

# PRIDE OF THE VELD

The image is a promotional poster for the film 'Pride of the Veld'. It features three shirtless men against a savanna sunset background. The man in the foreground is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background shows a silhouette of an acacia tree against a bright orange and yellow sky. The title 'PRIDE OF THE VELD' is at the top, and 'LE FRANKS' is at the bottom.

LE FRANKS

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## PRIDE OF THE VELD

By LE Franks

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

This black-and-white photo shows the backs of two men sitting in a Jeep. They're leaning close together with their arms entwined, hands held together to form a heart.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It was only supposed to be a sexy moment while on the safari, a summer fling, nothing serious between me, the local guide and the only other participant on the safari; a hot nerdy wildlife photographer. The plan was for us to return to our life after that, but through fun and hard moments, it became much more. Now, I don't think I can live without both those men. But how could we, with all of us living in three different corners of the world?*

*I'm looking for something sexy that's going to send me on a safari. HEA (or a strong HFN) or at least the allusion of one. Some action/adventure would be great but not mandatory.*

*Sincerely,*

*MC Houle*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** ménage, South African safari, photographer, kidnapping, multicultural

**Content warnings:** violence

**Word count:** 29,226

# PRIDE OF THE VELD

By LE Franks

## CHAPTER ONE

“Oh God, Danie, fuck! Please, please, ahh...” Danie kept up his slow, deep slide into him, ignoring the pleas. Danie was smiling and Geo was starting to break, whining and bucking up into him, trying to change the slow burn he was being given into a hard, heavy heat. Danie slid his hands up and down Geo’s sides, petting his skin with a soothing stroke.

“Not yet, not yet Geo. Hold on, we’re going to fall off the edge of the world together.” Geo started to shake. Danie’s Afrikaner accent lit the nerves of his spine, sending the hairs on his neck prickling. He gripped Danie’s forearms, holding him near, though Danie was refusing to drop down onto him, refusing to melt into his arms, not until Geo gave him everything. Everything again... except he wouldn’t. Not this time, not today, maybe not ever again. He’d made that mistake once, two summers ago, and had his heart broken by this man. He didn’t want to let him that close, ever again... but it was so hard to resist.

Geo licked up the nearest arm. Danie’s skin was warm and salty from a day of driving across the wildlife reserve, tasting of sun and sky, the brown parched earth, the grasses crushed under boot; there was a flavor of wildflowers and succulents, the rich blood of antelope, the pulse of the veld. Danie tasted of the only home that Geo ever cared about— which of course made the fire they generated between them risky. Too risky to let loose, like a wildfire racing across the plains destroying all life caught in its path. Dear God, Danie was like an anarchist, throwing Molotov cocktails at every single one of his defenses, tearing apart all the careful construction with his body. Geo tightened his hold on the other man.

Danie reared back, ripping himself out of Geo’s hands only to drive himself forward into Geo’s slick heat. The pounding intensified, and Geo

found himself floating as the pleasure ratcheted higher and higher. Danie slid an oily hand along his cock, twisting the head and stroking down the length matching the rhythm of his thrusts, over and over until Geo felt himself fall apart— come spurting across his abdomen and chest.

Danie slammed deep inside once more, following him over the edge, settling onto his forearms to keep from crushing him. “God damn, Geo. You’re going to kill me yet,” Danie murmured into his neck, licking at the sensitive skin behind his ear. “Geo...”

Geo froze. “Shhh! Danie! What’s that?” He slapped his hand over Danie’s mouth, and tried to quiet his breathing so he could hear. They’d stopped in an area of the Christiansen Reserve that was usually out of the range of the known predators, though without fencing it wasn’t uncommon for an animal to wander through from time to time. He listened again. He could hear a rustling in the bushes providing cover on the far side of their camp. There was definitely something moving around outside.

“Hand me my gun Geo. Think it’s next to you,” Danie whispered to him, rolling carefully up into a crouch, his penis, still wet with his release, lying across his thigh. Geo resisted the urge to laugh, as incongruous as this moment was. He strained his hearing, listening in the velvety darkness of the tent for a hint that would identify the creature currently investigating their camp.

“Shit, Danie, don’t shoot anything; just scare it off,” Geo hissed, shoving the rifle stock into his waiting hand. The rustling stopped as Danie carefully moved the tent flap aside, muscles tensed, and slid into the African night.

“Fuck!” The shout was a little muffled through the canvas tenting, but Geo could hear the fear resonating in the voice. He grabbed his pants, yanking them on as fast as he could before searching around by feel for something to cover Danie. Geo flung himself out of the tent, skidding to a halt at the sight before him.

Danie stood in the glow from their campfire; glistening brown skin stretching across his broad shoulders and towering frame reflected the flickering light. Even nude, he commanded respect. The muscles rippled in



Danie's arms as he held his rifle pointed down at the other man's feet. It was a man, their visitor, and not some animal looking for an easy meal. Geo turned and glanced around for any sign of a vehicle, but all he could see was the deep dark night.

"Okay, Danie?" Geo approached carefully, keeping out of his line of sight. The other man half-crouched, hands held out in the universal sign of peace. He wore a camera slung across the chest of a khaki field vest, his chambray shirt hanging half-open, though one rolled up sleeve sported a large tear across the upper arm. Geo could see the fabric was stiff and stained dark around the rip, as though the wound had only recently stopped bleeding. He continued his survey, noting the olive skin of the man's long, long legs sprouting out of a pair of cargo shorts. Nothing about this man screamed dangerous to Geo. He moved to Danie's side.

"Danie," Geo asked again, touching his back, soothing the warm skin in a gentle circle with his fingertips, "Who's this?" He gestured towards the other man, waving the shorts in his hand. With a recognizable hiss of impatience, Danie pulled him back, letting the shorts drop to the ground.

"Geo, stay back please." Danie's accent was thicker, a sure sign that he was stressed, so Geo resisted the urge to pick up the shorts and help Danie into them as he held the weapon. They were now moving into theater-of-the-absurd territory, and Geo wasn't sure he wanted to be the one to upset the tenuous balance between these two men locked in a staring battle with one another.

Finally the other man swayed, breaking eye contact with Danie before dropping to his knees. It was enough to send Geo into action. Ignoring Danie's growl of "Stop dammit, Geo!" he pushed past, moving quickly across the dry ground between them, and reaching the other man just as he collapsed. He found himself in a tangle of limbs, gazing into frightened brown eyes, wide with panic and pain. Geo's heart clenched as the man shook in his arms.

"Danie, we need the kit, and that bottle of Coke in my bag... and put some damn pants on— eh?" He frowned at the man, still standing there unrepentantly naked, fixing them both with his best glare. "Stop growling and move!" he went on. "You're scaring the poor thing." Geo was probably

smaller than the man with the camera if you stretched him out properly. But for now he reminded Geo of an injured rabbit, almost frantic in terror, unable to recognize help when it was offered to him. Geo would have to work with that. He stroked a hand along the uninjured arm, trying to calm and focus the man who was muttering to himself in unintelligible Italian.

“Shush, you’re safe, you’re safe now. I’m Geo, and the cranky naked guy here is Danie.” He glared up at the man in question. Danie stood stock still, ignoring Geo’s commands for the moment.

“Geo...”

“Later, Danie—he’s going into shock. I need you to trust me... no... wait! Just help me get him up and into the tent. He’s freezing. Everything’s in there anyway.”

Between the two of them they managed to lever him up and carry him into their tent, finally settling him onto their bedrolls. Danie rummaged around in Geo’s pack until he came up with a couple of bottles of Coke, watching Geo carefully remove the man’s shoes and socks before tucking the feet under the covers. Geo checked the long limbs carefully, tugging the shirt open to pull it away from the injured arm.

