lexi said quietly, once they'd made sure everyone was safe. They were sitting on the front steps of the clinic, drinking coffee from tin mugs under the dim porch light, trying to recover after the drama of the last few hours.

Moyo had gone back to Patrick's house with his wife and family, while the infant gorillas were safely back in their enclosure behind the clinic, no worse for wear.

Hawk didn't answer right away. He stared out into the darkness, that chiseled jaw tight with tension.

"Come on," she pressed, leaning slightly toward him. "I saw you out there—with the

rebels, with that rifle. You knew exactly what to do.”

He exhaled slowly, his fingers relaxing around the handle of his mug. “It’s a long story.”

She shrugged, trying not to think of the way he’d held her and Moyo earlier. His big arms had enveloped her, held her close, with one hand clasped to the back of her neck. She’d heard his heart beating against her ear, steady and rhythmic. Not racing like hers, or terrified like Moyo’s. He’d been in control of his emotions the entire time. “We’ve got time.”

Hawk gave a low, humorless chuckle. “Alright. If you must know, I used to be in the Navy. It was a long time ago, I was a different person back then.”

She nodded. “I guessed it was something like that.”

He lowered his voice. “It’s not something I broadcast. I was only in for five years before I realized that if I really wanted to make a difference, there were more effective ways to do it.”

She frowned, studying his profile, sharp in the lamplight. “Make a difference?”

He nodded, his gaze distant as he stared into the past. “Yeah. Instead of kicking down doors and blowing shit up, I wanted to be the one calling the shots. Building something instead of tearing it apart.”

Kicking down doors. Blowing shit up.

Lexi gnawed thoughtfully on her lip. “What part of the Navy were you in?”

He skirted the answer. “It doesn’t matter. At the end of the day, I needed a career

change and chose this route.”

“Engineering?”

He shifted slightly, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “It was my specialty in the Navy,” he admitted. “When I got out, it made sense to formalize it, get a qualification, and use it to build something that could actually help people. Roads, dams, clean water systems.” His voice softened. “I wanted to give people the kind of stability I was sent to protect.”

“Like this one?” she murmured.

“Yeah.” He exhaled slowly. “Although, this one is proving challenging.”

She chuckled. “You don’t strike me as a man who gives up easily.”

His gaze sliced through her. Midnight blue slits of determination that made her heart skip a beat. “I don’t.”

Were they still talking about the sanctuary?

She imagined he’d be quite formidable in the boardroom. Or the bedroom. Shit, where had that thought come from? Blushing, she said, “So the purchase of the mine...?”

“Provides employment for the locals and hopefully provides some stability to the surrounding area. I have a Navy buddy who runs a team of security experts trained for these exact situations. Once we purchase the mine, I’ll bring them in and hopefully restore some order of peace around here.”

“That would be amazing,” she whispered. “If only it was possible.”

“You don’t think we can do it?” he asked, turning to face her.

She sighed. “The situation is more complex out here than you think.”

“I’m aware of that,” he said darkly. “All I want is a chance to make a difference to people’s lives.”

Lexi gave a faint grin. “And here I thought you were just a ruthless businessman on a mission to expanding your empire.”

Hawk smirked, his gaze sliding to hers. “I am that too, but not for the reasons you think.”

Damn.

The way he was looking at her now—direct, unflinching, like he could see right through her—sent a rush of heat flooding through her veins.

“Seems I misjudged you.” She looked away, flustered.

The corners of his mouth turned up. “You’re not off the hook yet. What are you really doing out here?”

She hesitated, the flush of warmth in her chest replaced by the cold weight of his question. “Same as you,” she said lightly, deflecting. “Trying to make a difference.”

His eyes narrowed like he didn’t quite believe her. “Yeah, but you never told me what you were running from.”

She stiffened, gripping her mug tighter. “I’m not running,” she muttered.

“Come on.” He leaned back, his tone casual, his gaze unrelenting. “I looked you up, Alexandra Prescott.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, her voice sharper than she intended.

“Why not? It’s your name, isn’t it?” He watched her, his expression unreadable.

“Anything but that.”

His eyes glimmered. “Your dad’s Senator Charles Prescott, isn’t he? Why not tell me?”

“Because it doesn’t matter,” she said quickly, her voice tight. “Out here, nobody knows what a senator is—or cares. And I don’t want anyone making assumptions about me because of him.”

“Like assuming you’re a spoiled rich girl?” he asked bluntly, though his tone lacked judgment.

“Exactly,” she bit out.

“Even though,” he continued, his voice softening, “that kind of power and influence could give you a bigger platform to do good?”

“What this place needs isn’t power,” she shot back, her frustration bubbling over. “It’s compassion. People who care more about helping than about control.” She gestured to the clearing, her voice cracking. “Power is what brings war, Hawk. It’s what caused all this.”

For a moment, he was silent, his gaze dropping to the mug in his hands. Then he nodded slowly. “Touche,” he muttered. “I guess we’re coming at this from two

different angles. I'm trying to use my power for good, and you're trying to leave yours behind. But we're both after the same thing."

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, his admission softening the tension between them. "Maybe," she murmured.

He tilted his head, studying her. "So... leaving your fiancé at the altar. Was that part of leaving it all behind?"

She stared at him, stunned. "How do you?—"

"It was in the papers," he said simply, his lips curving into a faint smile. "Soon as I Googled your name, there it was."

"Crap," she muttered under her breath, rubbing her temples.

He laughed softly. "You sure know how to make an impact, I'll give you that much."

"It wasn't like that," she said, scowling. "I told Charles the night before I wasn't going through with it. He just didn't believe me."

"So you left," Hawk said, his voice quieter now.

She nodded, her throat tightening. "I packed a bag, snuck out, and never looked back."

"That can't have been easy."

"It wasn't."

He shook his head. "What did your family have to say? Your fiancée?"

“The fallout was intense,” she admitted. “My parents were frantic. My bridesmaids were panicking. Charles was already at the church. Eventually, they had to tell him I wasn’t coming.”

“How’d you know all this?” he asked.

“My mother writes to me. She never missed an opportunity to tell me what a disgrace I am, and how I embarrassed the entire family.”

Hawk gave a low whistle. “I can see why you don’t want to go home.”

“It’s not just that, I love it out here. The climate, the jungle, the people. It’s all so different, so exotic, and even though it probably won’t last, I want to make the most of every moment.”

“What do you mean it won’t last?” He tilted his head.

“It can’t. Even though Robert means well, there’ll be limits to what he can do. To what you can do. Eventually, I’ll have to leave, but hopefully, I’ll have helped along the way.”

“You’re helping already,” he said. “Those little infants wouldn’t have survived without you.”

She smiled. “I know. It feels good. I’d rather be doing this than attending a charity ball or raising money for something I’ll never see, or someplace I’ll never go. This way, when I go back, I’ll know that what I’m raising money for will be worthwhile.”

“It seems I’ve misjudged you too.” Hawk fixed his gaze on her face.

She arched an eyebrow. “Seems we’re even, then.”

CHAPTER 10

A thick mist clung to the rainforest as Lexi made her way up the hill to the Lodge early the next morning. The humid air was alive with the chirping of birds and the rustle of unseen animals, but the peaceful dawn was deceptive after the chaos of last night's attack. Her boots crunched on the damp path as she rounded the final corner, the lodge coming into view through the haze.

It was barely seven o'clock, but Robert had called an emergency meeting for the key staff. Everyone—ranger squad leaders, enclosure supervisors, and remaining sanctuary workers—was expected. The atmosphere was tense. Even with the calming birdsong, a sense of unease hung in the air like the mist.

Lexi stepped onto the wooden deck, greeted by the familiar aroma of Estelle's coffee and the quiet murmur of conversations. Estelle handed her a steaming mug and gave her a quick, concerned hug.

"How are you holding up?" Estelle asked softly, her usual warmth shadowed by worry.

"I'm okay," Lexi replied, though her body still felt like a coiled spring.

She spotted Hawk standing on the far end of the deck, deep in conversation with Robert. His face was somber but composed, his shoulders squared as if he were preparing to take on the world. She couldn't help but notice how commanding he looked, even after last night's chaos.

She remembered how he'd stood his ground, faced the rebels, ordering her to run for cover with Moyo. He hadn't hesitated, not even for a second. Then he'd shot three of them, and probably would have taken out the rest if the chopper hadn't arrived when it did.

Estelle followed her gaze. "He's staying to help," she said quietly. "Robert told me this morning. He's donating more money to rebuild."

Lexi blinked, caught off guard. "He's staying?"

Estelle nodded. "He wants to help us rebuild everything the rebels destroyed. He's already making plans with Robert."

Before Lexi could respond, Dan, the cameraman, approached with a tired but genuine smile.

"I'm glad you're alright," he said, his voice low. "I heard you had a close call last night."

Lexi's cheeks flushed. "Yeah, but we took cover in the jungle.

"That was a brave thing you did, making sure the others were safe." Dan said, his tone kind.

"I didn't have a choice," Lexi muttered, her gaze flickering toward Hawk. She couldn't shake the memory of him standing in the clearing, rifle in hand, shielding her and Moyo.

Dan nodded. "I heard about Hawk's heroics. The rumors must be true. I didn't believe it before, but now?—"

Robert clapped his hands, commanding everyone's attention. Dan broke off before Lexi could ask him what he meant. What rumors?

"Alright, everyone, let's get started."

The group gathered on the deck as the sun began to pierce through the mist, casting golden rays over the treetops. Lexi took a spot near the railing, while Hawk stepped up beside Robert.

"We had a lucky escape last night," Robert began, his voice steady despite the strain in his expression. "Thanks to everyone who helped protect the sanctuary and its people. I want to especially thank Hawk for his bravery and Lexi for securing the staff."

She shook her head. He deserved all the praise, she'd done nothing out of the ordinary.

"As many of you know," Robert continued, "the UN has warned us that rebel activity in the area is escalating. While we've been fortunate this time, the risks are growing. I won't lie to you—things will likely get worse before they get better. That's why I'm giving everyone here a choice. If you feel it's too dangerous to stay, I'll arrange transport to get you somewhere safe. No one will think less of you."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the group, but no one moved.

"For those of us who remain," Robert went on, his tone growing more resolute, "we're going to rebuild. Bigger, stronger, and better than before. Thanks to Hawk's generosity, we'll be reinforcing the enclosures, modernizing the clinic, and improving security across the sanctuary."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the group. "This work is too important to

abandon. Estelle and I aren't going anywhere, and we hope you'll stay and fight with us."

There was a beat of silence before Jean Paul, the head ranger, stepped forward. "My men will stay, Robert. We have families to support. And we love this sanctuary as much as you do."

Patrick chimed in. "Same here. No one on my team is leaving."

Robert smiled, visibly moved. "Thank you. All of you. With your help, we'll make this place safer for everyone—for the people and the animals."

The group broke into quiet applause, the tension easing slightly. Lexi watched as Hawk leaned in to murmur something to Robert, his expression intent. Even now, he looked like he belonged here—like he was part of the team.

As the meeting dispersed, Lexi lingered on the deck, sipping her coffee and watching the sunlight filter through the trees. Crazy how a place that was so beautiful could be so violent. She was so deep in thought, she didn't notice Hawk approach until he was standing right beside her.

"How are you this morning?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice. "Oh, Hawk. I didn't see you come over."

"I know. You okay, Lexi?"

Her pulse quickened at the nickname, which was now sounding more like a term of endearment. "I'm fine. How about you?"

"Fine. I'm just glad it wasn't worse."

Lexi gave a grim nod. “It could happen again, you know? The rebuild, the money you’re investing, it could all be for nothing.”

“It won’t be for nothing.” His tone was firm. “Even if it’s only for a short while, it’ll be worth it.”

“You’re prepared to give away all that money for something that might very well be temporary?”

“If it saves lives, if it helps the animals, then yeah.”

She studied him. The intensity in his eyes, the quiet conviction in his voice—it was heartwarming, it was disturbing, it was insanely attractive.

“Hawk...” she began, but cut off, unsure of where she was going.

“Yeah?” He took a step toward her. With the railing at her back, she couldn’t move away, not that she wanted to. Her heart hammered against her chest, as she looked up at him.

“Thank you for doing this.”

“You’re welcome.” He reached for her, but then Robert appeared on the deck.

“Hawk, do you have a moment to go over the plans for the rebuild?”

His arm dropped to his side, but he kept his gaze locked on her face. “Sure, I’ll be right in.”

“Great, thanks.”

He gestured after Robert. “Sorry. I’d better go.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I need to get to work anyway.”

He bowed his head to her. “To be continued.”

CHAPTER 11

Lexi wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Geez, it was hotter than Hades in here. The afternoon sun beat down, turning the clinic into a sweltering furnace. She looked around in dismay. Where to begin? The place was a mess.

Broken glass crunched underfoot as she moved around the room, picking up the pieces. Furniture was overturned, the medicine cabinet had been looted, and papers from her desk were scattered everywhere.

A hole in the wall that had once been a window let in streams of sunlight, but it did little to brighten her heavy mood. Patrick was in the recovery room, trying to straighten that out, so at least they had one area that was operational.

Anger simmered just beneath the surface. Why did they have to destroy the clinic? She knew the rebels didn't care, that their motives were rooted in poverty and desperation, but it still felt personal. The clinic had been her sanctuary as much as it was for the animals. Now it was barely usable, and she couldn't shake the thought that no matter how much they rebuilt, it could all be taken away again in an instant.

They worked for most of the morning, and by lunchtime, she was a hot, sweaty mess. The clinic was in better shape, however, and the floors clear of glass, the office back to working order, the recovery room usable again—and that cheered her. She was just washing her hands when Hawk stepped in.

“Good job,” he said, glancing around. “Much better.”

“Well, it’s usable,” she said, reaching for a hand towel.

He held up two cans of lemonade. “Figured you could use a cold drink.”

“That sounds great.” They sat in her office, the ceiling fan whirring quietly above them, moving hot air around the room. Still, it was better than being outside where the sun was at its pinnacle and dangerously hot.

Hawk sat opposite her, placing the two cans and a leather-bound notebook on the desk. “What’s that?” She nodded toward it.

“Those are my plans for the reconstruction,” he said. “I wanted to talk to you about your ideas.”

“My ideas?”

“Yeah, for the clinic. You know this place better than anyone. Walk me through it—tell me what you need, what would make your job easier. I’ll take notes and put together a plan.”

She opened the can of lemonade with a soft hiss and took a long sip. Damn, that tasted good.

Hawk was watching her, a smile on his face.

“Alright,” she said, setting it back down. “But it would be easier if I showed you.”

He nodded. “Let’s do it.”

They started in the main surgery room, where the smashed windows let in hot gusts of air. She pointed out the lack of space for equipment, the outdated tools, the poor

lighting. Hawk listened intently, jotting down notes in his notebook, occasionally asking thoughtful questions.

She led him to the recovery ward, “We need more cots in here. And better ones. The frames we have now are rusted, and the mattresses are ancient. Also, more storage for medical supplies. The cabinets we had barely held anything, and half of them are broken now anyway.”

“Got it.” Hawk scribbled something down. “What about a play area for the infants? Somewhere they can recover under supervision, before they go back to the enclosure?”

Lexi blinked. “That would be amazing. Are you sure you can afford all this?”

He gave a soft snort. “Yeah. Don’t worry about that.”

As they moved through the clinic, the tension that had knotted her shoulders all morning began to ease. Hawk’s calm, practical approach was reassuring, and she found herself opening up about her vision for the space. By the time they reached the storage room—what was left of it—she was talking animatedly about staff lounges, isolation wards for sick animals, and proper workstations for the carers.

“You’ve clearly thought about this,” Hawk remarked, his expression thoughtful as he flipped through his notes.

“Of course I have,” she said. “This place is my life.”

As they made their way back to the office, Hawk said, “I’ll draft up a blueprint and run it by Robert. We’ll make this place better than it’s ever been.”

Lexi looked at him, his earnest expression, the sincerity in his voice. It was so

different to how he'd been when he'd first arrived. It was like he was a different man.

"Why are you doing all this?" she asked softly.

He frowned slightly. "You know why."

"I know you want to change the world, but you don't have to stay here to do it. This place is dangerous, and you've got responsibilities back in New York. A whole company to run. So why risk your life to be here?"

Hawk was silent for a long moment. "Maybe I just want to help while I can," he said finally.

"Well, whatever the reason, we appreciate it. I just hope it's not all in vain."

Hawk's eyes lingered on hers, the warmth in his gaze making her breath hitch. "You haven't shown me the staff quarters yet."

"You want to see where I live?"

"Yeah, I heard there was some damage, and since we're remodeling, we may as well include those."

"Er, sure. Follow me." She led him out of the clinic and around the back to where two long, squat buildings stood, partially covered by the encroaching jungle. This was where the veterinarians, the carers, and the catering staff lived. Twenty units in total, but many had double bunks in them. As a woman, she'd gotten a room to herself.

"This is me."

He stood back while she unlocked the door, then followed her inside. Lexi cringed as

she took in the state of her room. It had been messed up by the rebels, but nothing had been taken. She didn't have anything of value to take.

When she'd arrived here, it had been with one suitcase containing the bare minimum, along with her passport and some spending money. Both of those were in the safe up at the Lodge, on Robert's insistence. She hadn't even brought her engagement ring, preferring to leave it on the dresser in her bedroom. Her mother had probably returned it to Charles by now. Maybe he'd even given it to Charlotte when he'd proposed.

She watched as his gaze roamed around the room, taking everything in. The broken shelf containing some personal items, the medical books piled on the floor, the chair over which she'd flung the green dress from last night and ... oh God. Her underwear.

Shit, she'd forgotten about that.

Flushing, she said, "Sorry about the mess."

"Not a problem." Hawk moved further into the room, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Your bed is broken."

One of the legs had broken causing it to slant like a lopsided playground slide.

"Yeah, I slept on the floor last night."

He turned to her, his tone chastising. "You should have told me."

"Yesterday was a long day. I wasn't really worried about where I slept. Besides, the mattress is fine, it's just the frame."

His expression softened. "I'll come and fix it this afternoon."

"Oh, there's no need." She brushed it off. "I'm sure there are more urgent things to work on."

"It won't take long."

"Okay, well, if you're sure."

"I am." The look in his eye caused her stomach to flip. It was filled with an intensity that took her breath away. She felt herself flushing, her hands turning clammy, and it had nothing to do with the heat or the humidity.

It was all him. Hawk affected her like nobody else she'd ever known. He seemed to draw her in with his very presence. Command her attention. Now he'd lost that superior attitude and the arrogance that went with it, she was powerless to resist.

He took a step toward her, his gaze fixed on her face. "You know I'd do anything to help you."

"But why?" she whispered. "What do you care? You'll be leaving soon."

"I still I care about what happens to you."

Oh, God. That magnetic force was pulling her in. He brushed a damp strand of hair out of her face, his fingers grazing her skin. She felt like she was being singed.

"Does Robert know who you are?" he asked.

"He knows my name, but not who my father is," she whispered, glancing down at her hands, wishing they weren't trembling. "Even if he did, it wouldn't matter. He

needed a vet, and I applied for the job.”

“You were very brave coming out here,” he murmured.

“I was desperate to get away.”

“Was he so bad, your ex?”

“Not really. He was just... well, power hungry, ambitious, political. You know the type.”

“I do. I’m surprised you went for someone like that.” He cocked his head to the side, so close she could almost feel his breath on her cheek.

“It was... expected,” she murmured. “I didn’t really have much say.”

“You always have a say,” he retorted.

“I know that now. That’s why I left, because nobody would listen to me.”

He snaked an arm around her waist and drew her to him. “Well, I for one am very glad that you did run out on him, and that you ended up here.”

She smiled, unable to help herself, despite the effect his proximity was having on her quivering insides. “So am I.”

Before she could think another thought, he bent his head, and his lips crushed down on hers. Hard, rough, with just the right amount of pressure to make her splay her hands over his chest for support.

His rock-solid chest.

Oh, help, she thought, powerless to do anything but acquiesce as his mouth forced hers open and his tongue delved inside. Lexi went weak at the knees, and clung to him, her head spinning. What was she doing?

This was Hawk Anderson, for goodness sake. The sanctuary benefactor, the man who'd waltzed in here, taken over, saved her life during the raid, and would leave once his work here was done—if not before.

And she was kissing him.

She pushed against his chest until he let her go. "What is it?"

"Hawk, we shouldn't be doing this."

He frowned, his gaze still smoldering. "Why not?"

"You know why not. It doesn't make any sense. You're leaving soon, and I'm staying here. Besides, Robert would kill me if he found out. You're the park's benefactor. We're all supposed to be nice to you."

"I think we're beyond nice, don't you?" His gaze was teasing.

"I'm serious. We need you to sponsor the renovations, to support our work here. You've seen how important it is. I can't risk all that."

"How are you risking that by kissing me?"

She bit her tongue. "I just don't want any bad feelings between us."

"There won't be. Not from my side, anyway."

She sighed, and moved further away, putting some space between them. “I’m sorry, Hawk. I think it’s best if we remain friends.”

He gave a reluctant nod. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

Her voice was firm. “It is.”

“In that case, I’m going to go and work on these plans. Once I’ve got something concrete, we can go over them together.” He raised an eyebrow. “That okay with you?”

“Of course.”

His gaze lingered, still burning with a heat that turned her insides to mush. “See you later, then.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of cleaning and repairs. With Patrick and the others helping, they managed to get the clinic fully functional, but by the time evening fell, Lexi was exhausted.

Hawk had said he’d stop by and fix her bed, but he didn’t. She told herself it didn’t matter—he was probably still working on his plans—but she couldn’t deny a small flicker of disappointment.

It wasn’t until she opened the door to her room that she noticed the difference.

Her bed was fixed .

Lexi stepped closer, bending to take a look. She ran her fingers along the sturdy

frame. He'd been here after all. Quietly, without fanfare, he'd kept his promise.

Her lips curved into a tired smile as she sank onto the bed, too drained to even change out of her clothes. The mattress cradled her aching body, and for the first time in days, she felt a semblance of security.

As her head hit the pillow, her thoughts weren't on the repairs or even the chaos of the clinic.

They were on Hawk.

On the way his eyes had burned when he'd looked at her, and the sudden passion with which he'd kissed her, sending her into a spin.

Her heart fluttered as she remembered how he'd tasted, how he'd felt. The hardness of his chest, the gentleness of his fingers brushing against her skin, the strength with which he'd held her.

She gave a soft moan and closed her eyes, letting the memories float over her as the sounds of the jungle fill the room. How was it that he had the ability to make her feel both completely grounded and hopelessly untethered all at once.

CHAPTER 12

The rebuilding of the sanctuary was officially underway. Robert had given his enthusiastic approval to Hawk's plans, and the project had become a community affair. Villagers flocked to help with the manual labor, eager for the chance to earn an income. For their wives, it meant food on the table for the next few weeks, and for the children, it was something exciting to watch. They raced alongside their fathers down the dusty roads, their grubby faces lit up with curiosity and joy. The sense of purpose was palpable.

While he was pleased with the commencement of the project, and the activity surrounding the revamp, he was twisted into knots about Lexi.

Fuck, staying away from her was harder than seeing her every day.

Since their kiss, and her subsequent "friends" talk, he'd decided it was best to keep his distance, except his body had other ideas. Whenever he saw her in her denim shorts, her surgical coat open over a tank top or T-shirt, he wanted to do all sorts of unspeakable things to her. Now he knew what she tasted like, what she felt like, his imagination was running riot.

A loud crash grabbed his attention, and he strode over to where a bulldozer was shoveling up what was left of the clinic backwall. Lexi's office was a pile of rubble, but they were extending outwards to the treeline, utilizing the space in the back yard, building over the underground shelter, which would still be accessible but from the inside.

He'd shipped bricks and machinery in from Goma, as well as a mini-cement mixer and bulldozer. Thankfully, they'd made it here in one piece. In addition to the manual laborers from the nearby villages, he'd hired a dozen construction workers to help with the rebuild. Time was of the essence, and he wanted to make sure he left the sanctuary in a workable order, before he went back to New York.

The thought made him twinge. Usually, he looked forward to getting back home after a trip, but this time was different, and he knew it wasn't just the work and the sense of purpose he felt being here. It was also Lexi, his jungle nymph, with her bewitching green eyes, lips that tasted like the sweetest nectar, and long, bare legs that he wanted wrapped around his waist while he...

Fuck. He raked a hand through his hair, damp with perspiration. It was scorching hot today, with a humidity that made him feel like the jungle itself was sweating. There was no such thing as AC out here, either. They didn't have the electricity and the few generators they did have were reserved for essentials like lighting, equipment and machinery. All the buildings had old fashioned ceiling fans that didn't seem to do much. That was just the way it was out here.

There she was, standing on the porch talking to Dan, her mouth curved in a smile. Dan said something, making her laugh, and Hawk felt a stab of jealousy. He wanted to be the one to make her laugh, to make those dimples appear in her cheeks, to see her eyes flash with happiness. With passion. With desire.

Oh, God. He shifted position, adjusting his stance as he started to stiffen. The nights were the worst. Sheer fucking hell. Thinking about her, fantasizing about all the things he wanted to do to her. To hear her moan, to scream, to gasp his name in ecstasy.

"Boss, there's a parcel for you. It was delivered to the Lodge this morning," said a local man who helped Robert with the admin for sanctuary.

“Great, thanks.” He knew exactly what that was, and it couldn’t have come at a better time. Not that he needed an excuse to see Lexi, of course, but it would give him a legitimate reason to visit the clinic.

Half an hour later, he stood outside the hole in the wall that used to be the clinic window. It had been razored by the rebels. Inside, he saw Lexi filling in paperwork at a makeshift desk in the treatment area. She was biting her lip, a look of concentration on her flushed face.

He knocked on what was left of the door, causing her to glance up. She brightened when she saw it was him, and his heart gave an involuntary flutter. “Hawk, come in. It’s nice to see you. You’ve been scarce.”

“I’ve been busy with the rebuild. Sorry I haven’t stopped by.”

Lame?

Yeah, but her words still echoed in his mind.

Friends.

He suppressed a shudder. Friends was the last thing he wanted, but he couldn’t have it both ways. If friends was all he could get, then that’s what he’d be. Even if it meant he had to live in permanent discomfort.

“That’s okay. What’ve you got there?”

She seemed unfazed. He frowned. Served him right for staying away. She’d put him out of her mind, got on with her work—like he ought to be doing. Instead, he was driving himself crazy with thoughts of her.

“I bought you something.”

“Oh, yeah?” Lexi set down the pen she was using and stood up. He almost groaned. She was wearing tiny shorts with a sheer, white T-shirt that said, “Save the Gorillas.” Her skin glowed with perspiration, and she’d swept her hair up in a messy bun, with tendrils escaping on either side.

He set the box on her desk and watched as her eyes widened. She stared up at him. “You got me a MacBook?”

“Not just any MacBook. It’s the latest model—M3 chip, insane battery life, lightning-fast speed. You’re going to love it.”

She tilted her head, skeptical. “Hawk, all I do is type notes and send emails. This feels... excessive.”

“Nah.” He waved off her protest. “This is more than just a work computer. You can video conference, keep better records, and maybe even start sharing some of your work online. A blog, maybe? Raise awareness about what you’re doing here.” He gestured around the office.

Lexi hesitated, her fingers trailing over the cool, smooth box. “A blog? I don’t know if I’ll have time for that, but... thank you. It’s thoughtful of you.”

“Don’t mention it.” He shrugged. “Besides, your old laptop looked like it belonged in a museum.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “Robert’s going to be jealous.”

“Not for long,” Hawk smirked. “I got him one, too. His old clunker needed to go.”

“Good call.” She bent over and moved a stack of papers aside to make room. “Want to help me set it up? I’ve got half an hour before I need to check on the animals, and I’d rather not risk breaking it right out of the box.”

“I’d be offended if you didn’t ask,” he teased.

She opened the box, her face alight like a kid at Christmas time. When she pulled out the streamlined laptop, she was practically glowing. “It’s beautiful.”

“You deserve it,” he said, and walked around to her side of the desk to help her set it up.

“How’s the construction work going?” she asked, as he turned it on. He could feel her heat beside him, sending his own body temperature over the edge. His skin prickled, he felt on edge, hyper aware of her presence, almost aroused. Shit, he had to get some semblance of control. He took a steadying breath. “It’s coming along nicely. We broke through the back wall earlier—that’s where most of the noise is coming from. But that part’s done now. We’re focusing on the extension.”

“Thank goodness,” she muttered. “The dust has been killing me.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Necessary part of the process, I’m afraid.” He dug in his pocket and handed her a small USB-C hub. “Here, start transferring your files while I get this beauty powered up.”

Lexi busied herself with the file transfers, while he focused on setting up her laptop. Despite the humidity, he could still smell her floral shampoo, it seemed to cling to him in the heat, envelop him making it hard to concentrate.

He forced his focus back to the screen.

“Done,” she said, a moment later and handed him the USB stick back. Then she bent to unplug the old desktop. “I take it I can get rid of this one now.”

Christ. He could almost see her pert butt cheeks sticking out from underneath those teeny-tiny shorts. An image of her bending over like that while he drove into her flashed before his eyes, and he had to squeeze them shut to get rid of it.

“You okay?” she asked, giving him an odd look.

“Yeah,” he croaked. “Just hot.”

“It is sweltering today,” she acknowledged with a nod. “I keep splashing water on myself to cool down, but it doesn’t last for long.”

That was another image he didn’t need. He turned away so she wouldn’t see the humungous bulge in his pants.

She moved the old computer to the corner of the room, near the door.

“You do the honors,” he said, when she got back. He moved back to the far side of the desk. It was almost a relief to put some distance between them, even if it was just a flimsy table.

She ran her finger over the finger pad and smiled. “Perfect. Thank you so much.”

“You might have to install some software, but it should be good to go.”

“Thanks, we only use the basics out here. WIFI is sporadic, since we rely on a portable internet hub. There’s no real cellphone network or electricity. I have to pick my times to go online.”

“I get it,” he said, with a knowing nod. He’d operated in many a developing country while in the SEALs, and he knew the lack of infrastructure was a problem. “Hopefully, this will make your life easier.”

“Oh, it will.” She grinned up at him, and his chest constricted. A moment passed, where she gazed at him, her eyes dancing. Eventually, she said, “Don’t be a stranger, Hawk. It’s good having you around.”

“I won’t.” If only she knew how torturous he found it being around her and not being able to touch her. Still, he was a big boy. If she could handle it, so could he.

“You know, I think jungle life suits you.”

He paused. “What do you mean?”

“You look good. Happier than when you first arrived.”

“I am,” he admitted. “This project—it’s been a wake-up call. For years, I’ve been stuck behind a desk, crunching numbers and managing people. I forgot why I got into this line of work in the first place.”

“To help people?” she said.

“And to build things. There’s something humbling about the jungle—its rawness, its unfiltered beauty. It has a way of stripping away the noise of the outside world and reminding you of what truly matters.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” she whispered.

He hesitated, then said, “I’m starting to see why you stay.”

“I’m sorry you can’t,” she replied, softly. “It would be nice to have you around.”

He gazed at her for a long moment. Did she mean that? Would things be different if he could stay? He knew deep down they would. She wanted permanency, she wanted commitment. Two things he couldn’t give her.

Neither of them moved. “So am I.”

A weight settled between them, something he couldn’t shift. Eventually, her eyes flickered, and she glanced away.

He took a deep breath and said, “Let me know if you run into any issues.”

“Huh?”

“With the laptop.”

She blinked. “Oh, right. Yes, I will. Thanks again.”

He cleared his throat and gave a small nod. “See you later.”

“See you.”

As he stepped outside, Hawk let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. All he could think about was the way she’d looked at her—like she wanted him to finish what they’d started in her room last week. And God help him if he wasn’t seriously considering it.

CHAPTER 13

Hawk walked into the clinic the next morning around six thirty. He knew Lexi got up early and was in the clinic by before the sun came up. She'd said not to be a stranger, so he'd waited a day before surprising her.

"Hey, I thought I'd say hi before I started work." Robert had insisted they start early so they didn't have to work when the sun turned the clearing into a furnace.

She turned, breaking into a hesitant smile. Not quite a dimple, but close. "Hey. You want a coffee? I was about to have one."

"Yeah, please."

He set two mugs on the table, and she filled them up from the coffee pot. "Your timing's perfect."

He grinned. "That was my plan."

They took them outside and sat on two rickety chairs on the porch, overlooking the clearing. It was early enough that the sun hadn't warmed the ground up yet, and a low mist unfurled at the base of the trees at the edge of the clearing. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and the faint mustiness of wet vegetation.