It was quite an ugly gash, the flesh torn and gouged rather than sliced. It was going to need stitches to close properly and would leave a nasty scar. Well, Geo’s doctoring was definitely going to leave a nasty scar. The shirt was a dead loss.

“Hey, I need to take care of your arm now; it can’t wait, I think. I need you to relax and drink some soda. You need some sugar in your system. So, while Danie gets that, I’m going to cut your shirt off so I don’t hurt you more than I have to. Okay?”

The man gave a brief, sharp nod. He kept his gaze fixed on Danie; the larger man clearly still worried him.

“Look, Danie is just a little over-protective out here. You gave us a bit of a scare...” Geo trailed off as the man’s eyes closed briefly and his muscles started to relax. There wasn’t going to be a better time for this. He pulled out

his folding knife, clicking the blade into place. The tip of the blade lifted the blue shirt away from the rich olive skin, already a little pale in the swaying light of the camp lantern. A quick flick and Geo had the sleeve opened up to the wrist.

He was able to tear it the rest of the way, leaving the arm exposed below the cut. He repeated the action until neatly separating the sleeve from the shirt. Danie was now crouching next to him with a bowl of clean, hot water. He had finally decided to help him care for the injured man. He shrugged sheepishly at Geo's smile— they'd gotten distracted earlier while preparing to make dinner, and they'd left a large pot of water to heat in the coals.

“See if you can get him to drink that Danie.” Geo nodded to the open bottle in Danie's other hand. The wound was oozing dark blood from the center. It was deep enough that Geo wished they were back at the compound where his grandfather kept a fully-stocked medical suite. All he had now was a standard bush kit. He could clean the wound and stitch it up, but he didn't have antibiotics with him. They'd have to cut their trip short and head back in the morning.

The kit's gauze pads were large enough to use for cleaning out the wound. Closer inspection showed dirt and debris embedded throughout the wound. This wasn't going to be pleasant. He poured a little water into a second bowl that Danie had found for him, washing his hands with some antiseptic soap from the kit, donning a pair of purple gloves. Danie watched him silently, tearing open the blue paper coverings for him as Geo went through half their stock of pads.

“What's your name? Do you speak English?” Geo asked, saturating another piece of gauze in antiseptic before carefully placing it on the man's arm, soaking the wound to loosen the dried clots of blood and dirt. Danie had settled on the man's other side, an arm around his shoulders, helping him take small, steady sips of warm Coke.

The voice rasped “Andrea.” Geo glanced up; the man was looking at him, pain still reflected in his hazel eyes.

“Good, that’s good Andrea. Danie here is going to keep you still, and as soon as I finish cleaning out this wound I’m going to have to stitch it together. We’re pretty far out; otherwise I’d just wrap it and take you back now. It’ll take us a few days to work our way around the falls, maybe four altogether to get back to the compound.”

“Yesssss...” the Italian hissed, and Geo used that moment to start scrubbing out the wound with a clean piece of gauze. “I was heading there myself.”

“Really?” Geo turned to Danie. “We didn’t have anyone scheduled. Did we get a call from an independent?” Danie shook his head.

“Probably an indie that wanted to keep the conservation fees for himself,” Danie replied, forcing the bottle between Andrea’s lips and waiting for him to take several sips before pouncing on him with his questions.

“Andrea, I think it’s time to tell us why you stumbled into our campsite without food, or water, or cloth...”

“Danie, this is not the time.”

“Geo! Now *is* the time! We have no idea what sort of trouble he’s...”

“He’s no trouble.” Geo cringed as the words left his mouth, kept his eyes on his work so he wouldn’t have to see Danie’s arched brow. But he knew Danie had a point. “Fine,” he said after a pause. “You’re right. It’s stupid not to know.” *And stupid out here gets you killed*, he thought.

Danie was gracious enough to keep his mouth shut. Geo watched him staring down at Andrea, still waiting for the other man to speak.

“My name is Andrea Conte. I’m a professional photographer, mostly wildlife and nature shots. I have a regular freelance gig with some of the better magazines... though for this trip I’m working on my own project. I’m finishing a book of photographs from each continent.

“I’ve been on Antarctica, shooting some of the animals and birds for the last month. It went better than expected, so when I got a call from my agent, I was able to hop an early transport to Sydney and fly over here immediately.

“She finally wrangled permission from the Christiansen Reserve to photograph the falls— I’d been trying and trying for years to get the old man to agree to it. I’d even put off shooting the lower African continent because I’d pinned everything on these birds. When permission finally came... it meant I could finish my book. My editor has been threatening to pull the contract if I wasn’t done by Christmas...” Andrea trailed off, leaning back against Danie without realizing what he was doing. Geo watched a shadow slide across Andrea’s face, speaking volumes.

“She lied to me.”

Geo nodded. “Yeah, she lied... or someone else did. I’m Geo Christiansen, and the ‘Old Man’ is my Grandfather, George. He only allows tourists to visit twice a year in small groups. Occasionally researchers and other scientists get special permission to view the site privately. The area is particularly sensitive: it’s a breeding ground for dozens of birds currently classified as threatened or endangered, and two that are extinct outside this range.

“He charges a great deal of money to the tour groups to help pay for security and conservation. Oupa would never allow any groups to come now. The birds are still nesting, and any disruption from outside can cause mated birds to abandon their nests and chicks. We’re here to keep an eye on things from a distance.”

Andrea looked so devastated that Geo squeezed the man’s hand gently. After a sigh Andrea continued. “The men met me at the airfield. I’d been booked on a flight out of Rand, and by this time I was completely done in. I’d been traveling almost continuously for seventy-two hours. Seeing my name on that placard was a relief, I can tell you.

“There were three of them altogether— all kitted out. They grabbed my bags and had me stowed in an old Range Rover before I could even say ‘thank you’; it was only later, thinking back, that I realized the truck was wrong. If the Christiansen Reserve had sent someone to get me, it would have looked... cleaner, a newer model with the Reserve logo on it or something. But I was exhausted. I fell asleep immediately and when I woke up we were already deep in the bushveld.”

Andrea looked off into the distance, remembering. “It was rough going, no roads most of the way...” Danie snorted at the apparent understatement, but Andrea pushed on. “We set up camp that first night, and I was busy going over my notes and maps. They were a little vague about where the base camp would be. They kept telling me that it would depend on what we found there, which seemed to make some sense.

“It’s so vast here— just occasional bluffs and thorn trees to break up the grasslands. I got some great shots, but I was anxious to get to the falls and start photographing the birds. I couldn’t believe my luck at the timing— we’re in the middle of nesting for some of the species...” Andrea trailed off and looked to Geo. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have done this unlicensed. You have to believe me. I don’t know why my agent would do this.”

“Money,” Danie injected gruffly. “It’s always money with *them*.”

“Who?” Geo had pulled out fresh gloves and a suture kit from the medical bag.

“Everyone. Everyone but you, Geo.” Danie’s smile had turned warm and golden as he looked at Geo.

Geo smiled and shook his head. “I like money.”

“If you liked money, Geo, you’d agree to sell the Reserve to the hotel group like your uncles want.”

“Oh, well I don’t *love* money. I just want to be close friends with benefits.” Danie rolled his eyes at him and turned back to distract Andrea from Geo’s preparations.

“Tell me about the men, Andrea.”

“Oh, the man who did all the talking was introduced as David Botha. He called the driver Junior. There was another man but he just stayed in the back with his rifle the whole time. Never said a word until yesterday... he, he scared the piss out of me. I heard Botha call him Karl...” He hissed as Geo dug into the torn flesh of his arm.

“Mmm. Sorry,” Geo mumbled.