"It's going to be another brutally warm day," Lexi mused, gazing up at the pale blue sky devoid of clouds. A lone hawk floated on the air currents, scouting for breakfast.

“It doesn’t seem to bother you too much,” he remarked.

“You get used to it. When I first got here, I was melting. Now I’ve acclimatized, so it doesn’t bother me as much.”

In the distance, the call of awakening birds pierced the low hum of the jungle. Near the gorilla enclosure, workers were gathering, steaming Styrofoam cups of coffee in hand, chatting quietly as they prepared for the day ahead.

Everyone was on schedule.

A squad of UN soldiers loitered nearby, rifles slung over their shoulders. Their daily escort had become routine. The locals refused to walk through the rebel-controlled areas without protection, and Hawk had no problem footing the bill for their safety. Not that it made him feel much better about the situation. It burned him that these people—just trying to eke out a living—had to pay for what should have been a basic right: security. But Africa didn’t work like that.

This country played by its own rules, he’d learned that from many hours conversing with Robert at the Lodge. Local warlords and rebels controlled entire regions, using their power to exploit resources, extort taxes, and enslave workers.

Here, in the shadow of one of the region’s largest tin mines, the tension between government forces and rebel factions was palpable. Usala Park, with its endangered wildlife and hopeful sanctuary, often found itself in the crossfire. It was a fragile ecosystem in every sense of the word.

They chatted for a while, mostly about their respective schedules for the day, then Hawk downed what was left of his coffee. “I’d better get to work.”

“Sure, me too.”

The laborers began to stir, finishing their coffee and gathering tools. Nearby, a group of boys played with sticks and an old tire, their laughter cutting through the quiet morning. Hawk smiled, he loved the sense of community at the sanctuary.

Moyo, the boy he'd spoken to the other day came running over. He was clutching the pocketknife he'd given him. "Mister Hawk, you ready for work?"

He grinned. "Yeah, buddy. I sure am."

Lexi smiled, and this time he did see her dimples.

"Catch you later," he called, as he walked over to join the others.

She waved, and just for a moment, his heart sang.

It was nearly lunchtime when Hawk looked up and saw Lexi come out of the clinic. The sunlight caught the copper tones in her hair, making her appear more nymph-like than ever. She was carrying a tray of iced tea and a plate of sandwiches. He'd been working on building a brick wall, showing Moyo the ropes, so to speak. It was basic, menial work but he was enjoying it. With the sun on his back, the sound of men working all around him, and Moyo beside him, what could be better?

He wiped the sweat from his brow. It was hot though, and he could do with a break and something to eat. Moyo eyed the sandwiches eagerly.

"Time for lunch," she said, setting the tray down on a pile of bricks.

"Thank you, Miss Lexi," Moyo said, offering up a shy smile.

"You're welcome, Moyo." She smiled at the boy, before turning to him. "How's it going?"

“Good, we’re making progress.” This would be the back wall of her new office, once it was completed.

“I’m learning how to build a wall, Miss Lexi,” Moyo said proudly.

“I can see that. Excellent work.”

He beamed and reached for a sandwich.

“It’s very hot out here,” she said, glancing up. The sun was nearly at its zenith, while the humidity had once again risen to crazy levels.

“Yeah, I know. We’ll break at two, and then start again at six, once it’s not so powerful.”

She nodded at Moyo and shot him a pointed look.

“Hang on,” he murmured, and disappeared into the makeshift office that they used as a base for the construction. When he returned, he was holding a baseball cap. He crouched down, handing it to Moyo. “Here. This’ll keep the sun off your head.”

The boy’s face lit up as he turned the cap over in his hands, his fingers brushing the embroidered logo. “What does it say?”

“It’s the Yankees,” Hawk said with a grin. “My favorite baseball team. Now you look like a real fan.”

Moyo grinned wide and popped the cap onto his head, adjusting the brim until it sat just right.

Lexi’s smile was thanks enough.

“I’d better get back,” she said, gesturing to the clinic.

“Thanks for lunch,” he called after her.

Hawk and Moyo ate their sandwiches, sitting in some shade at the edge of the clearing. Moyo adjusted his new cap, glancing up at Hawk.

“Miss is a very nice lady,” he said in French.

Hawk replied in kind. “Yeah. She is.”

“She helps me a lot,” the boy continued, his tone serious. “She told me not to go to the rebels.”

Hawk froze, his glass halfway to his lips. “The rebels?”

Moyo stared down into his drink. “They take boys like me. Teach us to fight, to be soldiers. I don’t want to, but sometimes we have no choice.”

Hawk’s jaw tightened. The boy’s words struck him harder than he expected. He’d read about child soldiers, seen the headlines and the reports, but hearing it from Moyo, a kid he’d come to know, made it real in a way he wasn’t prepared for.

“She’s right. You don’t have to go with them,” he said firmly. “You’ve got a choice, Moyo. You’re good with your hands. You can stay here, learn a trade. Be like your dad.”

Moyo’s expression darkened. “My father is dead.”

Hawk exhaled, unable to prevent the surge of anger. The injustices of this place—the things these kids were forced to endure—were staggering. He’d thought he’d seen it

all, but this was something else.

As they sat in silence, Hawk's gaze drifted back to the clinic porch where Lexi was setting down a bowl of water for the stray dogs that had taken up residence at the sanctuary. Always thinking of others, always putting herself second.

It wasn't just her kindness, although that was part of it. It was her strength. Her ability to thrive in this brutal, unforgiving place. He admired her. The thought shocked him. He didn't admire many people, but she was an exception.

"So," Moyo said, breaking his thoughts, "back to work?"

Hawk glanced down at the boy and nodded. "Back to work."

Together, they walked back to the site, the sun climbing higher overhead.

CHAPTER 14

A sudden crack of thunder split the air, loud and jarring. Lexi flinched and turned to look out of the glassless window. Fat droplets of rain began to fall, pockmarking the dry dirt of the clearing outside.

She'd known it was coming, of course. The heavy, oppressive heat of the last few days had been a warning, the jungle holding its breath for this exact moment.

Within seconds, the rain came down in sheets, thick and relentless. It drenched the clearing, transforming the dirt into slippery mud and sending workers scrambling for cover under the broad, sheltering mango and eucalyptus trees at the jungle's edge.

"Come inside!" she shouted toward Hawk and Dan, who were struggling to throw a tarp over the mini-cement mixer and a pile of freshly mixed concrete. Moyo was nowhere to be seen. She hoped Hawk had sent him home before the storm hit.

Hawk lifted his head at her shout, his soaked shirt clinging to his chest and shoulders, every muscle defined under the wet fabric. Lexi couldn't help but stare as he and Dan sprinted toward the clinic, rain streaming off them like they'd just emerged from a river.

"This storm's going to shut us down for the day," Hawk said, stepping under the doorway's shelter and shaking the water out of his hair.

Dan wrung out his shirt, his teeth flashing in a quick grin. "Might as well send the guys home. No sense in waiting this out."

Hawk nodded, and Dan disappeared into the rain to dismiss the crew.

“Moyo?” she asked.

“He’s already gone,” he told her.

“That’s good.”

She tried not to stare, she really did, as Hawk leaned one arm against the doorframe, gazing out at the storm. The man looked infuriatingly good even soaking wet. His curls, usually tousled and boyish, were slicked back from the rain, making his angular jawline and high cheekbones even more pronounced. His soaked shirt clung to him like a second skin, and she could see every inch of the broad shoulders and hard chest beneath.

A chest she remembered touching, clinging to as he kissed her.

Oh, God. That kiss.

She sucked in a breath, then busied herself with straightening the papers on the desk, anything to distract herself from the fact that just the sight of him had her feeling overheated in a room that was already muggy from the humidity.

“How’s Ayo doing?” Hawk’s gaze shifting over to her.

“Still recovering,” she said, glad for the change in subject. “Patrick’s working with him now. Want to check in on him?”

“Sure.”

She led the way, through the narrow doorway and down the short corridor to the

recovery room. He followed, his boots squeaking on the concrete floor. Inside, Patrick was gently stretching Ayo's injured leg on a mat. The young gorilla turned his head at their entrance, his big brown eyes wary, but he visibly relaxed when he saw her.

"He's still pretty jumpy." She crouched down and stroked Ayo's fur. "Loud noises, sudden movements—everything sets him off."

Hawk stood back, watching quietly as she murmured soft reassurances to the little gorilla. There was something so steady about his presence, the way he seemed comfortable just observing.

"They're a lot like kids, aren't they?"

"They are," she glanced up, surprised at the astuteness of his comment. "Come on, I'll introduce you properly."

She beckoned him closer, and after a moment's hesitation, he joined her on the mat. She spoke to Ayo in a low, soothing voice, telling him Hawk was a friend and someone she trusted.

Hawk gave her a look that sent a flutter through her stomach. "If you trust me, I guess that's good enough for him."

Ayo seemed to agree. The little gorilla let out a chattering sound that almost sounded like a laugh, his lips pulling back in a wide grin.

"You're in," Patrick said, grinning up at Hawk.

Lexi laughed. "Want to hold him?"

“Uh ... sure,” Hawk said, clearly uncertain but game.

She carefully handed Ayo over, watching as this big, rugged man cradled the young gorilla with surprising gentleness. Something fluttered deep inside her, in the vicinity of her heart.

“You’re a natural,” she teased as Ayo climbed onto Hawk’s shoulder and started tugging playfully at his damp hair.

“Hey, easy, buddy,” Hawk said with a chuckle. “I might need that later.”

Lexi laughed.

“I’ll take him before he pulls it all out.” She lifted Ayo off his shoulders and placed him back on the mat, where he immediately went over to Patrick.

“I’ll take him back to his cage,” the veterinarian said, picking up the gorilla.

“Okay, thanks Patrick. I’ll clean up and then lock up the clinic. See you tomorrow.”

Hawk said goodbye, and Patrick left via the back, taking a clinging Ayo with him.

“I’ll help you clean up,” Hawk offered, as they walked back to the treatment room.

She glanced at him in surprise. “You don’t have to. You must be exhausted, you’ve had a long day.”

“So have you.” He put his hands on his hips. “But I’m here, and I’ve got nothing else to do.” That simple statement shouldn’t have made her heart skip a beat, but it did.

They worked side by side, Hawk carrying the bucket of soapy water and wielding the

mop like a pro.

“You’re full of surprises,” she said, when he got started.

“Military discipline,” he said with a growl. “Made me into the man I am today.”

“Remind me to thank them,” she teased, as he carried on cleaning the floor.

They finished in record time, and once they were done and had washed and dried their hands, she turned to face him. “Thanks for your help.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She hesitated, wanting to say something else but not finding the words.

“I should go,” he said, filling the gap.

Lexi glanced out of the glassless window. “It’s still pouring. You’ll get drenched again.”

He grinned. “I’ll survive.”

And then he was gone, swallowed up by the storm. Lexi stared after him, her heart pounding for reasons she wasn’t ready to admit.

Another week passed quietly, but the routines of the clinic continued at their usual frantic pace. One morning, just after six fifteen, she found Dan in the clearing outside, setting up his camera equipment. She had already been up for a while, having checked on the wounded silverback that Noah, the field vet, had brought in overnight. Pausing to watch Dan adjust his lens, she asked, “What are the cameras doing here?”

He straightened slightly, smiling at her before returning his focus to the camera. “We’re filming the building progress today.” He positioned the lens towards the clinic. “Rex wants a stage-by-stage account of the revamp.”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Hawk came up behind her, making her jump, or maybe it was just her heart. She hadn’t heard him approach.

“Of course not. I was just curious.” She smiled and nodded to the clinic. “Coffee?”

His early morning visits had become a habit—one she secretly looked forward to.

At first, they’d talked about their days, and what they had planned. He’d listened, really listened, in a way that most people didn’t, and their talks had begun to feel ... comfortable. Intimate, even. But she’d kept up her guard, carefully steering away from anything too personal.

“I heard you had an eventful night,” he said, as they walked toward the clinic together.

“Yeah, a lone silverback showed up, ousted from Bongi’s clan. He’s got some nasty wounds on his neck—probably from challenging Bongi or another alpha. It was a long night. I just checked on him before I spotted Dan.”

“Was he trying to take over the clan?”

Lexi quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve been reading Robert’s books.”

A small grin tugging at his lips. “Figured it wouldn’t hurt to know what I’m talking about.”

“Well, you’re spot on. If a male’s strong enough, he can challenge the dominant

silverback, especially if the leader's aging, like Bongi. Otherwise, the only option is to go off and start his own clan."

"That's rough." Hawk's gaze was thoughtful. "Bongi must be on constant high alert now."

"He has to be," Lexi agreed, pouring the coffee. "I've asked the rangers in that area to keep an eye on him in case he's injured, too."

Hawk took the mug she handed him, their fingers brushing briefly. His voice dropped a little as he said, "Not so different from us humans, huh?"

Lexi chuckled. "Strip us down to the basics, and we're not so different from our ancestors."

They sipped their coffee in companionable silence for a moment before Hawk set his mug down, his expression shifting to something more serious. "Lexi, there's something you should know."

"Oh, what's that?" She glanced up, her heart skipping a beat at the expression on his face.

"I got a call this morning from my finance officer. The board's pressing for me to get back to New York. The share price has stabilized, and we've got a potential new project in Ecuador." He paused, taking a slow breath. "Long story short, they need me back."

Lexi froze, the words hitting harder than she'd expected. She set her coffee down carefully, keeping her expression neutral. "How do you feel about that?"

Hawk looked away, his broad shoulders dropping slightly. It was such a small

movement, but it spoke volumes. “I have to go. That’s not really up for debate. I was hoping for another week or two here, but I can’t keep delaying. It’s my company, and there are decisions that only I can make.”

Her chest tightened, but she forced herself to keep her voice steady. “Well, you’ve done an incredible job. You helped us rebuild, along with boosting the company’s image. I hope you feel it’s been worthwhile for you.”

“It has, obviously.” He ran a hand through his hair, the curls still damp from his morning shower. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have stayed for this long.”

It had been almost a month.

“The board have been patient, but I can’t blame them for getting restless. If I were in their position, I’d be frustrated too. They must be wondering what I’ve been up to in the jungle.”

“Don’t you give them updates?” she asked quietly, searching his face.

Hawk’s lips curved into a rueful smile. “Of course, but they don’t understand what it’s like here, why it’s so hard to leave.”

Lexi swallowed, her heart thudding painfully in her chest.

“I know you understand.”

She nodded, and before she could help it, she’d reached out and rested her hand on his. It was meant as a simple gesture of comfort, but the moment their skin touched, something shifted. His hand was warm and solid beneath hers, and for a moment, she couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

When she looked up, his eyes were already on her, searching. There was heat there, a deep, intense heat that made her mouth go dry.

God help her, she felt it too. And that terrified her.

Breaking the moment, she pulled her hand back and wrapped it around her coffee mug. “So ... when do you think you’ll leave?”

He hesitated, unable to meet her gaze. “Tomorrow. Robert’s having a farewell dinner for us tonight.”

She gasped, unable to help herself. “So soon?”

He looked away. “The building work is almost complete. The rest can be done without me. There is no reason to delay any longer.”

Except for me, she thought silently, then chastised herself. Silly, she was the one who’d suggested they stay friends—and thank goodness she had. If she’d slept with him, if she’d fallen for him, his leaving would have been a hell of a lot harder.

“How are you getting to the airport?”

“We’ll head to Kinshasa with a UN vehicle and fly out from there. Rex and Dan will come with me, of course.” He scoffed. “We’ll finally be out of your hair.”

Lexi fought tears. She liked having them in her hair. Not them.

Him .

The idea of never seeing him again through her into a panic. She wasn’t ready to say goodbye. They were just getting to know each other. Really getting to know each

other. Plus, Hawk was such a dominant figure at the sanctuary. Their alpha male, their silverback. Even though Robert was the chief warden, Hawk was the one who pulled the strings. “It won’t be the same without you,” she whispered.

Hawk stared at her. “I don’t want to leave either, but I have no choice.”

She nodded, willing herself not to cry.

“Lexi...” He started to say something, then stopped, shaking his head. “I’d better go. There’s still a lot to do. See you later at the Lodge?”

“I’ll be there.” She couldn’t keep the tremble from her voice.

Then he was gone, striding into the sunlight, leaving her standing there, her heart breaking into a trillion tiny pieces that she feared she might never be able to put back together again.

CHAPTER 15

Dinner was a quiet affair, it seemed she wasn't the only one who was sad to see them go. "We'll miss you," Estelle said, ever the gracious host.

Robert nodded in agreement. "You've been instrumental in turning this place around."

Lexi made the appropriate remarks, but barely tasted a thing. Once they'd finished eating, she set her knife and fork down and forced a smile. "That was delicious, Estelle. Thank you."

Estelle beamed. "The salad and vegetables are all organic. Blessing's husband grows them behind the lodge."

"I'm impressed," Hawk added. He sat beside her, as he had throughout dinner, but their conversation had been maddeningly polite. A comment about the food here, a remark about the project there—each word felt hollow, as though both of them were skirting the truth.

The end of the project loomed like a storm cloud on the horizon. Tomorrow, the United Nations peacekeepers would arrive to escort the three men to Kinshasa. From there, Hawk would fly back to the States, a world away from her. The thought made her chest ache, but she buried it beneath the mask of a polite smile.

Robert stood, raising his glass, and said a short speech. He thanked Hawk for his generosity, praised his leadership during the clinic rebuild, and spoke of how his

contributions had been instrumental in restoring hope to the sanctuary.

Hawk responded with humility, his deep, steady voice carrying easily through the room. He talked about how his time here had been life-changing and how hard it was to leave, but duty called. As he said the words, his eyes flicked briefly to hers. Her heart constricted.

She knew he didn't want to go, just as she didn't want him to leave, but what could either of them do? His world was so far removed from hers, here in the jungle.

Lexi excused herself as Estelle began clearing the plates. "It's really warm in here," she murmured, avoiding Hawk's gaze. "I think I'll get some air." Leaving the men to talk, she slipped out onto the deck.

The night air was cooler but did little to calm her swirling emotions. She leaned against the wooden railing and gazed out into the jungle. As always, it was alive with sound: crickets chirped in unison, frogs croaked, and leaves rustled softly in the breeze. The rainforest felt as restless as she was, the air thick with tension.

She heard the door creak open behind her and didn't need to turn to know it was him. His presence was unmistakable, like an invisible gravitational pull.

"You okay, Nymph?" Hawk's voice was low, filled with quiet concern.

She turned as he came to stand beside her. "You haven't called me that for weeks."

"I was trying to keep my distance."

The dim light spilling from the lodge illuminated his features—the strong jaw, the shadow of stubble, the piercing intensity in his eyes. Her heart gave an involuntary lurch.

“I know,” she whispered.

“I tried to stay away, but it didn’t work. Then I thought we could be just friends, but that didn’t work either. It just made me want you more.”

Crap.

Tears pricked at her eyes. The knot of emotions inside her felt impossible to untangle. “I didn’t want to fall for you,” she whispered. “I tried hard not to, but you made it impossible.”

“I made it impossible. You’re blaming me?” His midnight blue eyes slanted in the lamplight.

“You saved me from the rebels, you financed a new clinic, you’re good with the animals. You didn’t leave when you had the chance. Dammit, Hawk, you helped us rebuild with your bare hands. How could I not fall for a guy like that?”

He gave a soft snort, then enveloped her in a hug. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that she melted into him. At the same time, it felt so right.

After the last few weeks of talking, sharing stories and growing closer, it didn’t feel weird at all when his long, tanned arms closed around her. “If I could stay, I would. You know that, right?”

“I know,” she murmured into his chest. He smelled so good, like the sea on a summer’s day. She inhaled, trying to dedicate it to memory.

He held her for a fraction longer, then released her. The look in his eyes made her breath catch. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Lexi. I just wish... I just wish we had more time.”

Her chest tightened, and she gulped over a lump in her throat. “Me too.”

The silence that followed was heavy, charged with something unspoken. Lexi’s pulse quickened as his gaze lingered on her face, his eyes tracing her features as though trying to memorize them. The air between them felt electric, and she knew she should step back, break the moment—but she couldn’t.

“Do you ever regret leaving him?” Hawk asked, his voice quieter now. “Charles, I mean. Was it ... hard?”

Lexi blinked, caught off guard by the shift in the conversation. What on earth made him think of her ex? She looked down, brushing her fingers along the wooden railing. “No,” she said softly. “Not for a second. I regret how I did it, sure. But not leaving him.”

He nodded thoughtfully, then said, “I get that. Sometimes you just know it’s not right.”

“Have you ever been in that position?” she asked, turning the question back on him.

“Yeah,” Hawk admitted after a beat. “I was married once.”

Her head snapped up in surprise. “You were married?”

“For a couple of years, yeah.” He gave a wry smile. “It didn’t work out. I was still building my company back then, putting in crazy hours, flying all over the place. She wanted stability, and I couldn’t give it to her.”

“I’m sorry.” She hesitated, then added, “That must have been hard.”

“It was,” he said simply. “I thought I could make it work, but the truth is, we wanted

different things. She wanted a partner who was home for dinner every night. I wanted to build something bigger than myself. In the end, I guess neither of us was willing to compromise.”

Lexi studied him, seeing a flicker of vulnerability beneath his confident exterior. It made her heart ache a little. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out. But it sounds like you learned from it.”

He nodded, his gaze steady on hers. “I did. And it taught me that being with the wrong person—no matter how much you want it to work—is worse than being alone.”

His words hit home, resonating with her own experience. She reached out without thinking, her fingers brushing his. “I think you’re right.”

The touch lingered, and something shifted in the air between them. Hawk’s gaze dropped to her lips, and her breath caught.

“You know ...” he said, his voice rougher now, “I’m glad you didn’t marry him.”

“Me too,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Something broke then, the tension that had been simmering for weeks finally boiling over. Hawk stepped closer, his hand sliding around her waist, pulling her against him. Her heart pounded as his other hand came up to cup her face, his thumb brushing lightly over her cheek.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmured, his voice thick with restraint. “If this isn’t what you want, tell me now.”

But she didn’t want him to stop. She couldn’t. Instead, she tilted her head, her lips

parting slightly in silent invitation.

With a low groan, Hawk's mouth crushed against hers. It wasn't a gentle exploration, nor a hesitant beginning. No, this was raw, possessive, and laced with all the pent-up desire that had been simmering between them for weeks. He kissed her as if he were claiming her, as if he'd been holding himself back for far too long and couldn't stand the restraint for another second.

Lexi gasped softly against his mouth, the sound swallowed by the sheer intensity of his lips moving against hers. Every rational thought flew from her head as she gripped his shoulders, feeling the strength of the muscle beneath his shirt, and then her hands moved higher, threading into the thick waves of his hair. He was warm and solid, and she wanted it to last forever.

Hawk tilted his head, deepening the kiss, and she felt a yearning so fierce it made her knees tremble. His other arm circled her waist, pulling her flush against him, her soft curves molding to the hard planes of his body. The heat of him seeped into her skin, leaving her dizzy and breathless. His tongue slid against hers in a slow, sensual dance that sent molten heat pooling low in her belly.

She couldn't hold back the soft moan that escaped her, and it seemed to spur him on. His hand moved down her back, sliding to her hip, his fingers pressing firmly as if anchoring her to him. The world around them dissolved, the symphony of jungle sounds fading into a distant hum. All she could hear was the erratic thundering of her heart and the ragged pull of their breaths as they kissed with reckless abandon.

He tasted like coffee and something darkly addictive, and she couldn't get enough. Her tongue moved against his with the same urgency, matching his fervor as if she, too, had been holding back for too long. Her body responded to his touch, arching toward him, craving more of the heat, the contact, the sheer electricity that sparked between them.

Hawk groaned low in his throat, the sound vibrating against her lips and sending shivers skittering down her spine. The primal edge in his voice only stoked the fire raging between them. His hand slid up from her hip, fingers splaying wide across her lower back as he pressed her even closer. She felt utterly surrounded by him, intoxicated by the strength of his arms and the heady, manly scent clinging to his skin.

His lips left hers, and she almost whimpered at the loss, but then his mouth was trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along her jawline and down the column of her neck. The scrape of his stubble against her skin was deliciously rough, sending goosebumps racing over her arms. Her breath hitched as he lingered at the sensitive spot just beneath her ear, his teeth grazing lightly before he soothed the spot with his tongue.

“Lexi,” he murmured against her skin, her name a reverent whisper that sent a rush of heat straight through her. His voice was husky, filled with raw need, and it only made her want him more.

“Yes,” she whispered, tilting her head back to give him better access, her fingers tightening in his hair. His lips returned to hers with renewed intensity, the kiss growing hotter, deeper, more desperate. Time seemed to stand still as they gave in to the storm of emotions and desire that had been building for so long. The kiss wasn’t just a release—it was an explosion, a culmination of everything unsaid, every heated glance, every near-touch that had gone unresolved between them.

Hawk’s hands slid down to her hips, gripping them firmly as he turned her around until the solid wood of the railing pressed against her spine. He caged her in, his body braced against hers, the heat of him wrapping around her like a cocoon. She clutched at his shirt, bunching the fabric in her fists in an attempt to pull him even closer.

Her heart pounded erratically, her blood roaring in her ears. She was drowning in him, in the taste of his lips, the feel of his hands, the roughness of his stubble, the

sheer intensity of his presence. It was overwhelming, intoxicating, and she never wanted it to end.

But then, just as she was about to lose herself entirely, the lodge door creaked open behind them.

“Hawk? Lexi? Coffee’s ready!” Estelle’s voice rang out, cheerful and oblivious.

They broke apart, breathing heavily, their foreheads almost touching as they tried to collect themselves. Lexi’s hands dropped from his hair to his chest, her palms resting against the hard planes of muscle as she tried to steady her racing pulse. Hawk didn’t move away immediately, his hands still firmly on her hips, his thumb tracing slow, deliberate circles over the fabric of her dress.

His eyes locked with hers, and the heat in his gaze was enough to leave her breathless all over again. For a long moment, neither of them spoke, the air between them still crackling with sexual tension. Then, finally, Hawk gave a shaky laugh and murmured, “Saved by the coffee.”

Lexi managed a smile, though her lips still tingled from the force of his kiss. “We should ...” She gestured vaguely toward the lodge, her voice unsteady.

“Yeah,” he agreed, though he didn’t release her right away. His gaze lingered on her face, his thumb brushing one last, tantalizing stroke over her hip before he finally stepped back.

He held out his hand, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Come on. Let’s not keep Estelle waiting.”

Lexi hesitated for half a second before slipping her hand into his. The simple touch sent a fresh wave of heat through her, and as he led her into the lodge, she couldn’t

help but glance up at him. His hair was mussed, his lips slightly swollen, and his eyes still held that unmistakable fire.

Whatever had just happened between them, it was far from over.

CHAPTER 16

He offered to walk Lexi home, though "offered" wasn't really the right word. He wasn't giving her a choice—not when every fiber of his being was demanding to be near her. From the second their lips had met back on the lodge deck, all he could think about was touching her again, tasting her again.

Dinner had been torture. Coffee, excruciating.

His focus had narrowed to the faint curve of her smile, the way her hair caught the light, the memory of her soft moan against his mouth.

They left the lodge together, the humid night air clinging to their skin as they followed the moonlit path. The jungle was alive with its symphony of insects and distant calls, but he barely heard it. Every sound was muted beneath the thunderous pulsing of his desire. She walked ahead of him, her stride brisk, her silhouette outlined in silver by the moonlight.

Fuck, the urge to touch her, to claim her, was maddening.

When they were finally out of sight of the lodge, he couldn't take it anymore. Without warning, he reached for her, spinning her around and pulling her into his arms. Her gasp barely escaped before his mouth crushed against hers, hot and insistent. He kissed her like he'd been starving for her, devouring her lips with a hunger he couldn't suppress. His hands slid down to her hips, pulling her flush against him, the softness of her body molding perfectly to the hardness of his.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he murmured against her lips, his voice low and gravelly with desire. “Now that I’ve tasted you, I just want more.”

Her soft moan was his undoing. She kissed him back with equal intensity, her hands gripping his arms, sliding up to clutch at his shoulders, as if she needed to hold on to him to keep from falling. He wasn’t sure how long they stood there, locked together in a kiss that threatened to consume them both, before he backed her against the thick trunk of a eucalyptus tree. Her head tilted back, lips parting to welcome him, and he took full advantage, tasting her deeply, possessively.

The feel of her, the taste of her—it fueled the fire raging inside of him. He buried his hands in her hair, tilting her head to angle her mouth perfectly under his. The tiny sounds she made, the way her fingers tangled in his hair, drove him wild. She tasted sweet and intoxicating, like a drug he couldn’t get enough of.

“Jesus, Nymph.” He pressed her against the tree as his lips trailed down her jawline, his teeth grazing the delicate skin of her neck.

She gasped, her body arching into him, clawing at his shirt. He couldn’t resist running his hands along her sides, feeling the curve of her waist beneath his fingers. Her skin was warm, her breath coming in short, soft pants that sent a rush of satisfaction straight through him.

“Stop,” she said, though her laugh belied the command. “We’ll never make it home at this rate.”

“Right now, I don’t care.” His voice was rough with need. His lips brushed against hers again, teasing, tasting, lingering. But she pulled back, laughing breathlessly as she tugged him toward the path. “Come on, Hawk. Let’s at least try to make it to the cabin.”

They stumbled through the clearing, hand in hand, the anticipation thick and electric between them. The second they reached her door, Hawk was on her again, his hands at her waist, his lips trailing over the curve of her neck as she fumbled with her keys.

“You’re not helping.” She laughed, breathlessly, her fingers trembling as she finally managed to unlock the door.

The moment it opened, he pushed her inside and kicked it shut behind him. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing. His hands slid under her blouse, his fingers grazing the bare skin of her back as he pulled her closer. She sighed into his kiss, her nails dragging lightly across his shoulders, and it was all the encouragement he needed.

“You drive me crazy,” he muttered, his voice low and rough as he peeled her blouse off and let it fall to the floor. The moonlight streaming through the window bathed her in soft silver light, illuminating every curve, every inch of pale, perfect skin.

“And so fucking beautiful.” His breath caught as he looked at her, and he couldn’t stop his hands from exploring—tracing the line of her collarbone, the dip of her waist, the curve of her hips.

Her bra joined the blouse on the floor, and he lowered his head, taking one taut peak into his mouth. Lexi cried out, her back arching, her hands gripping his hair as he continued to suckle. The sound of her moans made his blood roar, and he couldn’t stop himself from backing her toward the bed, his lips never leaving her skin.

She fell back against the mattress, hair splayed out around her like a dark halo. He stood for a moment, stripping off his shirt and jeans with quick, efficient movements. Her eyes were locked on him, dark and full of heat, and it made him feel like the luckiest man alive.

He joined her on the bed, deftly unbuttoning her linen trousers and sliding them off her long, tanned legs. She writhed, reaching for him, and when he kissed her again, it was with a tenderness he'd never felt before. This smart, sassy, brave, remarkable and beautiful woman was his. Even if it was only for tonight.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, while her hands roamed over his back, drawing him in. Her soft moans drove him to the brink of madness.

“Lexi,” he gasped, as he pressed kisses along her jaw, her neck, her shoulder.

“Mm...”

“Are you on birth control?”

She shook her head. “Crap, no. I stopped taking it when I got here.” Her face fell.

He fished in his jeans pocket for his wallet. “Hang on. I think I’ve got a condom.”

He pulled out the wrapper.

Thank fuck.

It would have been a crying shame if they hadn’t been able to have sex.

“Put it on. I want you. Now.”

Her words made him tremble with need. He wanted to be inside her, to feel her tight pussy around his cock, right fucking now.

He peeled off her panties, discarding them on the bed, and pulled on the condom, before positioning himself over her. She gripped his ass and pulled him closer until

he nestled against her wet entrance. From her breathy, wide-eyed gasps, he could tell she was ready for him.

Grabbing her hips, he thrust inside her, burying himself to the hilt. She cried out, her head falling back onto the pillow, her glorious breasts rising off the bed. He'd never seen anything so goddamn sexy in his life.

"Oh, God, Lexi," he groaned, as her folds tightened around him. He was buried so deep, that if he moved, he feared he'd come. Bending over, he claimed a perfect nipple in his mouth and sucked. It puckered immediately hardening under his tongue.

She gasped, writhing against him. He withdrew an inch, only to thrust in again.