“This Botha— describe him to me.” Danie used a finger to turn the Italian’s face away from Geo working on his arm.

“He’s late-forties maybe, light-brown hair cut short. Blue eyes, scar on his cheek. Very tan. A little shorter than me, I think, but bulky— going soft around the middle. Broke a few fingers in his day, pinky and ring finger on his left hand are twisted, like they were crushed and not set properly... oh!” Andrea suddenly jerked up, causing Geo and Danie to both shove him back down, Danie keeping his left hand planted firmly in the middle of the man’s chest.

“Shit, don’t fuckin’ move!” Geo cursed. “It’s bleeding again, dammit!”

“Sorry, sorry...” Andrea panted, but his eyes were lit in excitement. “I don’t have to describe them to you, get my camera please.”

One glance at the photograph of three men standing around a battered truck had Danie reaching for their satellite phone. Geo watched him check the phone’s charge before calling the compound.

“Christiansen here!” his grandfather’s rich Afrikaner accent boomed out of the phone. Danie yanked it away from his ear, switching it to speaker instead.

“Ya, it’s me Danie.”

“Is everything all right with Geo, Danie,” the other man burst in. “Let me speak to him now.”

“George, he’s unavailable—”

“Swart!” he growled, cutting off Danie’s explanation. “Get me my grandson or you won’t have an ass to sit on for the rest of your very, very short life!” Geo rolled his eyes and shrugged. Oupa was always out of control when it came to him.

Sighing, Danie moved the phone closer to Geo. “Hi, Oupa,” Geo began. The sigh coming from the receiver was audible.

“Geo, tell Swart I’m still going to kick his ass. He takes ten years off my life every time he calls. He never leads with the important information. I’m always expecting to hear you’ve been swallowed by one of the river crocs.”

“Not likely. I avoid the river— too muddy. Besides, everyone knows you’ll outlive us all. It’s only fair for Danie to try and even things up by taking a few years off your life.” He waited for his grandfather’s snort before continuing. “I’m fine, Oupa, but my hands are full at this minute; let Danie catch you up, and don’t give him a hard time please?”

The snort came again followed by the inevitable “You’re my only grandson, Geo. I worry when you’re out there alone. I can’t imagine what Danie does to keep himself occupied while you work.” Danie grinned at that, sending the heat into Geo’s cheeks and groin. *Not the time.*

“We’re fine, Oupa. But we have news. Talk to Danie while I finish these stitches, I’m still trying to stop this bleeding...” Geo trailed off realizing his slip.

Danie yanked the phone back. “George, we’re both okay. We do have an injured wildlife photographer here. Geo’s patching him up and we’re breaking camp in the morning, so expect us back at the reserve in four days. We’re going to hustle.”

Geo crooked a finger at Danie, motioning the phone closer. “Oupa, I have a deep laceration to the bicep, about eight inches long. It’s pretty dirty, but I have supplies to clean it. I don’t have antibiotics, so please call Doctor Sigurdsson and have him on hand when we get back, along with transport in case we need to fly him out. I’m going to stitch and wrap it, and we’ll hope for the best.

“We don’t have all the details, but we’re pretty sure this is one of those tourist scams. He was set up by a third party; assumed it was through the reserve. His name is Andrea Conte— you should be able to Google him right now.”

Geo felt Andrea tense under his hand as he spoke, before giving a small shrug and relaxing back against Danie. There was a pause in the conversation, so Geo took his flashlight, shining it on the wound as he poked around one last time, making sure it was clean. They could hear the old man rummaging around rustling papers and muttering under his breath.



“Ah, I have a photo here. There is an Italian photographer, twenty-five or so; brown hair, hazel or green eyes... hard to tell from this shot. He’s sitting down in a café so I can’t tell how tall he is. Looks like he wears glasses... the ones in the shot are black wire rims.”

Geo arched a brow at Andrea. “In my bag, back with... them. I just use them to read.” He looked sad, as if he suddenly remembered all he’d lost.

George Christiansen continued on through the phone’s speaker as if Andrea hadn’t spoken at all. “Looks like he’s worked for *Nature* and *National Geographic*... oh! I think we have that one here in the office somewhere—he took those shots of the Beluga whales that you liked so much...” Geo listened to his grandfather searching around some more, picturing him in his office, leather chairs overflowing with papers and books, the walls covered with maps and charts.

“Ah, yes. I have it here, Geo. Let me just look at the contributor page... oh. It’s the same man from the website. Can you send me his picture? And you might as well take a shot of the wound for Sigurdsson before you stitch it, lad.” Geo smiled. The old man might seem distracted, but he knew exactly what was going on with every last soul working on the reserve, and he wasn’t afraid to tell them where they were going wrong or how to do their jobs better.

Danie sent the shots, and they didn’t have to wait long for the old man’s reply, coming over the phone strong and sure, belying his eighty-three years. “He’s not looking good, Geo. Make some strong tea and wash out the wound with it before you stitch it closed. Pack in the used tea bags— three should do, and leave it for as long as it takes for him to finish drinking the rest of the cup. Lots of sugar, but only to drink, not in the tea used as a wash. Let Danie get it. He makes a proper cup... not like you, Geo. Your gifts lie elsewhere.” Geo rolled his eyes, biting his tongue. It was an old complaint.

“Is it the same Andrea Conte?” Danie asked.

“Of course!” the old man scoffed. “If he wasn’t, I’d have you open up the wound and toss him out of camp for the big cats to snack on!”

Andrea looked like he was ready to bolt, so Geo started rubbing calming circles on his chest. “Really, Oupa? You went with cats? He thinks you’re serious while I’m trying to keep him from panicking and losing more blood.”

“That’s what the tea’s for. The tannins help coagulate blood and decrease seepage when you finally stitch it.” Geo nodded as if his grandfather could see him. Andrea tensed as Danie ducked into the tent carrying two tin cups of tea.

Handing the one containing four tea bags to Geo, Danie broke into the conversation, settling next to the injured photographer, holding the cup to the man’s lips.

“George,” he said and then paused, urging Andrea to drink before continuing, “we don’t have the full story yet. We found Conte making his way into our camp, pretty beat up. Conte thought he’d been picked up by one of our guides. Apparently he’s been trying to get a spot on one of the reserve’s commercial tours for a few years; when his agent sent him an email about booking the guide, he just assumed it was authentic.

“We have a photo he took of the man, and it’s Ronson. He’s back, calling himself David Botha, but it’s definitely the same man, and he’s got a couple of rough trade working with him. He’s out here looking for something more lucrative than illegal guide fees.

“We need to notify the authorities and send out our security detail to track them from around the falls. It’s too dangerous to let them roam loose. You know Ronson, and the last I heard of him there was a bounty pending. He won’t hesitate to fight his way free if he’s cornered. I’ll feel better getting Geo out of the area as soon as possible. He wants to get Andrea back anyway, but he’ll freak out about leaving the birds if there’s a poacher around.” Geo stopped working long enough to frown at Danie, who ignored him.

“Frankly I couldn’t give a crap about the damn birds at this moment,” Danie ground out. “I just want Geo out of Ronson’s path; one look and that bastard will be seeing gold. There’s no mistaking he’s your blood.”

“Fine, Swart. You take care of my grandson by whatever means necessary. Consider Conte under my protection too. I guess Geo won’t let you do anything else if he’s already mothering the lad, eh Geo?”

“What, Oupa?” Geo called over to the phone. “I’m not mothering him. I’m doing field repairs. It’s the opposite of mothering, since I keep causing him pain.” He was irritated by the direction the conversation had taken. He wasn’t a child, and Danie’s overprotective bullshit needed to stop.