Her body trembled beneath him, her eyes huge as she stared up at him. "Hawk... Oh, my God. Hawk. I'm so close."

She was so hot and tight and wet, he could barely hold on himself. "Easy, baby," he murmured, and drove in again, this time feeling her clench around his shaft.

"I can't help it, I'm sorry." Her pussy convulsed, and she arched off the bed. He felt each little shudder as the waves crashed down on her.

He stared in awe. Goddamn, that was quick. She must have been so ready for him. It made him feel like a million bucks.

Wanting to make it the best fucking orgasm she'd ever had, he drove in again and again, until she was screaming his name. Her spasms sent him over the edge, and he spiraled into the abyss.

"Fuck, Lexi," he growled, as he pumped into her, half out of his mind with need and desire. It was too much, he was going to explode.

With a guttural yell, his mind emptied and he unleashed. Powerful jets of lava spurted into her, over and over again, until he felt drained. Until she'd milked him dry, and he had nothing left to give.

He collapsed on top of her, hearing her heart pounding against his. They were both drenched in sweat, their bodies glistening in the light of the moon steaming in through the window.

Never in his life had he experienced anything as sudden and intense as that. As his heart slowed to a controllable rate, he knew something had changed inside him. He'd found the one woman he'd never tire of. The one woman who mattered more than anyone else.

And he was leaving her in the morning.

CHAPTER 17

Lexi lay there, her body still trembling in the aftermath. She should've felt embarrassed by how easily she'd given in, how completely she'd unraveled under Hawk's touch.

But she didn't. She couldn't.

Every nerve ending in her body was still buzzing as she struggled to catch her breath.

She turned her head to look at him. His broad, muscular frame was half-hidden in shadows, but the moonlight caught the sharp angles of his jaw, the slight sheen of sweat on his chest. He looked so perfectly male—powerful, in control, a man who knew exactly what he wanted and how to take it.

And, God help her, she loved being the object of that desire.

He caught her watching him and smiled. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just." She wasn't sure that she'd ever recover from what they'd just shared. It had been so mind-blowing, so intense, that she couldn't put it into words.

Her womanly bits were still throbbing, wet from her desire.

He planted a kiss on her shoulder. "That was incredible. You were incredible."

She felt a blush creep into her cheeks. "You weren't so bad yourself."

He snorted, then trailed his fingers down her arm, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. She shivered, unable to help herself.

“You don’t think we’re done, do you?”

She swallowed hard, unable to tear her eyes away from his.

“If we’ve only got one night, I’m sure as hell going to make the most of it.”

The heat at her core sprung to life, the throbbing increasing.

His gaze deepened, and he leaned in, brushing his lips against hers in a kiss that was achingly gentle. “You up for that?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her body giving an involuntary tremble.

“Good. Because I want you to remember me, Lexi. I want you remember every single moment of this. Forever.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. The way he said it, the intensity in his voice, sent a flood of emotion through her. This wasn’t just about lust for him—at least, not entirely. He wanted more than her body. He wanted to leave a mark on her, one she’d never be able to erase.

He held her waist, his grip firm but not rough, and pulled her closer. His breath was warm against her skin as he whispered, “Let me make you feel, Lexi. Let’s make a memory.”

Her resolve crumbled completely. She was powerless to resist him, to resist the way he made her feel. “I’d like that, but we’re out of condoms.”

“No where not. I had two.”

She laughed. “Thank goodness for that.”

He took his time, drawing out every touch, every kiss. His hands moved over her body like he was committing every curve, every inch of her, to memory. He touched her like he wanted to own her, like he wanted to stake a claim that no one else could ever rival.

It was intoxicating, erotic and overwhelming. She couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything except the heat of his hands, the rough scrape of his stubble against her skin, the deep, growly need in his voice when he whispered her name.

They kissed slowly, thoroughly, as if they had all the time in the world. His lips moved over hers with a devastating tenderness that made her chest ache. It wasn't just desire—it was something deeper, something that left her completely undone.

When he slid over her, his body covering hers, she felt a rush of heat so intense it nearly brought tears to her eyes. He cradled her face in his hands, his gaze locking onto hers as he murmured, “Look at me, Nymph. I want to see you. I want to feel you.”

She didn't think she could take it—the way he was looking at her, the depth of his voice, the weight of him pressing her into the mattress. It was too much. And yet, she didn't want him to stop.

When he finally entered her, it was slow and deliberate, and she gasped at the overwhelming sensation. He moved with a measured intensity, each thrust purposeful, as if he wanted her to feel every inch of him.

“Do you feel that?” he murmured, his voice rough with need. “That's me, Lexi.

That's all me."

She could only nod, her voice stolen by the emotions crashing over her. He was right. She felt him everywhere—in her body, in her mind, in her heart. He consumed her completely, leaving no part of her untouched.

"You're mine tonight," he growled, his lips brushing against her ear. "And I'm yours."

Her nails dug into his back, her breath hitching as his words sent a fresh wave of desire coursing through her. He was dominating, possessive, but she didn't care. In fact, she loved it. She wanted to be his, even if it was only for this one night. Just like he was completely hers.

He slowed even more, his movements deep and deliberate, his hands gripping her hips to hold her exactly where he wanted her. She could feel every inch of him, the heat of his body, the raw strength in every thrust.

She couldn't stop the tears that welled in her eyes. Not because she was sad, but because she knew she would remember. She knew that no matter what happened after tonight, no matter how far apart their lives took them, this moment would stay with her.

When she finally came undone, it was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Her body trembled violently beneath him, her cries of pleasure echoing through the small cabin. He followed seconds later, his release explosive, his hands gripping her as if he was afraid to let her go.

For a long time, they lay there together, their bodies tangled, their breathing heavy. Hawk's arms were wrapped tightly around her, his chest rising and falling against her back.

Tears slid silently down her cheeks as she closed her eyes. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but tonight, she was his. And he was hers. And that, for now, was enough.

CHAPTER 18

The first rays of sunlight crept through the window, casting a warm, golden hue across the room. Lexi sat on the edge of the bed, clutching her knees to her chest, and gazed at the man lying beside her. Hawk was sprawled on his back, one arm slung above his head, his chest rising and falling in the peaceful rhythm of sleep. Even in stillness, he radiated strength, the sharp lines of his jaw softened only by the slight scruff he hadn't bothered to shave.

Her heart twisted.

What a night.

Passionate, raw, and overwhelming in ways she hadn't been prepared for. They'd come together like two forces of nature, and for a few precious hours, she'd allowed herself to forget everything else—her work, her fears, her past. But now, in the cool light of dawn, reality was pressing down on her, making it harder to breathe.

Hawk stirred, his eyes fluttering open, and when his gaze landed on her, his lips curved into a sleepy smile.

"Morning," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

Lexi felt her breath hitch. "Morning."

He reached out, his fingers grazing her thigh as he pulled her gently back down beside him. "Come back to bed."

She wanted to give in—to let herself be cocooned in this fleeting bubble of warmth and desire, but that would be foolish. He'd already ruined her for anyone else. Going another round with Hawk would destroy her completely. Instinctively, she knew that. There was only so much heartache she could bear.

"I can't," she said softly, her fingers brushing against his as she slid out of reach. "I have to check on the silverback. Patrick's probably already at the clinic."

Hawk groaned dramatically, running a hand through his messy hair. "Surely Patrick can take care of him for one morning. I, on the other hand..." His voice trailed off as he sat up, his broad shoulders catching the morning light. He looked at her, hope flickering in his expression. "This is your last chance, you know."

Lexi froze, unsure if he was teasing or not. His words were laced with a bittersweet finality, a stark reminder that this moment—their moment—was slipping away.

"I know," she whispered, not even managing a sad smile. "I wish I could stay."

She turned away, pulling on a T-shirt, as the silence stretched between them.

There was a creak as Hawk climbed out of bed and crossed the room to the small shower. Lexi's eyes flicked to him against her will, remembering how it felt running her hands over every inch of that magnificent body.

For a fleeting moment, she imagined what it would be like waking up to this sight every day, making love to him every night. Sharing a life with him.

Her chest tightened and she choked back the tears. Hawk disappeared into the shower, the sound of running water filling the space. She busied herself with pulling on her jeans and putting on her shoes, tying the laces with trembling hands.

By the time he joined her outside on the doorstep, the air between them was lighter but no less heavy with unsaid words. The morning chorus of the jungle surrounded them—the chirp of birds, the distant rustle of leaves—but Lexi could hardly hear it over the pounding of her heart.

“What time do you leave?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

“UN escorts arrive around noon,” he replied. “I need to head back to the Lodge to pack my things and have breakfast with Robert. He’ll probably guess where I’ve been.” He shot her a heated look. “Not that I mind.”

Lexi forced a smile. “I don’t suppose it matters. It’s just one night, and you’ll be gone soon.”

He turned to face her, his dark blue eyes locking onto hers. “I want you to know that last night was... well, it was incredible. It wasn’t just one night to me. I don’t want you to think that.”

Her stomach twisted. “No,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “Of course not. I didn’t mean it like that.” She looked down at her hands, the words tangling on her tongue. How could she explain? How could she make him understand that it had meant everything to her, but that everything could only last for one night?

“I won’t forget you, Lexi, or what we shared.”

Her throat tightened. “Neither will I.”

There was a pause.

“You could come with me,” he said, the words so soft she almost didn’t hear them.

She stared at him, and for a moment, couldn't breathe.

Come with him?

He couldn't be serious.

"Hawk..." she began, but he cut her off, his tone more urgent now.

"I mean it, Lexi. Come back to New York with me. You don't have to stay here. The rebels are pushing closer every day—it's not safe. You've done so much already, but you could do more back home. We could do more. Together."

Lexi's stomach dropped, and she turned away, unable to meet his gaze.

"Don't ask me that," she whispered.

"Why not?" She could hear the frustration in his voice, tinged with desperation. "I don't want to lose you, Lexi. I'm not ready to let you go."

Her heart shattered at his words. She could see the sincerity in his eyes, the raw vulnerability he was trying to hide, but that only made it harder. "My life is here, Hawk," she said, her voice trembling. "You know that. I've built something here, something I'm proud of. I don't want to give it up."

He paced up and down in front of her, reminding her of a caged animal. "I can't imagine never seeing you again."

Her breath hitched as tears welled in her eyes. "I know. That's why this is so hard. But I can't leave. I can't go back to that life."

"You wouldn't be going back to the same life. You'd be with me."

Her tears spilled over, and she turned away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze. “And then what? What happens when I’m in New York, and you’re off running your company, jetting around the world? What happens when I’m left standing in the shadows again, like I was before?”

He went silent, his jaw tightening. She could see the conflict in his expression, the way her words hit him like a blow.

“I’ve been there before, Hawk,” she continued, her voice breaking. “I can’t do it again. I can’t lose myself like that again.”

He scraped both hands through his hair. When he spoke, his voice was hollow. “I understand. Fuck, Lexi, I’m sorry. That was a dick thing to say. I know you can’t leave, and I don’t expect you to. I just... I just wish it didn’t have to be this way.” He punched the side of the cabin, not hard enough to leave a mark, but hard enough to feel it.

Her heart ached at the pain etched into his features. She reached out, taking his hand in hers. “Me too,” she whispered.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, the weight of regret pressing down on them. Then Hawk sucked in a ragged breath. “I should go. Robert’s probably wondering where I am.”

Lexi couldn’t help the tears streaming down her face as she watched him walk away. She didn’t call after him. She didn’t try to stop him. Because deep down, she knew this was how it had to end.

As the jungle swallowed him from view, she wrapped her arms around herself, the emptiness in her chest threatening to consume her. Hawk had left his mark on her, just as he’d promised. But instead of warmth, all she felt now was the ache of his

absence.

And she knew she would carry that ache with her, always.

CHAPTER 19

New York.

Hawk sat in his sleek New York office, staring at the spreadsheets glowing on his monitor, though the numbers meant nothing to him. His desk, usually an emblem of control and authority, felt cold and lifeless. The hum of the air conditioning and the distant din of Manhattan traffic only highlighted the oppressive silence of the room.

His mind wasn't in New York. It hadn't been since the moment he'd stepped off the plane a month ago. No amount of meetings, deals, or strategies could distract him from the pull of the jungle, from the face that haunted his every waking thought.

Lexi.

She was everywhere. He pictured her in the clinic, her hands steady and sure as she treated the injured gorillas. He imagined the way she smiled when she brought him iced tea during breaks from the construction site, her dimple flashing and her eyes sparkling with quiet mischief. He even caught himself wondering if she was laughing right now—probably at something Moyo had said—or whether she was working, her hair pulled back in that no-nonsense ponytail that somehow only made her more beautiful.

Fuck, he missed her.

Hawk clenched his jaw and leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. He'd always prided himself on being a man of control, someone who could

compartmentalize. But Lexi had shattered that, leaving him raw and unbalanced. She'd made him feel things he'd never let himself feel before—things he wasn't sure he even wanted to feel.

And he'd blown it.

Asking her to leave with him had been a desperate, selfish mistake. He knew her past, her sacrifices, her deep-rooted need to forge her own path. And yet, in his panic at losing her, he'd ignored all of it. He'd grasped at straws, hoping she'd abandon everything she'd fought for and follow him.

How could he have asked her to do that?

He was ashamed of himself, of his arrogance, of his inability to see that loving her meant letting her be who she was.

He should've stayed. The thought hit him like a punch to the gut. He could've stayed longer, worked something out. But no, duty had called. The board had demanded his return, and like the good soldier he used to be, he'd followed orders. He'd convinced himself he didn't have a choice, but now he knew better. He could've made time.

He should've made time.

His thoughts drifted to Moyo. The boy's tear-streaked face as the UN truck pulled away was seared into his memory. He'd wanted to say something to comfort him, to promise he'd come back, but the words had stuck in his throat. He'd abandoned them both—Lexi and Moyo—and the guilt weighed on him like lead.

"I've got to snap out of it," he muttered, rubbing his temples as a knock on the door pulled him from his spiraling thoughts.

Grace entered, her no-nonsense demeanor as steady as ever. “I made you some tea,” she said, setting a tray down on his desk. “And a sandwich. You’ve been skipping lunch again.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Grace.” He forced a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

She studied him for a moment, her sharp gaze missing nothing. “You’ve not been yourself since you came back. Africa’s still on your mind, isn’t it?”

He didn’t answer, but the truth must’ve been written all over his face. Grace sighed and patted his shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything,” she said before leaving him to his brooding.

The afternoon dragged on. Hawk went through the motions of work, but his heart wasn’t in it. He checked his watch. Four-thirty. Close enough to quitting time. He began packing his laptop when the phone rang.

The line crackled, and his heart skipped a beat. The static was unmistakable—it was a long-distance call.

“Hello?” he said, his voice tight with anticipation.

“Hawk, it’s Robert.”

Relief flooded through him, followed immediately by a spike of anxiety. Robert rarely called unless it was serious.

“What’s going on?” Hawk blurted out.

Robert’s voice was strained, the words coming quickly. “It’s bad news, I’m afraid. There’s been another attack. The rebels hit the sanctuary.”

Hawk's stomach dropped. His grip tightened on the phone. "What happened?"

"They came in force, over forty of them, armed to the teeth. We couldn't hold them off. Estelle and I barely made it out alive. The UN picked us up five miles west of the park."

Hawk's heart pounded, but Robert's next words hit him like a freight train.

"Hawk, Lexi's missing."

Time seemed to stop. The world narrowed to those three words, reverberating in his skull.

"What do you mean, missing?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

"She stayed behind with Patrick to move the injured animals. She didn't make it to the evacuation point." Robert's voice cracked. "We had to leave without her. There was no choice."

Hawk's vision blurred with red-hot rage and icy fear. He could barely process what Robert was saying.

Lexi, alone in the jungle, with rebels closing in.

"What's being done to find her?" he barked, his SEAL instincts kicking in.

"Nothing," Robert admitted, his voice heavy with guilt. "The army's spread too thin, and the UN can't send anyone back. It's chaos here, Hawk. The whole place is on the brink of a civil war."

Hawk slammed his fist on the desk, making the tea tray rattle. "That's unacceptable."

Robert tried to explain, but Hawk wasn't listening. His mind was already racing, formulating a plan. He wasn't the corporate CEO anymore. He was the Navy SEAL, the soldier, the man who thrived under pressure and got things done.

"I'm coming over." His voice was hard as steel.