“How’s the arm look now?” His grandfather’s tone was placating, which annoyed Geo all the more.

“Bleeding’s stopped again, thanks. I’m about to put in a couple of deep stitches. Thank Dr. Sigurdsson for kitting us out well; he put dissolvable sutures in here. Only topical numbing cream, though. We should fix that before anyone else heads out.” Geo trailed off, biting his lower lip to stop himself from rambling on.

“Just take the stitch. Danie will hold him down, then you’ll be done in no time. You can do it, Geo. You’re a Christiansen, and these men are your responsibility.”

“I thought we were Danie’s,” he mocked, laughing at the irritated noise his grandfather made.

“I pay Swart to use a rifle when he needs to. You are born of the land, Geo. Even if your father made the mistake of getting you on an American, the land of your birth doesn’t mean as much as the land of your blood, and your blood is all Afrikaner. You’ve always made me proud, but today I can’t be there. Today you are the Christiansen.”

“Oupa!” Geo felt like he was five again. He was going to whine, but then the iron voice was back.

“Danie, should I send the plane out?” It was obvious George Christiansen had made his point and was moving on, assuming everyone would fall in line with his orders, as usual. Geo pushed aside the annoyance.

“We’re still a couple days away from the strip at midpoint; we’ll head there and assess. If we break camp at daybreak we can make it by midday the next, maybe.”

“Stay in touch. I’ve calls to make.” The thrum of the phone was instantly cut and silence filled the tent.

“Okay, Andrea... ready?” The photographer nodded his head and bit his lip until Geo noticed Danie brush a thumb across it in rescue. Interesting. With a deep breath of his own, Geo used the kit’s hemostat to slide the first suture into place.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

By the time Geo was finished, Andrea was a wreck. Danie held tight to the Italian, cuddling him into the crook of his arm while he kept his other hand pressed against his chest, keeping him immobile. Danie admired the man's determination to keep his arm steady while Geo worked on closing the wound. The only reaction he allowed were sharp, indrawn breaths, holding them until Geo finished an apparently painful stitch.

Geo was lovely to watch at any time, but this was an altogether new experience. He seemed to swell before him, as if his grandfather's words had struck home. Danie knew that Geo always felt like an outsider in his Grandfather's world. He had two uncles who were constantly undermining his confidence, encouraging him to return to the safety of his American home.

It pissed Danie off to no end, to see him come back from a "family" dinner with his confidence shaken. It was only when they made their annual trip deep into the reserve to watch over the nesting grounds that Geo would blossom under the dark blue African sky, reminding Danie of a wildflower in the veld.

Andrea's eyes were closed and his breathing even. He'd slipped into sleep while Geo was bandaging his arm. Cleaning up after himself and repacking their medical bag, Geo turned to him. "So..." he started, voice low. "What do you think of our guest?"

Danie crossed his arms and stalled. He stared into Geo's beautiful eyes, and for a moment he had no idea what the man expected him to say, wanted him to say, feared he would say. There was nothing in his face pointing the way, and Geo was his world— his beautiful, secret world.

"He's pretty, Geo. You know how much I like pretty things," he began carefully. He watched as Geo began stowing his field journals and equipment, tucking them into the footlocker he used during these trips. It held every personal item he brought to Africa with him. Geo looked up.

"Are you calling me pretty?"

"You are. Don't deny it."

“But you think he’s pretty?” There was a slight frown. A swift wave of panic broke over Danie.

“Yes, in a way. But you think he’s pretty, too, don’t you?” he challenged, exhaling in relief at Geo’s nod.

“Umm, he’s hurt though...” Geo said, considering the man lying still on their bed.

“You like taking care of injured birds. Are you asking me if you can keep him?”

“Mmm... maybe. He needs caring for. Look at him.” They did. They looked at the lovely man, resting in their nest of blankets. Sleep had eased the tension that had drawn the face tight since those first harrowing moments. His breathing was slow and deep, and they could see a line of golden skin rise and fall as the shirt parted between breaths.

“Tell me...” Danie moved over to Geo, pulling him into his arms. Geo tilted his head back, looking up at him.

“You know I only want you... but...” Geo began before faltering. Danie froze, afraid of the next words he’d hear.

“No, Danie. I mean I only want *you*. But for you, it’s different, and Andrea is your type... more than I am... But there’s something about him that I like... so maybe I wouldn’t mind... just once? With you?”

Danie drew back, staring at Geo and admiring the blush that now touched his cheeks.

Not sure how to respond, Danie began carefully. “If I even have a type, it’d be you, Geo, but you’re right about Andrea. There’s something there that draws me. Maybe it’s the circumstances; maybe it’s him... regardless, I won’t throw him out of our bed if you decide to bring him into it.”

Geo was silent for a moment. Then he fixed Danie with a look that was almost too much to bear. There was a sadness and resignation that seemed to rise from him.

“Don’t worry, I do understand. You don’t have just me. I know all about the others, Danie. Oupa might not know we’ve been together, but he knows me. He knows my heart. I think he was hoping that by telling me everything you’ve been up to while I’ve been home in America, well— that it would keep me away from you while I’m here.”

“He doesn’t know anything, Geo; he’s just trying to protect you,” Danie whispered.

“He suspects something, Danie. Otherwise he wouldn’t bother. I know he wants to keep me from being hurt, but maybe it’s too late for that... I’m just your annual summer fling, right?”

“No, Geo! God, no! You’re not a fling to me, I swear.” Danie swallowed painfully past the lump in his throat. “But you’re also not mine— not in the long term. You’re not the only one your grandfather talks to Geo. He warned me off you, after your first summer back, making it clear that you’re not available. That you’re too young, and you can’t be in a serious relationship with any man... that you understand your responsibilities here and have agreed to set aside your ‘personal desires’ for the good of the family.

“He told me that the Christiansen Reserve can’t thrive without you at the helm guiding and protecting it for the future. In order to do that, you’ll need a family of your own and a strong relationship with the community. And it’s a very conservative community.

“They might be able to ignore your preferences while you’re away at college ‘experimenting’, but once you come home for good you won’t allow yourself to continue with an ‘alternative lifestyle’... though it sounds like your grandfather would be the one who’s ‘not allowing’.” Danie trailed off at Geo’s look of horror.

“I don’t believe he’d say that!” Geo spat out furiously under his breath. “None of that is true Danie. None of it.”

“Believe me, Geo. He’s a hard man, but he’s not entirely wrong. You can’t be ‘out’ here. Not if you want to take his place.”

“But I’m already out,” Geo protested, trying to keep his voice low.

“You might not deny it if someone was to ask you directly, but you’re not grabbing me in front of the staff, either. You always wait until we’re out here, until we have privacy before you’ll let me kiss you, touch you, hold you...” Danie trailed off, caressing Geo’s face.

“I didn’t want to risk your job by making you look unprofessional, Danie. I’d never risk your livelihood that way.”

“I know, Geo. I know.” Danie bowed his head, trying not to pull the other man closer. Instead he stepped back, dropping his arms and letting Geo turn away.

It didn’t take them long to clear the tent of their loose items, Geo brooding the whole time. They moved in silence, letting the injured man sleep. Another fifteen minutes and they’d be breaking down the tent, and then they’d be on their way.

Danie watched Geo review their food and water supply, stowing some items and leaving others out. It looked like there would be cheese sandwiches for the drive tomorrow. Geo was mixing up a batch of biscuits to bake in their Dutch oven, a cast iron skillet already cooking up the last of their pork belly and potatoes.

The original plan had been to wait another week and arrange for a resupply from the reserve; now, depending on how far they went, they might have to drive through without taking the time to build a fire to cook. At least they’d eat well tomorrow. The next day might be down to the canned pork and beans that Geo also set aside as he packed up their makeshift kitchen.

Danie grimaced at the thought of cold beans, and cold shoulders. Geo hadn’t spoken more than was absolutely necessary. He’d put his “little lord” face on, the one that made him look like a clone of his grandfather— cool and stern and seemingly unflappable. He’d never used it on Danie before, and that hurt more than he cared to admit.

“Geo,” he murmured softly, coming up behind him at the fire. “I’m sorry, I should never have...”



“What? Should never have wasted your time with me? Never led me on? Let me dream of having more with you?” Geo gulped back a sob, and in an instant Danie had him burrowed against his chest.

“Ah, Geo... no, love, no. Nothing like that. Come on, shush... Geo, sweetling... I have no regrets. We’re good together, and for as long as we have this— whatever this is— I’m happy. But you’re obviously not, and I can’t stand to see you in pain.” Danie crooned softly in his man’s ear, holding onto him as he cried out his unhappiness and fatigue.

Danie wished he had the words to take away the pain and uncertainty, but there’d always been so much unspoken between them, and this was a conversation meant for another lifetime. To think that Geo thought so little of them both, it broke Danie’s heart, just as it had obviously broken Geo’s.

From the very beginning, Danie knew that he could happily spend the rest of his life with the shy teen. But while Geo was only a few years younger than him, their relative stations kept Danie from acting on his attraction.

His job was more important than a casual summer fling with the boss’ grandson. But summer after summer came, and the attraction grew. Geo grew. Tall and slim, always so withdrawn and pale when he arrived on the reserve each year; But within weeks, the joy returned to his eyes and the color to his cheeks. Danie was mad for him, and it was so hard to stay away.

He just couldn’t see a way forward. Hefting an exhausted Geo into his arms and wrapping his legs around his waist, he took him into to the tent, nestling him beside Andrea. Grabbing his rifle and a campstool, Danie settled in front of the tent. He deliberately put thoughts of Geo aside, instead sending his senses out into the night, opening himself up to the sounds of the savannah and listening for the men that didn’t belong there.

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## CHAPTER THREE

By the time dawn had pinked the African sky, they had Andrea tucked into the back seat of the Range Rover. They also packed a handful of biscuits stuffed with bacon and hard cheese, and a thermos of Geo's favorite dark coffee blend was wedged between his boots as they drove across the veld.

Danie had grumped a bit, watching Geo pulling out his secret stash of coffee from America, just enough to last him for a trip. It was a dark-Italian triple-roast with chocolate. He'd refused to share with Danie after the first time he'd been teased about it.

Seeing him fill the bottle and hand it all to Andrea felt like a slap in the face until Geo pressed a tin cup of the brew into his own hands. Still, he'd never been gifted with an entire thermos before. Geo could apparently read his mind; he got a roll of the eyes and a slap on the back of his head for his trouble.

Geo had checked Andrea's wound, cleaning it again and tossing the old tea bags away. He'd laid them over the stitches last night before wrapping it all up in the bandages. From the looks of it, they'd seemed to do the trick; Danie couldn't see any fresh bleeding. There was frayed skin that Geo couldn't stitch, so the entire area was a combination of Steri-strips, stitches, and ointment. It was going to leave Andrea with a hell of a scar.

"Tell me what happened." Danie didn't wait long once the Italian had stirred this morning.

Danie tried to get a clearer picture from Andrea about the direction he'd come from, though he'd apparently been thoroughly turned around as he fled from his own camp, and Danie didn't want to take the time for more than a cursory check on his tracks into camp.

"Danie," Geo cautioned, taping down the end of the bandage. "Leave it for now. We'll have plenty of time on the trek back." Geo went back to mothering Andrea, sending him off to sit in the Rover until they were packed. It wasn't until they'd travelled for an hour and everyone had finished their breakfast that Geo finally gave Danie a slight nod to proceed.

“Andrea, how did you get injured?” Danie asked, gazing at the Italian in the back seat. He’d been running various scenarios through his mind, ever since he’d gotten a fresh look at the wound.

“I was running, I heard them, heard them talking. They said they were far enough away from the normal tracks... no one would know. No one would miss me...” his breath started to stutter, sending Geo over the front seat into the back with his patient.

“It’s okay, Andrea. We have you. You’re safe,” Geo murmured, pulling the man tightly to him, taking care with the injured arm. Danie watched them in the mirror, catching Geo’s eyes, looking for his silent approval before asking his next questions. “Just tell us about the camp. Where were you and what were you doing?”

Andrea had calmed enough to continue. “I’d been out for a while, shooting photographs around a ravine, mainly background, landscapes... a few long-range shots of antelope, nothing too exciting. I’d told the others that I’d be out for an hour, and the direction I was headed. I’d done this before at each stop on the trip, so no one made any comment.”

“Without an escort?” Danie was incredulous.

“I suppose that should have clued me in to begin with— eh?” Andrea chuckled darkly, then went on. “I decided to cut it short, there wasn’t anything there... you get an instinct after a while. I’d moved in a circle this time, not out and back like I’d done each time before...” He paused again, and Danie could hear the swallow from his seat.

“Andrea, it’s okay...” Geo began, locking eyes with Danie in the mirror again. This overprotective streak was not helping.

“*Geo*,” Danie snapped. “He needs to tell us, and you need to back off and let him. You can’t shield him from this.”

“Thank you, Danie,” Andrea replied. “He’s right Geo, I’m fine. You’ve already done a brilliant job caring for me. Yes? But you can’t protect me from this.” Geo sighed and nodded, but he stuck close to the Italian with one hand on his knee and the other back around his shoulder.

“So, I am not quite a... a ninja? Yes, not quite as stealthy, but close. So close. To be a good wildlife photographer, you must blend into your environment, you must walk so softly that even the breeze does not touch you. Yes? So from the time I was a little boy, my grandfather would take me into the woods outside Perugia and we would pretend to be great hunters. We would stalk our game and capture them not with a gun, or a bow... but with our old camera. He was a painter, very famous in the area. He painted the woods, and the animals. Soon, it was just me. I would track through the forest and bring him back little snapshots on the Polaroid, and he would paint them.”

“So it is second nature to me. I float over the ground; you will not hear me come unless I make noise on purpose. Around these men, I make lots of noise. But this time I did not. I was maybe twenty-five feet away from the truck. I was behind several thorn trees and some bushes and brush, and I froze. Something that I heard, a word or a tone, alerted me— I’m not sure which, but I dropped down and took that picture that I showed you.

“I stayed there and the wind shifted and I could hear them clearly. They were talking about... about killing me there and leaving me for the animals...” Danie winced, remembering Christiansen’s joke from the night before. Andrea continued: “I backed away; I was opposite from the direction I’d originally left camp. When I was sure I was far enough away, I ran.”

“How did you get hurt?” Geo pressed closer to him, and lightly touched the bandage on his arm.

“I ran on and off for the first three hours. I keep fit, I run in my spare time, and truthfully, this isn’t the first time my feet have saved me in the wild. I can also climb most trees. That is a very useful skill, I must say. I practice that at home as well.”

Andrea’s mood seemed to lighten.

“It was dusk and I was worried about being out all night on the savannah. All I had on me was my camera, my pocketknife, my documents, and a couple of energy bars. I also had an empty water bottle still clipped to my belt.

“I finally reached a ravine. It looked about forty, forty-five feet down, with a fairly steep bank. At the bottom was some running water. It was the first I’d seen since I started to run. My bottle was empty, and I hoped there would be shelter among the boulders...” Danie raised a brow in disbelief. Andrea shrugged and grimaced in pain.