"You can't," Robert protested. "It's too dangerous."

"I don't care," Hawk growled. "She's out there, and I'm not fucking leaving her to the wolves."

He hung up and immediately began making calls. First to Grace, ordering her to book him on the next flight to Kinshasa.

"But you're leaving for Ecuador next week," she protested, but he cut her off, his tone allowing no room for argument.

Next, he called Patrick, an old SEAL buddy. Pat Burke, now retired from the Navy, ran an elite unit of ex-military soldiers and SEALs that Hawk often used for close protection in volatile regions. He outlined the problem and Pat promised to send two competent operators to help him navigate the rebel-controlled jungle territory and get Lexi back.

By the time Doug, his capable and competent CFO, came into his office, Hawk was a man on a mission. His usual polished demeanor had been replaced by something raw and primal.

"I'm going back to Africa," he told Doug without preamble. "You're in charge until I get back."

"What about Ecuador?" Doug asked, alarmed.

“You’ll have to handle that,” Hawk said, grabbing his go-bag. “Take Max with you. He’s head of engineering. He’s perfectly able to assess the project.”

“What are you going to do in Africa?” Doug asked, following him out of the office.

“Fix a mistake.”

As he walked out of the building, his mind was laser-focused. There was no room for doubt, no room for fear. He would find Lexi. He would bring her back.

And God help anyone who stood in his way.

CHAPTER 20

Democratic Republic of Congo.

Hawk leaned against the doorway of the hut, staring out at the raging storm. The rain hammered against the thatched roof with relentless force, while lightening illuminated the muddy village in brief, jagged flashes.

“It’s fucking biblical,” he muttered, grimacing in disgust.

“Let’s give it twenty minutes for the worst of the storm to pass,” Phoenix, one of the ex-SEAL operators on loan from Pat said, leaning against the wall, his rifle resting against his thigh. The second operator, Viper, crouched by the window, alert and watchful.

Edmond, calm and composed as ever, sat cross-legged on the floor, sharpening his machete with practiced ease. The rhythmic scrape of the blade on stone was oddly soothing compared to the turmoil bubbling away inside of him.

“Okay, but then we move out. I want to close the gap before nightfall.”

They were close. According to the villagers, Lexi had been here, and she, Moyo and Patrick were alive. That knowledge fueled him, driving him on despite the appalling conditions.

Thirty-six hours wasn’t much of a head start, especially not in this terrain, but it wasn’t nothing either. They could still catch up if they pushed hard and didn’t waste a

second.

Phoenix nodded. “The rain will hamper our movement, but it’ll also slow them down if they’re ahead of us. Patrick will be trying to keep the boy safe, and with an injury like that, they won’t be moving fast.”

Viper glanced up from his position by the window. “You think they’re headed for higher ground? Maybe trying to find a cave or some other shelter until the heat dies down?”

Hawk’s gaze darkened. “If Patrick knows this area as well as I think he does, he’ll avoid the obvious hiding spots. The rebels will be scouring the caves and the hills first. My guess is he’s sticking to the dense jungle, following water sources. He knows the terrain, and he knows how to stay hidden.”

Edmond spoke in French without looking up. “They will be careful, but they are vulnerable. The boy is slowing them down, and Miss Lexi ... she is brave, but she is not a fighter.”

Hawk’s hands tightened into fists as he responded in kind. “She doesn’t have to be. That’s why we’re here.”

Edmond glanced up, meeting Hawk’s eyes. He gave a small, respectful nod. “We will find them.”

The rain began to ease, the pounding deluge giving way to a steady drizzle. Hawk checked his watch. They couldn’t afford to wait any longer.

“Let’s move,” he said, slinging his pack over his shoulder.

The group filed out of the hut, their boots squelching in the thick mud as they made

their way back to the jungle's edge. The air was cooler now, the storm having temporarily beaten back the oppressive humidity, but the ground was treacherous, slippery and littered with puddles.

Edmond took the lead, his machete flashing as he cleared the narrow path ahead. As a ranger, guide and tracker, he was best placed to pick up the trail. Hawk followed closely, his rifle held ready, his eyes scanning the dense foliage for any sign of movement. Phoenix and Viper brought up the rear, their banter from earlier replaced by a tense, watchful silence.

The jungle was alive with noise—the drip of water from the leaves, the distant call of birds, the rustle of unseen animals. Every sound set Hawk's nerves on edge, but he forced himself to focus. His SEAL training came back to him in sharp detail: stay alert, stay calm, assess the situation, and adapt.

As they pushed deeper into the jungle, Edmond paused suddenly, holding up a hand. The group froze, their weapons at the ready. Hawk moved up beside him, his voice a low whisper. "What is it?"

Edmond pointed to the ground. A faint trail of flattened grass and disturbed earth led away from the track, heading deeper into the trees.

"Footprints," he whispered. "Three people. One is supporting the boy. They passed through here recently."

Hawk's pulse quickened. He crouched down to examine the trail, his trained eye picking out the details Edmond had noted. The footprints were shallow—whoever was carrying Moyo was struggling to distribute the weight evenly. The tracks were fresh, no more than a few hours old.

"They're heading southeast," Edmond continued, his voice steady. "There is a river

nearby. They will follow it.”

Hawk gave a determined nod. “Then so will we.”

The group moved quickly now, their pace urgent but controlled. The jungle seemed to close in around them, the dense foliage swallowing the fading light and plunging them into a green-tinged twilight. The sound of running water grew louder as they approached the river, the rush of the current mingling with the ever-present hum of the jungle.

Edmond stopped again, crouching by the riverbank. He pointed to a patch of disturbed sand. “They crossed here. See the tracks? They’re heading upstream.”

Hawk scanned the area, picking out the faint signs of passage. A snapped branch here, a scuff mark on a rock there. Lexi was doing her best to cover their tracks, but she wasn’t a trained operative. Her efforts, while admirable, wouldn’t fool a seasoned tracker like Edmond.

“They’re smart to stick close to the water,” Viper said, kneeling beside Hawk. “Easier to stay hydrated, and the sound of the river will cover their movements.”

“Smart, but risky,” Phoenix countered. “The rebels will be looking here too. We need to move fast.”

Hawk’s jaw tightened. “Let’s pick up the pace.”

They followed the river for another hour, their boots slipping on the wet rocks as they navigated the uneven terrain. The jungle grew darker as the sun dipped below the horizon, the fading light casting long shadows across the water.

Finally, they came to a small clearing where the ground was littered with signs of

recent activity. A makeshift campfire in the center, long since extinguished, surrounded by a few scattered belongings—a torn piece of cloth, a stick with striations carved into it, possibly from the type of pocketknife he'd given Moyo, and a bundle of medicinal plants wrapped in a banana leaf.

Hawk bent and picked up the cloth. "I think this is from Moyo's shirt. His fingers tightened around the fabric. "They were here."

"How long ago?" Phoenix asked.

Edmond studied the remains of the fire. "Last night, maybe early this morning."

"We're gaining on them," Hawk said, looking at the others. "If we keep moving we might be able to intercept tonight."

Phoenix and Viper exchanged a glance, their expressions resolute. "You lead, boss," Phoenix said, hefting his rifle. "We'll follow."

Hawk glanced ahead at the seemingly impenetrable jungle.

"I'm coming, Lexi," he whispered into the dusk, so nobody else could hear. One thing he knew for certain was he wasn't stopping until she was back in his arms.

CHAPTER 21

Lexi stared out over the vast expanse of Lake Kivu, watching as the cotton-wool clouds drifted across the glassy surface. On the other side of the lake, hazy purple hills marked the border with Rwanda. Beyond that, the promise of safety. She longed for it with every fiber of her being, but the lake might as well have been an ocean.

The villagers spoke of hidden dangers beneath those placid waters—gases that could poison the air and the treacherous depth that swallowed small boats whole, never to be seen again. Local myths, mostly, but even if they could secure a vessel, rowing across the lake without supplies or shelter would be impossible. Moyo was injured, and both she and Patrick were exhausted.

Besides, they'd never make it in one go. They'd have to stop on one of the islands, which would leave them exposed and vulnerable. She shivered at the thought.

The alternatives weren't much better. The jungle loomed dense and unforgiving along the shoreline, while the mountains above promised freezing temperatures and treacherous terrain. She sighed, willing herself to focus.

One step at a time, Lexi. You can do this.

But she didn't know for how much longer.

She turned and went inside the hut where Moyo lay curled on a straw pallet, his breathing shallow. She knelt by his side, suppressing a sob. The boy's dark lashes fluttered against his pale, clammy skin. The head wound, though no longer bleeding,

had left him weak and concussed. Every time she thought about how he'd stepped in front of that rifle butt to protect her, her throat tightened. The memory of the sickening crack when it connected with his skull still haunted her.

He'd done it to save her, and she owed it to him to make sure he survived this. To make sure they all survived this.

Adjusting the makeshift bandage on his head, she whispered, "You're so brave, Moyo. You're going to be okay." Her words felt hollow even to herself.

He had to be okay.

Hot tears pricked her eyes. She couldn't live with herself if anything happened to him.

Patrick entered the hut. "The villagers say a French charity boat sometimes stops here to deliver supplies. It's due tomorrow, but they're not sure if it's still running."

She sucked in a breath as a sliver of hope took hold. "Tomorrow? Do you think we can hide out here until then?"

Patrick hesitated. "The rebels aren't far behind us. They'll eventually find this place. It's only a matter of time."

The weight of his words pressed down on her like a physical force. She looked at Moyo, so weak and fragile on the pallet. His feverish moans tore at her resolve. "He needs to get to a hospital," she said, her voice firm. "We don't have another choice. We have to wait for that boat."

Patrick gave a grim nod, but she could tell he was worried. "Okay, we'll stay until tomorrow, but Nomu and his son will keep watch tonight. If anything happens, we'll

have to move fast.”

Nomu, the village elder, had given them shelter without hesitation. His kindness was humbling, but it also filled her with guilt. These people had so little, yet they’d shared blankets, food, and had given them a safe space in which to hide.

The sky outside darkened, the first stars blinking into existence as the jungle’s symphony of night sounds began. Lexi settled down beside Moyo, her body heavy with exhaustion. She pulled a scratchy blanket around her shoulders, hoping it would ward off the night’s chill.

Patrick’s voice drifted from outside the hut. “I’ll keep the first watch,” he said, and she heard the creak of the rusty chair.

“Thanks. Wake me up when you need me to take over,” she called back, her eyelids already drooping. The scent of damp earth and the distant call of an owl lulled her into a restless sleep.

“Lexi, wake up!”

A rough hand shook her shoulder, pulling her from a vivid dream. Hawk was there with her, his warm chest under her head, his strong arms wrapping her in a cocoon of safety. For a blissful moment, she clung to the illusion.

The hand shook her again, harder this time. “Lexi, we have to go!”

Patrick!

Her eyes shot open, the smell of damp straw and mud dragging her back to harsh reality. Her friend loomed over her, his face tense.

“What’s happening?” she whispered, scrambling upright.

“They’re here. Nomu saw them coming.” His voice was low and urgent. “We have to move. Now.”

“Moyo?” She turned to the boy, who was already stirring. His eyes fluttered open, dull and unfocused.

“I’m okay,” he said weakly, though his voice was barely a whisper.

Lexi’s heart twisted. He was anything but okay, but there was no time to argue. She helped him sit up, but he flagged against her.

“You’ll have to carry him,” she told Patrick. “He can’t walk.”

Patrick bent over and scooped the boy into his arms. “We’ll follow the path toward the hills,” he said. “The rebels won’t expect us to head that way.”

Lexi grabbed the small satchel containing her dwindling medical supplies and followed him out into the night.

The trail through the thinning jungle, which led up into the hills, was illuminated by the faint moonlight, yet hidden from the village below. Patrick, Moyo in his arms, went first. He grunted under the strain but kept putting one foot in front of the other. Lexi stayed close, her eyes drawn to the shadows, her ears prickling at every rustle in the foliage.

Behind them, the faint glow of the village fires flickered in the distance. Shouts carried on the wind—angry, guttural voices that sent a chill down her spine.

They were close. Too close.

“Faster,” Patrick urged, between pants.

Lexi pushed harder, her legs burning as she fought to keep up. The trail was gravelly and slick with mud in parts, making her slip every few footsteps. How Patrick remained standing, she had no idea. Branches snagged at her clothes, scratching her arms and face, but she didn’t dare slow down.

A sudden burst of gunfire cracked through the air, sharp and deafening. She froze, looking at Patrick in alarm. “They’re in the village.”

His tone was grim. “We need to keep moving.”

They pressed on, the telltale sounds of the pursuing rebels growing louder. Lexi’s lungs burned, her body screaming for rest, but the thought of what would happen if they were caught kept her going.

Moyo whimpered in Patrick’s arms, his small hands clutching at the man’s shirt. He was scared, and in pain. Lexi’s heart went out to him.

“It’s okay,” Patrick murmured. “We’ll keep you safe.”

She glanced back and caught a glimpse of flashlights cutting through the trees.

Oh, God.

They were closing in.

“Patrick,” she hissed, her voice trembling.

“I see them,” he replied, his pace quickening. “We’ll lose them in the hills.”

The vegetation got even more scarce as they began to ascend, the ground growing steeper and rockier. Her legs felt like lead, but she forced herself to keep climbing. Each step brought them closer to safety—or so she hoped.

The gunfire faded behind them, replaced by the relentless chorus of the jungle. Had they lost them? Had the rebels taken a different path?

She didn't dare breathe a sigh of relief.

Not yet. Not until they were far, far away.

“Almost at the peak,” Patrick gritted, perspiration dripping down the sides of his face, although she wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure her or himself.

Lexi didn't respond, all her energy was focused on putting one foot in front of the other. They couldn't stop until Moyo was safe.

CHAPTER 22

The sun hung low in the sky as Hawk, Phoenix, Viper, and Edmond approached the village on the banks of Lake Kivu. The air was thick, damp with the scent of rain-soaked earth, but the eerie silence was what set Hawk's teeth on edge. No voices. No laughter. No bustling movement. Just the muted slap of water against the shore and the faint rustle of wind through the grass huts.

His instincts screamed trap.

Phoenix, who'd taken point, raised a fist, signaling the team to stop. They froze instantly, rifles up and scanned the scene.

"Clear eyes, people," Phoenix said quietly, his voice low and measured. "Something's not right."

The village, if you could call it that, looked like it had been hastily abandoned. The narrow dirt tracks between the huts were churned up with muddy footprints, and scattered belongings littered the ground—pots, a child's doll, a half-full water container tipped on its side. There were no chickens scratching for feed, no women's chatter, no kids darting through the huts. Just an eerie silence.

Viper adjusted the strap of his weapon, his voice a low growl. "Feels like the calm before the storm. Where's everyone gone?"

"Edmond?" Hawk prompted.

The ranger crouched by a set of footprints leading away from the village. His dark eyes tracked the ground, methodically picking out details that only a seasoned tracker could see.

“They left in a hurry,” he murmured. “Most of the villagers fled into the jungle when the rebels came. They’re hiding.”

Hawk tightened his grip on his rifle. “Lexi? Moyo? Patrick?”

Edmond straightened, pointing toward the huts nestled on the hillside. “Let’s take a look. If they were here, someone will have seen them.”

“Let’s move,” Hawk ordered.

The team split up, slipping into the village. Phoenix and Viper swept left, weapons raised and steps silent. Hawk and Edmond took the right, scanning the shadows and clearing each hut, looking for signs of life—or worse.

“Nothing,” came Phoenix’s voice over the comms, a clipped whisper. “Cleared five huts. Looks like they bailed.”

“Same here,” Hawk replied, his jaw tightening. “Keep going. Stay sharp.”

It was the last hut, tucked against the base of the hill, that gave them their first clue.

“Got something,” Phoenix called.

Hawk and Edmond jogged over. Phoenix stood by the doorway, gesturing toward a makeshift pallet on the ground. Hawk went inside, followed by Edmond. Viper stood guard outside.

Hawk crouched down, his eyes narrowing as he spotted a smooth, shiny object. He picked it up, turning it over in his hands.

“It’s my pocketknife.” His voice was a strangled rasp. “I gave this to Moyo.”

Phoenix gave a grim nod. “At least we know we’re on the right track.”

There were sounds of a scuffle followed by a loud yell. They all dashed outside.

Viper held a frail old man by the arm. “Caught him hiding at the back of the hut.”