“The short answer is... half-way down I slipped and fell, landing in the rocks. Something had my arm pinned and I yanked it loose, which was a bad idea as you can see. I managed to slide down the rest of the way... by the time I reached the bottom my bottle was gone, and there was no way back up the banks.”

“You’re damned lucky there wasn’t a cloud burst upstream. That ravine can turn into a washer within minutes. You wouldn’t have survived. Stay out of any wash or ravine... even dry as a bone and with a clear-blue sky, they’re deadly under the right conditions,” Danie lectured their guest from the front as Geo nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Uh, okay— next time, eh?” Andrea agreed before resuming his story. “I tried to clean myself up, and the bleeding slowed— though I didn’t realize it was so deep until you started poking around in it...”

“Probably the mud helped with the bleeding. What a mess.” Geo grimaced at the memory.

“Thank you, Geo, truly. You saved my arm, I’m sure.” Danie caught the reflection of Andrea smiling his glorious, sweet smile at Geo. It made him wish... wish so many things. None of them right; not right now. He turned and concentrated on driving while listening to the tale in back.

“Right, so— I couldn’t get up the way I came, and at least I had water to drink. I still had everything else, and my camera was perfect, which I bless the angels for protecting.” Andrea kissed the tips of his fingers and sent the kisses upwards towards heaven.

“So I felt better. But by nightfall it was so dark, and getting cold by the water, so I just kept moving. Eventually the ravine leveled out a little and I was able to crawl my way out. Once I spotted your fire in the distance, it took

another two hours before I made it there; I was terrified it would go out or that there were big cats in the area and I wouldn't reach it in time."

"Weren't you afraid that it was Ronson and the others waiting for you?" Geo asked. His eyes were wide in alarm for the other man.

"Yes, actually. So I did my best not to be seen or heard. When I saw that your truck was different, I almost collapsed on the spot. I must have made more noise than I thought, because the next thing I knew there was an angry, *naked* man threatening to shoot me!"

Geo snorted out a laugh, and Danie knew he was remembering him standing over the smaller man with all his piel hanging in the breeze. It was serious at the time, not knowing whether or not Andrea was a danger to any of them, but still... he smiled in agreement.

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Geo groaned and stretched in the driver's seat. They were making good time on the first leg of their journey, paralleling the river; driving straight through, eating the sandwiches he'd made up last night. Andrea was watching him in the mirror while Danie slept in the passenger seat. Geo knew that Danie had kept guard over the two of them through what little was left of the night and early morning. Geo had awoken cuddled next to the Italian, a leg wedged between Andrea's and a severe case of morning wood.

Thoughts of makeup sex with Danie crossed his mind. He'd really gone and done it this time. He could see how much his accusations had hurt Danie. It didn't mean they weren't true... it's just that they'd never talked about being anything more than what they were. Inseparable, each and every school break since he'd turned nineteen.

He'd gently extracted himself from the bed and gone in search of Danie, vaguely wondering how many blowjobs it would take to get the man to forgive him.

None, as it turned out. Danie had just pulled him onto his lap without a word and kissed him breathless. They'd sat that way, holding each other and listening to the savannah stir with the first whispers of dawn.

They didn't have long to linger. Neither said the actual words of apology, or any words at all, but the connection they'd always shared was still there, unbroken. Geo sighed in relief. Then, glancing at the mirror, he gazed straight into the eyes of Andrea Conte. His breath faltered and his cock hardened and his heart spasmed.

He glanced over at Danie and flushed. Embarrassment chased away his libido, but the look in the mirror from the backseat was full of regret, and also interest and a hint of something else. Geo thought back to his conversation with Danie, before they got sidetracked with painful revelations. The idea of sharing the Italian with Danie sent a thrill through him. It wasn't cheating if they were together— right?

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## CHAPTER FOUR

They were eight hours into the first leg of their journey when it happened. A sharp jolt and the scream of metal tore through the cab, jerking the Rover to a halt. Geo groaned. Danie had snapped upright, and Andrea was thrown into the window, howling in pain from the impact on his arm. Geo could see a patch of crimson blooming on the far edge of the bandage where there hadn't been any stitches. He hoped that was the case, since it seemed unlikely they were going anywhere soon.

“Are you okay?” Danie had snapped open his seat belt and leaned into the backseat to check on Andrea.

“Hurts like hell” Andrea gritted through clenched teeth. “What happened?”

“Felt like something broke in the undercarriage...” Geo muttered then hopped out to check.

“Axle,” muttered Danie.

Geo knew they weren't going anywhere in the Rover, but he needed to check everything out himself, maybe more than once, before he admitted defeat.

“Geo,” Danie called, stepping out into the hot afternoon sun, “Andrea needs you to check his arm, and we need to set up camp. I'll call George and have him send out a rescue party. It's at least a day's hike to the airfield on foot— wiser just to stay put and let them come to us. We have the supplies.”

“What if?” Geo couldn't say the words.

“He's fine, Geo. Go see, and let me call the old man?” Just a quick nod to Danie and Geo was all business again. The strong, hard illusion he'd hide behind in public was back, and he could see Danie's approval. He needed Geo to be tough right now.

By the time Danie finished his call into the reserve, Geo had checked and rebandaged Andrea's arm, started laying out their supplies, and unpacking the tent before heading into the bush to look for fuel.



A campfire would be more critical out here; there were at least two lion prides that included this area in their range. According to Danie, George was sending out trackers, a mechanic, and a spare axle. They were expected to rendezvous with them in three days if lucky. Four was more likely if they were sticking together in a caravan.

He was sure they'd be seeing Oupa himself. This was one incident of bad luck too many and the old man would be blaming Danie for all of it. Oupa was never fair where he was concerned.

Geo moved next to checking their water supplies, pulling out a roll of charts for the reserve. He found their quadrant, looking for the closest spring or creek. It looked like they had a little luck. There was a year-round spring a short distance away. That also meant there'd be game, and with the game, predators wouldn't be far behind. He pulled out their second rifle and a box of shells and laid both on the hood of the Rover.

"Andy, do you know how to shoot?" Geo tossed over his shoulder to the Italian.

Andrea had been casually taking pictures of them working since neither of them would allow him to help.

"Just photos, caro," he replied softly, taking another shot of Geo, smiling.

"Okay, just checking." Geo tucked his head back into the hatch of the Rover. They had enough water for all four days if they rationed it. That meant canned food. Geo pulled out the boxed food, setting it on the ground.

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Danie circled through the grass, checking lines of sight into their camp. They were a little exposed to the south, but there was a ridge rising up that would give the advantage of high ground if someone approached from that direction. He shifted the full water jugs on his back, scouting closer.

It was a scramble to get to the top of the rocky outcropping one-handed, but he managed it. Peering around for cover, thinking like a hunter, he

abandoned his cargo and eased forward on his belly, looking out and into their camp.

Andrea was sitting on a campstool close to the tent, fiddling with his camera again. Geo was working on the fire. Flashes of steel from his knife blade kept catching the sun, and Danie made a note of it. No point in bringing unwanted attention to any of them. Though by the time night fell, they'd have no choice. Their fire would shine like a beacon, but the four-legged predators were more likely to find them without it.

He watched as the Italian got up from his seat, sauntering over to Geo. The hand he placed on the small of Geo's back set his teeth on edge. *Drop it.* He willed the Italian to move away. Instead, Andrea moved it slowly across his back until draping it over Geo's shoulder, bringing their heads together.

He thought he would see Geo's smile, shy and flirty, if he pulled out his binoculars. Geo wasn't pulling away; even from this distance he could read the man's body language, could feel the imprint of Geo's warmth from all the times he leaned back into him; watching him lean into the photographer brought a stab of pain.

He really couldn't blame Geo, not after the other night, especially since he had practically offered up the man to Geo, on a silver platter. But that was before he revealed so much. More than he'd intended, but not everything. Probably not enough. And maybe it was too late; he'd seen the glances between Andrea and Geo. After their argument, how could he expect Geo not to jump at the chance to be with the Italian?

Danie lay there, letting the late afternoon sun heat the skin of his back through his shirt, just watching the two men. Andrea was almost as pretty as Geo. He had a similar slender build, a head of messy brown hair, and olive skin; as a pair they would be quite stunning. The Italian had a few inches and a handful of years on Geo. He had an established career that took him all over the world. He certainly sounded like he was a better fit, at least on paper.

Danie didn't have much to offer Geo except for his companionship and protection in the bush for a few months each year. But at the end of the day, he was just an employee.

Danie picked up the satellite phone and called Geo, watching him break away from the other man— *does he look guilty?*

“Geo, can you spot me?” Danie was all business again, shoving away his impending heartbreak for another time.

“Where are you?” He watched as Geo spun in a tight circle, before moving out to get a clear view of the surrounding area. He quickly fixed on the rise, peering at his location under a hand, shielding his eyes from the glare.

“Can you see me yet?” Danie moved on his belly a little closer to the edge.

“You're up on that ridge, yeah?” Geo asked.

“Can you *see* me?”

“No. That's not good is it?” As Danie watched Geo, he imagined that he could see Geo worry his bottom lip, like he always did when he sorted out a problem.

“Not if you're the one looking, Geo.” He disconnected the call and stood, waving and waiting for Geo to wave back before scrambling back down to ground level.

His walk back to camp was a thoughtful one.

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They ate beans from cans set into the coals to heat. The labels curled from the fire and blacked with soot, the metal almost too hot to touch. Geo kept up a patter that masked the silence from the rest of them. Andrea kept sending glances over the fire at both of them, which was confusing.

Earlier, when he'd returned with the water, Danie had found the pair huddled together over the man's viewfinder, Geo marveling over photographs from wherever. They didn't even have the decency to pull apart when he entered the camp. Instead, Geo just waved him over, as if it was the most

natural thing in the world to have the Italian draped all over him. Maybe it was.

The photographs were spectacular— even in a three-inch format. Danie hated them.

Andrea pulled the camera back for a moment, searching through shots for a moment, and then, crossing the camp, slid next to him. Danie felt the warmth and the spicy scent coming from the man.

After so many days in the bush without more than cursory bathing, Danie had become used to the musky, pungent smells he shared with Geo. But this man, this man with olive skin and lashes longer than any he'd ever seen on a man before, smelled like sunshine and bergamot.

He shivered and willed himself not to respond further. He could feel Geo's eyes on them as he watched Andrea scroll through the shots for him.

He settled on a series of shots of Geo, following him as he moved through the camp settling them in for a long wait. The photographs elevated the mundane activities to art. The sunlight setting Geo's hair into a blazing halo of gold, making his eyes shine with ethereal light— a fallen angel amid kindling as he knelt before the stone circle, building their fire. There were more. Close-ups of Geo, his shy smile, his raucous laughter, his worry reflected as he pulled on his lower lip with his teeth.

"This, this is the one." Andrea pointed to the next shot. Geo was standing, arms at ease across his chest, and there was such a look of love and peace on his face, that Danie had to look twice. He looked up at Andrea, confused.

"He was looking at you. You were busy across the way, and he just stopped to watch you." He scrolled through several more shots of Geo with a dreamy look on his face.

"You are a couple, yes?" Andrea persisted, his hazel eyes shining in the twilight.

"Mmm..." Danie wouldn't commit to anything that would ruin Geo's chance of happiness if he really wanted the Italian.

“I think maybe that’s a yes. I asked this to Geo, and he made the same noise. It must be a special Afrikaner slang that means ‘I’m in love with my partner’?” The Italian laughed at Danie’s expression.

“He made that same face, too! You both are so...? Cute? No... I think the word is... Yes! Stupid. If I was in either of your shoes, I wouldn’t let some stranger come this close to my man.”

Andrea moved all the way into him, pressing himself into Danie’s side. Danie felt the breath against his neck, lips hovering over his ear as the man whispered, “I like you Danie. You are exactly my type. You are all gruff on the outside, so strong and quiet. But when I needed you last night, there you were— wrapping me up in your arms, protecting me. I felt it Danie. Did you feel it?”

Danie shuddered. Looking up he saw Geo watching them with hooded eyes, all expression gone from his face. Andrea smiled broadly and eased back slightly.

“I think that Geo is reconsidering what he wants. Shall we give him more material?” Andrea moved again, and Danie threw out his hand, halting the man’s forward progress before he could cause more harm.

The man leaned into his touch, and Danie closed his eyes, playing with the idea of pulling his hand back and letting Andrea fall all the way forward, into him. With a wink and another wicked smile, the Italian moved away to sit by the fire, still playing with his camera, leaving Danie wondering.

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Geo cursed himself for a fool. He’d pushed Danie away last night and this was the result: a horny Italian crawling all over his man, and Danie just letting him. They should have left him in the bush for the lions to eat. Danie was the worst kind of idiot if he thought Geo cared about what he did for a living.

Danie *had* finally pushed the photographer back, but Geo could see it was only because he was there watching the pair. Andrea moved around the fire to drop into the canvas chair next to him.

“He’s beautiful... your Danie,” Andrea leaned over whispering. “I wouldn’t mind a man like that in my bed every night. You’re a lucky man, Geo.” He pulled the lens cap off the camera and started framing shots in the lilac haze of twilight. It really was beautiful here. The thorn trees stood in silhouette against a lavender sky still slightly-pink where the clouds drifted, and the grasslands had turned an antique-gold color glowing with the last kiss of daylight.

Andrea turned the camera on him, letting the shutter fly in a quick burst. Geo could feel himself frown.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what, caro?” Andrea had turned his lens back across the vast savannah.

“Take my picture all the time.” Geo leaned back in his chair, his tin cup cradled in his hands.

“You won’t let me help, caro. So I practice my shots. You never know when a wild animal will walk across your path. Or an exotic bird.” He purred the last and stroked a finger down Geo’s arm, sending shivers across his skin.

“I’m anything but exotic,” Geo protested, folding his arms on his chest.

“If I brought you to my home, all the boys would follow you down the street begging for your attention.”

Geo snorted in disbelief. “Unlikely. They might follow me down the street just to pull me in an alley and beat the crap out of me. That I’d believe.”

“No, I’d never let that happen, caro. You will always be safe with me. You just need to trust me, like you trust Danie. But maybe you don’t trust Danie?”

“Danie? Of course I trust Danie. I lo—” he began, stopping himself, but not in time to avoid the self-satisfied smirk from the other man. Andrea lifted the camera to his face and squeezed off another shot of Geo.

“So Danie is wrong. He says there is nothing between you.”

“There isn’t!” Geo snapped back

“Well, then, you won’t mind if I keep you company tonight while Danie stands guard and keeps us safe? That’s all he does for you, right, Geo? He’s just here to keep you safe?”

Geo froze, unsure how to respond. He looked over at Danie, who was now leaning against their disabled Rover, glaring at them.

“So we’ll let him keep your body safe while I keep your heart.”

Geo stiffened. “Why would you say that?” he demanded.

“Because, caro, I have spent years travelling from place to place, and I can recognize the rare and valuable treasures found only in the most remote places. I’ve made a career on my luck, and guts. It’s only fitting that I find love the same way.”

“You’re insane!” Geo was pissed.

“Why? Because I can see a lifetime when I look at you?”