“Who are you?” Hawk asked, stepping forward.

The man didn’t answer, just glared at him with milky eyes.

“Edmond?” Hawk barked. “Find out what he knows.”

The ranger spoke in rapid Swahili, his voice low and steady. After a beat, the old man replied. He gestured toward the hills, his lined face etched with worry. Hawk held himself still, forcing patience as Edmond listened, nodding every few seconds.

“They were here,” Edmond finally translated. “The woman, the boy, and the man. They stayed the night, but the rebels came early in the morning. They fled toward the hills. He thinks they’re heading to Bibokoboko, a small village hidden in the Mulenge mountains.”

“Up there?” Hawk glanced toward the steep, mist-shrouded peaks rising above them. It was rugged terrain, treacherous under the best conditions. Lexi and Patrick were on foot, carrying a wounded child no less.

“How long ago?” Phoenix asked.

Edmond relayed the question, then turned back to the team. “They left at dawn. They have maybe half a day on us, but they’re moving slow because of the boy.”

“Fuck,” Hawk muttered, frustrated. He stared thoughtfully at the trail winding up into the hills. “Half a day isn’t much. We can catch them if we push hard.”

Phoenix frowned, scanning the surrounding jungle. “What about the rebels? That old man said they showed up here. How many are we talking?”

Edmond asked the elder, who replied with a toothless grin.

“Four,” Edmond said simply. “All armed.”

“Four?” Phoenix snorted. “That’s a damn warm-up.”

Hawk’s lips twitched in the faintest ghost of a smile. “Four of them versus four of us. I like those odds.”

The elder added something else, his voice solemn. Edmond’s expression darkened.

“What?” Hawk asked sharply.

“The rebels have followed them.” Edmond’s tone was grim. “They know the boy is hurt.”

Hawk glanced at the others. That was to be expected. The clock was ticking, they had to get to Lexi and Moyo before those bastard rebels did. “We’re moving out. Edmond, lead the way. Phoenix, Viper, watch our six. Eyes on the ridges—we’re vulnerable climbing these hills.”

He wasn’t telling the seasoned operatives anything they didn’t already know. The

team moved as one, their boots crunching over gravel as they followed the faint trail into the mountains.

The air grew thinner as they ascended, the humid jungle giving way to rocky slopes and sparse vegetation. Hawk's muscles burned with the effort, but he didn't slow down. Each step took him closer to Lexi. She was out here, somewhere in this unforgiving wilderness, scared, exhausted, and possibly hurt. She needed him. Moyo needed him.

He only prayed they weren't too late.

CHAPTER 23

Lexi felt like collapsing. Her legs trembled with every step, her chest burned, and her blistered feet screamed with agony with every step. Blood pooled in her left boot, sticky and warm, but she didn't dare take it off. If she removed the boot, she wouldn't be able to get it back on again, and she couldn't risk falling behind.

"Not long now, then we'll stop for a break," Patrick said, his eyes scanning the path ahead. He'd been a godsend, and she thanked her lucky stars he'd escaped with her and Moyo. Without him, they would never have gotten this far.

The climb was relentless, each step felt like scaling a staircase carved from uneven stones and loose gravel. The jungle had all but disappeared, and now their path wound through sparse, rocky terrain. The air grew thinner and colder the higher they climbed, but it was a relief from the stifling humidity below.

"Okay, let's take a break."

Lexi heaved a silent sigh of relief. Patrick knelt and laid a pale and drawn Moyo on the hard ground. Lexi scurried over to him and took his hand. "You're doing great," she told him, giving it a warm squeeze. "You're such a brave boy."

Braver than any child should ever have to be.

A flicker of a smile, but then it was gone. He didn't have the energy to respond anymore. Lexi flashed Patrick a worried glance. They were running out of time. "How much further to the village?" she asked.

Beads of sweat glistened on his brow, but his expression remained calm. “The elder said a day’s walk. We must be close now.”

Shit. Would they make it?

They were both exhausted, and Moyo was fading fast. Not to mention the rebels who she had to believe were still hot on their tail, even though they couldn’t see or hear them.

They couldn’t afford to stop for long.

She looked around at their environment, assessing it for hiding places in case of an ambush. Nothing but rocks, crumbling earth, and patches of scrubby grass. Reaching into her backpack, she took out her water bottle. It was nearly empty, since she’d not had a chance to refill it before they’d fled the village. Her hands shook as she unscrewed the cap and held it to Moyo’s lips.

“Drink,” she urged him gently, her voice hoarse. Moyo took a few tentative sips, then rested his head back down on the ground. Lexi sat beside him.

“Why are they still after us?” she asked Patrick. “I wouldn’t have thought we were worth the trouble.”

“You are a valuable asset to them,” the veterinarian told her. “A foreigner, an outsider, someone they could use as leverage.”

Or worse.

Imagine if they knew who she really was. A senator’s daughter. The ransom they could demand would be astronomical.

She cringed. Not even Patrick knew about that.

If they got caught, maybe she'd use it as a bargaining chip. Her life, along with Moyo's and Patrick's, for a larger sum. If they didn't kill them first. She pushed the thought down, locking it away with all the other horrors she refused to acknowledge. She couldn't afford to let fear paralyze her now.

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the cool mountain air wash over her. Somewhere above them, birds sang sweet, sharp notes that echoed through the hills. For a fleeting moment, it was almost possible to believe they were safe.

Almost.

"You ready to move?" Patrick asked, a short while later.

Grimacing, she got to her feet. Patrick picked up Moyo, who wrapped his arms around the man's neck. He looked absurdly young and vulnerable. Lexi wanted nothing more than to get him to a hospital, but out here, there was no chance of that. Maybe a medicine woman in the nearby village could help. That was the best they could hope for.

It was late afternoon when they finally stumbled into Bibokoboko.

Lexi nearly wept with relief as they crested the last ridge, and the small mountain town came into view. Rolling green hills stretched out around them, dotted with cattle and fringed with patches of dense forest. The sky above had turned a deep shade of purple, twilight creeping over the mountains like a velvet curtain.

The village itself was a scattering of mud-brick houses painted in faded hues of pink and yellow. Smoke curled lazily from a few chimneys, and a sparkling stream cut through the valley below, where women bathed their children and washed clothes. It

was a serene, picturesque scene, but Lexi couldn't fully appreciate its beauty. Her body ached, she was tense with worry, and all she could think about was Moyo.

She collapsed onto a wooden bench outside a pink-painted house unable to go one step further. Patrick set a barely conscious Moyo down beside her. He slumped against her shoulder, his body unnervingly limp.

"I'll find the elder," Patrick said, taking off toward the center of the village. "Wait here."

Lexi watched him go, praying they'd be welcome here. As Patrick disappeared from sight, a small group of villagers gathered nearby, gawking at her and Moyo. She managed a faint smile, though it felt like more of a grimace. There was no point in talking to them, she couldn't speak their language.

Patrick returned minutes later, accompanied by a diminutive man with sharp features and wire-rimmed glasses perched precariously on his nose. The elder greeted her warmly, though his expression turned somber as his gaze settled on Moyo.

Thank god. They weren't going to be butchered, murdered, or run out of town.

The elder directed them to the Health Center—the largest building in the village and, according to Patrick, the only source of medical care for miles.

The Health Center was a sturdy concrete structure with a corrugated iron roof and a smattering of cracked glass windows. Inside, it was spartan but clean, with rows of wooden benches and a single examination table. A middle-aged French doctor introduced himself as Claude. His soft voice carried an air of quiet authority, though he looked tired, and the strain of years spent working in such an unforgiving place was evident by the lines across his forehead.

“He has a head wound.” She gestured to Moyo who sagged limply in her arms. “He’s concussed, but I’m worried it might be worse.”

“Set him down here.”

She laid him on a wooden assessment table and stood back, her heart hammering.

Please let him be okay.

Claude examined the boy with practiced efficiency, his brow furrowing as he checked Moyo’s pupils and probed the edges of his wound. When he finally straightened, his expression was grim.

“He’s severely concussed. I’d recommend getting him to a hospital as soon as possible. There’s a risk of internal bleeding—a hematoma.”

Lexi’s stomach twisted. “How urgent is it?” she whispered, though she already knew the answer.

Claude’s gaze didn’t waver. “Very.”

Her breath hitched, and for a moment, she felt like the ground had dropped out from under her. There was no hospital nearby. No medevac. No way to save Moyo.

She blinked back tears, gripping the boy’s hand tightly. “We can’t lose him,” she murmured.

CHAPTER 24

The incline was punishing. Hawk's thighs burned with each step as they trudged upward, their pace relentless despite the altitude sapping their strength. The path narrowed into a single-track trail, hemmed in by dense foliage on one side and a sheer drop on the other. His lungs expanded, dragging in thin, cool air. He scanned the surroundings, his eyes darting to every shadow, every movement in the undergrowth.

Phoenix, leading their formation, suddenly raised a clenched fist. Hawk immediately halted, his rifle snapping up to shoulder height. Behind him, Viper and Edmond froze. No one spoke. The air crackled with tension, every sense on high alert.

Voices.

Hawk strained to pick up the direction. A low murmur drifted through the trees ahead—deep, male tones punctuated by bursts of laughter. He dropped into a crouch, signaling the others to do the same, and motioned for Phoenix to confirm their source.

Phoenix disappeared in the direction of the plateau. Through the clump of trees, they could see a fertile patch of grass dotted with grazing cattle and nestled in a tranquil valley below, a village.

That must be where Lexi was.

Phoenix returned, moving soundlessly through the bushes flanking the trail. When he reached them, he hissed, "Four tangos. Spread out but within range. Looks like they're gearing up to move."

“Attacking the village?” Hawk asked.

He nodded. “They’ve all got AKs and look like they mean business.”

“How’d you want to handle this?” Viper asked.

Phoenix didn’t hesitate. “I’ll flank right and circle around. Get behind them. Viper, you and Hawk take the left. Edmond, stay put for now and cover us. Eyes on me.”

Edmond gave a curt nod, clutching his weapon with white-knuckled fingers.

Hawk nodded. It was time to take out these bastards who’d been hunting his woman. He hadn’t forgotten. Stealth and speed, he still had both. “Let’s make it quick. We need to get to the village before dark.”

Viper gripped the strap of his rifle. “Quick and quiet. Got it.”

“Move out,” Phoenix hissed.

They watched as Phoenix melted into the undergrowth, his movements fluid and deliberate. Hawk and Viper waited a beat before veering left, each step carefully placed to avoid crunching twigs or dislodging loose stones. Edmond stayed behind, scanning their perimeter for any signs of reinforcements.

Hawk’s pulse steadied, his breathing slow and controlled. The weight of his rifle felt natural in his hands, a familiar extension of his body honed through years of SEAL training. His mind shifted into operational mode—calculating angles, assessing risks, running through contingencies. The rebels hadn’t posted a lookout, their posture casual and their attention focused inward. A mistake they wouldn’t live long enough to regret.

As they crept closer, his instincts took over. Twenty yards out, he motioned for Viper to hold position. They crouched behind a cluster of tall shrubs, the foliage providing just enough cover to obscure their approach.

He checked his watch. Phoenix would be in position any second now. Hawk tightened his grip on the M4 carbine slung across his chest, the familiar weight reassuring. SEAL protocol kicked in, his mind already assigning arcs of fire. He and Viper would take the left side of the group while Phoenix cleared the right. Standard two-two ambush formation. Clean and efficient.

“Ready?” Viper murmured, his voice a hushed whisper.

He nodded.

The seconds ticked by, each one stretching like an eternity. Then, faintly, Hawk heard the crunch of a boot on dry leaves. Phoenix.

Viper raised his hand in a silent count. Three. Two. One.

They struck in perfect unison.

Hawk rose smoothly from his cover, his rifle locking onto the nearest rebel. He squeezed the trigger twice, rapid and controlled. The 5.56mm rounds struck center mass, the force of the impact slamming the rebel backward. His AK-47 slipped from his hands as he crumpled to the ground.

Beside him, Viper’s shots cut through the air, two quick bursts aimed at the rebel nearest the tree. The man didn’t even have time to raise his weapon before he collapsed, his body folding like a rag doll.

Across the clearing, Phoenix emerged from the shadows. His movements were

precise, methodical, like a predator closing in on its prey. He fired two double-taps in quick succession, the shots finding their marks with lethal accuracy. Both rebels dropped where they stood, their bodies hitting the ground in almost perfect synchronization.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Hawk scanned the clearing, his rifle sweeping over the fallen bodies. No movement. No sound other than the distant rustle of leaves and the faint bleating of cattle in the background.

“Clear,” he called, adrenaline surging through his veins.

Phoenix came over. “Too easy,” he muttered, nudging one of the bodies with the toe of his boot.

“Complacency will kill you out here,” Viper replied, his tone grim. He crouched beside one of the rebels, inspecting the weapon. “AK-47. Fully loaded. Looks like they were ready for trouble.”

“Not ready enough,” Hawk said, his gaze sharp. He turned to Edmond, who was just stepping into the clearing, his expression stoic but his eyes wide with unease. “Anything?”

Edmond shook his head. “No reinforcements. It was just them.”

Hawk let out a slow breath, his grip on his rifle loosening. “Good. Check the bodies. See if they’ve got anything useful—maps, intel, supplies. If not, let’s head into the village.”

Phoenix and Viper moved quickly, their hands methodical as they searched the

rebels' pockets and backpacks. Hawk kept watch, his eyes scanning the tree line for any sign of movement, but there was none.

“Got something,” Viper called out, holding up a crumpled piece of paper. He unfolded it, frowning as he studied the contents. “It’s a hand drawn map. Looks like the village up ahead.”

Hawk exhaled. “Okay, then. Let’s move out.”

CHAPTER 25

Lexi sat slumped on the wooden chair next to the cot, her fingers entwined with Moyo's. The boy hadn't stirred for hours, his shallow breaths barely audible over the sound of the wind battering the clinic's corrugated iron roof. She stared at his pale face, unable to prevent the tears that streamed down her cheeks. His small chest barely rose and fell, each breath a fragile thread tying him to life.

Patrick had gone to find them some food and water, but she couldn't think about that now. She had failed Moyo. Without proper medical attention, he was going to die.

The realization hit her like a gut punch. For all her veterinary training, her desperate attempts to get him to safety, she'd been powerless to save him. The boy who had risked his life for hers was slipping away right before her eyes, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

She gave a strangled sob. "I'm so sorry, Moyo."

The thought of the rebels still hunting them barely registered anymore. She'd been too long without food, water and rest, and her mind was groggy, her thoughts sluggish and disjointed. Even the fear of what the rebels might do to her if they found them had dulled to a vague background noise.

Her body tilted forward, exhaustion claiming her. She slumped over the edge of the cot, still holding Moyo's tiny hand, and closed her eyes. Just for a moment. Just long enough to escape this nightmare.

But the nightmare wasn't done with her yet.

The sound of raised voices yanked her back to consciousness. Shouting. Men. Nearby. Her head shot up, but the sudden movement sent the room spinning. She clutched the edge of the cot to steady herself, her vision swimming. The voices outside grew louder, angrier. Boots pounded against the packed earth outside the clinic. Not the quiet shuffle of villagers, but the heavy, determined strides of men who meant business.

The rebels. They've found us.

Her heart raced, but her body refused to move. She stared at the door, unable to summon the energy to get up. Let them come, she thought numbly. She was too weak to fight, too broken to care. She glanced at Moyo's pale, still form, and a fresh wave of tears blurred her vision.

The pounding of boots stopped right outside the door. Someone barked an order, and for a moment, the world stood still. Lexi closed her eyes, bracing for the end.

"Lexi? Lexi, are you in there?"

Her eyes snapped open. That voice—it couldn't be. It wasn't possible. She was hallucinating. Dehydration and despair had finally tipped her over the edge into madness. She clung to the cot, her breath catching in her throat.

"Lexi! Answer me!"

It sounded like him.

"Hawk?" She tried to push herself upright, but the effort sent her tumbling to her knees. The world tilted dangerously, and she put her hand against the wall for

support.

“Hawk?” she called again, louder this time, her voice cracking on his name.

The door burst open, slamming against the wall with a force that rattled the windows. For a moment, she thought the sunlight streaming in had blinded her, but then his silhouette filled the frame.

It was him. It was Hawk.

He’d come for them.

Strong, broad-shouldered, and gloriously alive, he stood there like a warrior from another world. His chest heaved as he scanned the room, rifle slung across his chest.

“Lexi. Thank God.”

He crossed the room and knelt in front of her, his hands gripping her shoulders as if to anchor her in place.

“I’ve got you, baby. You’re safe now.”

She fell into his arms, sobbing. “You came for me?”

“Of course I did,” he said fiercely, holding her against him. “I love you. There’s no way I’d let anything happen to you.”

She buried her face against his chest, inhaling the familiar scent of him—sweat, earth, and something uniquely Hawk. Had he just said he loved her? The surreal feeling of relief was fleeting. She pulled back suddenly, her eyes wide with panic.

“Moyo,” she choked out, pointing to the cot. “Hawk, he’s dying. I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried everything—” Her voice broke as fresh tears streamed down her face.

Hawk turned his head sharply toward the boy, his expression hardening. He called over his shoulder, “Phoenix! Get in here now!”

A tall, broad-shouldered giant of a man entered the room, moving with military precision. His sharp eyes scanned the room for threats. “Yeah?”

“We need a medevac for the boy.”

“On it.” He reached into his pack for what she assumed was a sat phone. “I’ll let Pat know.”

“Edmond,” she breathed, as the ranger walked in behind them. He rushed over with a water canister and offered it to her. “Here, drink.”

Her hands shook as she took the canteen, the weight of it almost too much for her weak arms. Hawk placed a steadying hand over hers, guiding the canteen to her lips. The water was cool and sweet, and she drank greedily, the liquid soothing her parched throat. The haziness started to recede.

“How long will they be?” she asked, biting her lip.

“Not long.”

She hoped he was right.

“The rebels,” she murmured, resting her head on Hawk’s shoulder. She still couldn’t believe he was here, that he’d come looking for her.

“Don’t worry about them,” he said. “We took care of that.”

“You mean?”

He nodded.

Tears welled again, but this time they were of relief. They were safe. Well and truly safe.

Now, if only they could get Moyo to a hospital in time...

“He’s going to be okay,” Hawk said, as if reading her mind. “We’ll get him the care he needs.”

“Are you sure? He’s in a bad way.”

“I won’t let anything happen to him,” Hawk muttered, against her ear. “Trust me, Lexi. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to either of you ever again.”

CHAPTER 26

Hawk barreled out of the clinic. “Phoenix, where are we on that chopper?”

Phoenix threw him the sat phone. “Pat’s on the line.”

Hawk raised it to his ear. “Pat, what’s the ETA?”

The ex-SEAL Commander’s voice was tinny and sounded very far away. “I’m on it, Hawk, but this is Africa. It’s going to take some time.”

“We don’t have time,” he blurted, the tension getting to him. “We’ve got a young kid in bad shape. He’s not going to make it unless we get him to a hospital— fast. I need a helicopter out here stat.”

Luckily Pat wasn’t the type of man who took no for an answer either. They’d served together in the same unit and Hawk knew he was reliable. “Hang in there, buddy. We’re doing everything we can. Anna’s on the phone to the mining companies now. Somebody will have a bird sitting idle.”

“Get it here,” he growled.

“Stay by the phone,” Pat replied, before hanging up.

Hawk handed the phone back to Phoenix, who raised an eyebrow. “Think he’ll pull through?”

“He’d fucking better,” Hawk growled, raking a hand through his hair. His chest felt tight, an unfamiliar sensation he didn’t care for. He’d always prided himself on keeping his emotions in check, but seeing Lexi in that state—broken, filthy, sagging on the ground—had rattled him to his core. She was a fighter, but even fighters had limits. And Moyo... The boy’s pallor and shallow breathing told him his condition was serious. If he could just hang in there long enough to get to a hospital.

Phoenix stepped back leaving Hawk to stew and went to join Viper who was talking to one of the village elders.

Five excruciating minutes later, the phone buzzed. Hawk marched over and snatched it from Phoenix’s hand. “Pat, talk to me.”

His buddy was all business. “Found a bird. Private company out of Rwanda. It’s not cheap—five figures—but they’ll be there in an hour. There’s a paramedic onboard.”

“Thank fuck,” Hawk breathed.

“Send me your coordinates.”

“Will do. Thanks, Pat. I owe you.”

“You just bring them home safe.”

Hawk handed the phone back to Phoenix. “Chopper’s inbound. ETA one hour. Let’s prep for evac.”

Phoenix nodded sharply. “I’ll secure it. Viper, you send the boss the coordinates.”

“Copy that.” Viper slung his rifle over his shoulder and reached for the phone.

Hawk strode back into the clinic. The dim room smelled of sweat, illness, and despair. Lexi sat slumped in the corner, her head resting against the wall, her glassy eyes fixed on Moyo's fragile frame. Patrick leaned against the wall next to her. They were sharing a canister of water.

"Lexi," he said gently, crouching in front of her. "The medevac helicopter will be here in an hour. It's going to take Moyo to a hospital. He's going to get the help he needs."

Her eyes flickered with something—hope? disbelief?—but her voice was barely a whisper. "Really?"

"Yeah," Hawk said, his voice firm. He reached out and cupped her face, his thumb brushing away a smudge of dirt on her cheek. "You did everything you could, sweetheart. Now let me take it from here."

Tears welled in her eyes, and she gave a shaky nod. "Thank you."

"Always," Hawk said, his voice rough with emotion. "I'll never leave you again, Lexi." He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, to shield her from the horrors she'd endured, but there wasn't time. They had to prepare for the evac.

He stood and moved to the boy's side. Edmond hovered nearby, his expression grim. Hawk met the ranger's gaze. "We're moving him as soon as the chopper gets here. Think you can carry him to the field to the west of the village?"

Edmond gave a tight nod.

"Good." He turned back to Lexi. "I'll be right back, baby."

She nodded, her fingers still curled around Moyo's small hand.

Outside, the night was pitch-black, the sliver of a moon now hidden behind thick, dark clouds. Hawk joined Phoenix and Viper at the designated landing zone—a flat stretch of grass on the edge of the village. They'd cleared the field of debris and marked the area with fluorescent glow sticks.

“LZ is good to go,” Phoenix reported. “No sign of hostiles.”

“Let's keep it that way,” Hawk grunted. It was unlikely they'd encounter any more rebels this far up in the hills, but he wasn't taking any chances, not with Lexi and Moyo's lives on the line.

Finally, the faint thrum of rotor blades broke the silence. The sound grew louder, cutting through the night air. The helicopter descended in a flurry of wind and dust, its searchlights sweeping the area.

Phoenix signaled to the pilot, guiding the bird down safely, while Hawk sprinted back to the clinic.

“We're moving!” he barked. “Chopper's here.”

Edmond, rifle slung over his back, lifted an unconscious Moyo into his arms. Lexi struggled to her feet, but her legs buckled. Hawk caught her before she hit the ground. “I've got you,” he said gruffly, cradling her against his chest.

Together, they made their way to the waiting helicopter. Hawk bent over, shielding Lexi from the downdraft of the rotors as Viper and Phoenix helped Edmond load Moyo inside. The paramedic immediately hooked the boy up to an oxygen tank and began assessing his vitals.

Hawk climbed in after them, settling Lexi on one of the bench seats. She looked pale and disoriented, her eyes fluttering shut as the exhaustion overtook her.

“Stay with me, baby.” Hawk gripped her hand. She nodded weakly, her fingers tightening around his. Christ, he loved this woman. Once this was over, he was going to marry her and make her his wife. There was no way in hell he was ever letting her go again. If this experience had taught him anything, it was that life was too short to fuck around.

As the helicopter lifted off, Hawk glanced at Moyo. The boy’s chest rose and fell with the aid of the oxygen mask, his small body dwarfed by the medical equipment. The paramedic worked quickly, stabilizing him and giving him fluids.

“Hold on, kid,” Hawk muttered under his breath. “You’ve got this.”

Lexi was watching Moyo, tears streaming silently down her face. He squeezed her hand. “He’s going to make it. He’s tough. He’ll get through this.”

“I thought we were all going to die,” she whispered. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

Hawk’s chest tightened. What had he been thinking leaving her in the fucking jungle by herself? “I’m here, Lexi. And I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me, got it?”

A faint smile tugged at her lips. “I think I can live with that.”

Forty-five minutes later, the helicopter touched down at a private hospital in Goma. A medical team was waiting, and rushed forward to take Moyo into surgery.

Hawk carried Lexi inside himself, refusing to let anyone else touch her. She clung to him, her head resting against his chest, weak from exhaustion and relief. Only Patrick was still upright, and able to walk unaided.

As they wheeled Moyo into the operating room, Lexi broke down, sobbing into Hawk's shirt. He held her close, his large hand stroking her back as he murmured soothing words into her ear.

"You're safe now," he whispered. "It's over. I've got you."

And he wasn't letting her go. Not ever.

CHAPTER 27

Lexi's heart skipped a beat as Hawk stepped into the hospital ward. His presence filled the small, sterile space like a burst of fresh air, and for a moment, she forgot about the ache in her limbs and the weariness in her bones.

He looked every bit the dashing hero, clean-shaven and impossibly handsome, though a hint of ruggedness still lingered in the sharp angles of his jaw and the broad strength of his shoulders. He looked entirely different to the man who had stormed into the jungle clinic, muddy and unshaven, to rescue her and Moyo. She loved both versions of him, if she was honest. She'd take him any way she could get him.

His eyes lit up as they met hers, and there was a warmth in his gaze. "I hear you've been cleared for release."

"Doc says I'm good to go." She smiled weakly.

She'd been on an IV drip for twenty-four hours, the dehydration and exhaustion having taken their toll. While she hadn't seen Hawk much since being admitted, she'd sensed his presence beside her. The nurse had even mentioned, in a conspiratorial whisper, that he hadn't left her bedside.

He perched on the edge of her bed and took her hand in his. "I just spoke to the doctor. Moyo's surgery went well. They relieved the pressure on his brain, and he's going to make a full recovery."

Relief crashed over her, stealing her breath. "Oh, thank God." Tears welled in her

eyes, and she didn't bother to wipe them away. "For a moment there, I thought I was going to lose him. You know he got hurt protecting me from the rebels?"

Hawk's hand tightened around hers, and his gaze darkened. "He's a brave kid."

"He is," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "When the rebels attacked, we managed to get most of the staff and injured gorillas into the shelter. The new steel-reinforced door kept them out. But Moyo wasn't there—I couldn't find him. Patrick and I went to look, and when we did, the rebels already had him."

She recounted the story, her voice trembling as she relived those harrowing moments. "I shot one with a tranquilizer dart, and Moyo managed to wriggle free, but not before another rebel swung his rifle at me. Moyo stepped in front of me—he took the hit trying to protect me. Patrick shot the other rebel with his handgun, and we escaped, but..." Her throat tightened. "It was too close, Hawk. Too close."

Hawk's jaw clenched, his hand tightened around hers. "You're both alive. That's what matters." His voice was low and fierce.

She looked up at him, still unable to believe he'd come all the way from New York to rescue her. "But how did you find us? How did you know where to look?"

His expression softened. "I had help. Remember that Navy buddy I told you about?"

"The one you served with?"

He grinned. "Yeah, that one. He loaned me two ex-SEALs—Phoenix and Viper—and they're the best there is. We teamed up with Edmond, and he helped track you. From there, it was just about following your trail."

"You tracked us?" Her voice was filled with awe. "All the way into the hills near Lake Kivu?"

“Yeah,” he said simply, as if it were nothing.

It was crazy—insane, really. She wouldn’t have thought it possible. “You did all that for me?”

His eyes softened and he leaned closer. “I’d do it all again in a heartbeat.”

Her breath caught, and for a moment, all the chaos of the past few days faded away, replaced by the overwhelming gratitude she felt toward him. But it wasn’t just gratitude—she knew that. It went much, much deeper.

“Hawk,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Did you mean what you said back at the clinic? When you found me?”

He gave an adamant nod. “Every word.”

Her heart thudded. He still loved her, and she loved him so much it hurt. Except she still couldn’t be with him. “I have to go back, you know,” she whispered. “To Usala. It’ll be a mess. The animals will be terrified, displaced. They’ll need treatment, rehabilitation and care. They need me.”

“I know,” he said softly. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to leave.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re not?”

“No.” A small smile played on his lips. “Because I’ve realized something important, Lexi. If I want to be with you—and God knows I do—then it’s up to me to fit into your life, not the other way around.”

Her heart stuttered, and she stared at him in disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’ve resigned as CEO of my company.”

Her jaw dropped. “You... you resigned?”

“Well, technically, I’m still the non-executive chairman,” he admitted with a smirk. “But I’ve stepped back from running things day to day. I’ve decided to start something new—a company based in Uganda.”

“Uganda?” she repeated, trying to wrap her head around his words. Had he lost his mind completely. “Why Uganda?”

“Robert’s relocating the sanctuary there,” Hawk explained. “I spoke to him this morning. It’s safer, the government is more stable, and the gorillas will have better protection. He’s going to need your help with rehoming them.”

She gasped. “What about the staff, the carers, their families?”

“We’re going to offer them relocation packages. Unfortunately, we can’t help everyone, but we’ll do what we can.”

“That’s... that’s...” She gazed at him, at a loss for words. How much more amazing could one guy be? If she hadn’t been completely head of heels in love with him before, she sure was now.

“There’s more,” he said, his smile lingering.

“I’m not sure I can take much more.”

He grinned. “I’m going to set up a company focused on infrastructure—pipelines, water projects, things that make a real difference for communities.”

Tears blurred her vision, and she blinked to clear them. “You’re serious?”

He nodded. “Dead serious. And it’s not just for the work, Lexi. I’m doing it because I

love you. Because I want to build a life with you. If you'll have me."

Her tears spilled over, and she let out a laugh that was equal parts joy and disbelief. "Oh, Hawk. Of course, I'll have you. I love you too."

He leaned over and kissed her. Unlike their last night together, this kiss was tender and lingering, and full of promise for the future.

When they finally pulled apart, Lexi hesitated, a new thought forming. "Hawk, there's something else I've been thinking about."

"Name it," he said, his tone steady.

"It's about Moyo." She glanced at her hands. "He doesn't have anyone. His parents are gone, and he's been through so much. I was thinking... what if I adopted him?"

Hawk took both her hands in his. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Really?" she asked, gazing up at him. It was a lot to take on. An orphaned soon-to-be teenage boy. One who'd seen so much trauma in his young life. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" Hawk's eyes shone with pride. "I'd love that. He's an amazing kid, and I'm incredibly fond of him. If you want to be his guardian, then I'll be right there with you. He deserves a family, and I can't think of anyone better to give him that than us."

Lexi's heart swelled, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding on tightly. "Thank you, Hawk. You don't know how much that means to me."

"It's what families do," he murmured against her hair. "And we're going to be one hell of a family."

The door opened again, and a nurse peeked in. “Moyo’s awake,” she said with a smile.

“Can I see him?”

“Sure, just don’t tire him out.”

Hawk helped Lexi out of the bed, and together they walked down the corridor to the boy’s room. Moyo was lying on the hospital bed, propped up with pillows. He was still connected the IV, and a tube ran from his nose. His face lit up when he saw them.

“Miss Lexi! Mr. Hawk!” he cried, his voice still weak but filled with joy.

Lexi leaned down and kissed his forehead. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Better,” he said, gripping her hand. “The doctors fixed me.”

“They sure did,” Hawk said, ruffling the boy’s hair.

Lexi’s throat tightened as she looked at Moyo, his brave little face full of hope. “Moyo,” she said softly, “how would you feel about coming to live with us? About being part of our family?”

His eyes widened, and for a moment, he was speechless. Then he threw his arms around her neck, holding on tightly. “Really?”

“Really,” she whispered, her own tears falling freely.

Hawk knelt beside them, his arm around Lexi’s shoulders as he ruffled Moyo’s hair again. “Looks like you’re stuck with us, kid.”

Moyo laughed, the sound bright and pure, and in that moment, Lexi knew she'd made the right decision. She loved this little boy and wanted nothing more than to be his guardian.

"You dropped this in the hut in the village," Hawk said, and handed him the pocketknife he'd lost.

Moyo gasped and reached for it. "You found it."

Hawk gave a pleased nod and put a hand around Lexi's shoulders. As she leaned into him, still holding Moyo's hand, she felt the weight of the past lift. The future stretched out before them, full of promise and love, and she knew without a doubt that they would face it together—as a family.