“Because you don’t know me, Andrea! How can you know a man in a day? Not even a day?”

“You can know a man’s heart, Geo. You showed me yours last night, and I want it. Danie showed me his as well.”

“But you don’t want his?” Geo was horrified at the thought that anyone wouldn’t value Danie. Danie was perfect.

“Did I say that, Geo?” Andrea cocked his brow. “Danie might be the only man whose heart could come close to your own. But his is closed, and yours is as open as the African sky at dawn.

“I’m drawn to beauty, caro, and your heart is the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in a very long time.”

“You’re delirious,” Geo huffed through the heat in his cheeks. Wide African sky or not, he felt closed in and cornered at the moment. Rising, he walked over to Danie.

“Make me feel better, Danie.” He leaned against the Rover, brushing shoulders with the man.

Danie stared at him for a few moments. “We’ll be fine, Geo. We always are. This is just a temporary thing. Christiansen will be here in a couple of days. It’s just like we’ve moved base camp. We’ve done it a million times, Geo. More than a million times.”

Geo pondered that. “It doesn’t feel the same without you, Danie,” he muttered under his breath.

Danie drew back. “You’ll always have me, Geo. You’ve always had me.”

“Maybe.” Geo shrugged and pushed off the fender. He picked up his rifle and moved to the perimeter of their camp. “One last check around. I’ll see if there’s more wood. Back in fifteen.” He didn’t wait for Danie’s approval, just slipped into the grass, letting his attention focus on the environment around him instead of the two men playing havoc with his mind back at camp.

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As soon as Geo slipped out of sight, Danie turned on the Italian.

“I want to know what you told him that made him so upset,” Danie snarled, yanking the man out of the chair by his shirt. And it *was* his shirt. Danie and Geo had both leant him clothes to wear. Andrea was broader and taller than Geo, so Danie’s shirts were a better fit, though still loose across the chest and shoulders. But Geo preferred his cargo shorts baggy and slung low across his hips. On Andrea they fit perfectly across his ass and modeled his package nicely. Not that Danie had been noticing that. Much.

“I simply told him that the two of you seemed to be in agreement. And since neither of you has claimed the other, there is no reason for me not to make the most of a very pleasant opportunity in the middle of a very unpleasant situation. I haven’t lied to anyone here.”

“What did you say, exactly,” Danie hissed with a shake.

“I said that I have waited my whole life to meet a man as beautiful and lovely as he is, and, as I am not a fool, I would do anything to have a chance at the heart of one of the two best men I’ve ever met at home or in my travels. I want Geo, Danie. And since you don’t seem to care beyond the duties of your



employment with his grandfather, I suggested that I was the better person to keep his heart not only safe, but singing.”

Danie stumbled back as if struck.

“You can’t have him!” Danie snarled, jerking the man forward again. “What right do you have to stumble into our lives and take over? All we’ve done is help you. All I’ve done is try and protect you! Why?” Danie felt tears forming in his eyes. Releasing Andrea to wipe a hand across his face, he almost missed the whispered response.

“Because, Danie— I want you, too. You *are* the second man whose heart I’ve fallen for. I want you, I want Geo... God, I want you both. And I know that you want me too. I wasn’t quite asleep last night when you and Geo had your talk. It’s a very small tent to have very private conversations in.”

The confession wrapped itself around Danie’s chest, squeezing the breath out of him. He opened his eyes to stare into Andrea’s hazel pair. There was no humor, no smirk, just a deep intensity that made his mouth dry and sent shivers down his spine. Dear God. *Forgive me Geo.*

Danie raised a hand to cup Andrea’s jaw, rubbing his thumb across a perfect sculpted cheekbone. The man shuddered, letting his lashes sweep closed as Danie yanked him close enough to cover the man’s mouth with his own.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

The campsite was empty of life when Geo finished his check of the surrounding area, night following swiftly on the heels of the setting sun. Wandering over to the fire to dump a final load of dead wood next to the blaze, he poked at the flames and considered making a fresh pot of coffee for the long night ahead.

A low moaning broke the silence of the camp, raising the hairs on the back of Geo's neck. *Andrea*. Geo tore across the packed earth of their camp and tore open the flap of the tent. *Fucking God*.

The bastards hadn't even noticed him. They could be fucking *dead*. Geo looked down at the rifle still clutched in his hand and then back to the pallet they'd made on the floor of the tent. He could just make them out in the gloom. Andrea was all naked olive skin, while Danie was shirtless with just a pair of shorts riding low on his hips. From this angle, Geo couldn't tell if they were unbuttoned or not, since Danie was currently curled around the photographer, sucking the man's cock!

God. Danie was slowly working Andrea's prick in long, slow, strokes of his tongue and hand. He knew what that felt like, and his own cock hardened in protest at being left out. He reached down, adjusting himself automatically. Seeing Danie with another man was like watching a train wreck in slow motion. Andrea moaned again, reaching his long fingers into Danie's hair, keeping him close. Geo almost lost it when Danie slid over the Italian's length until he'd buried his face into the man's dark curls. There was no holding Andrea back now, he was groaning and writhing across the blankets, muttering in Italian.

Geo watched Danie speed up, bobbing over the glistening member. His mouth was dry and his head hurt. They were beautiful together, moving against each other with such passion. Geo could see the connection of body and soul. He'd thought Danie's passion had belonged to him alone, even during the periods of time when they were apart; he had never believed Danie

had managed to replace him. He would have seen it in Danie's eyes when he stepped off the plane after a long school year away.

But this was different. The grip of Andrea's hands in Danie's own, the stroking fingers on Danie's face, the kisses Danie laid on the tender skin of Andrea's groin. They all spoke of a connection that was burning hot and bright with the speed of a South African grass fire.

"Ah, Danie! I need... I need... more! Please Danie." Danie grunted and rolled off the other man, reaching around for his pack. Geo knew.

"Need help finding something?" Geo couldn't stop himself. The bitter words tumbling over his lips were gone before he realized they were there.

Danie reared back like he'd been stabbed, and Geo considered it for a moment.

"Geo..." Danie's plea was shocked and a little desperate.

"Don't bother." Geo gripped the rifle in his hand, closing his eyes against the scene before him. Andrea was still stretched out in front of him, his cock still hard and glistening from Danie's mouth. Geo was sure there'd be a look of smug triumph in that bastard's face, so he avoided looking there.

"I'll take first watch. You two... Carry on." Geo yanked the flap back trying to maintain a dignified exit. "Fuck!" he screamed in the next second, finding himself yanked backwards onto the floor.

Andrea had him wrapped up, arms and legs entwined with his, keeping him from escaping. He'd rolled them over in his struggles to get free, and now he was completely pinned under the Italian.

"Don't struggle, caro," the man whispered in his ear, sending him into another frenzy of motion, trying to buck all that nakedness off his back.

"Geo, love. Stop." It was Danie kneeling next to his head that got him to stop. Danie was the one he wanted to fucking kill.

"Fuck off, Danie," he muttered into the bedding now soaked with his spit.

“Let him up, Andrea,” Danie murmured, and instantly Geo was released, which pissed him off further.

“You. Fucking. Ass. Hole. Danie Swart!” Free of the Italian, he rose to his knees, launching himself at Danie who was balancing on only his toes, squatting next to him. It was no contest, and Geo had a hand wrapped around Danie’s throat, tumbling him backwards. Using it to steady himself, he punched the man dead-on.

Andrea scrambled, throwing an arm across Geo’s chest to drag him away from a howling Danie, blood gushing from his nose. “Let me go, you fuckin’ snake!” Geo snarled, writhing in the photographer’s arms once more.

“Hush, caro. It’s okay... you don’t understand. We were waiting for you to join us... we just got... carried away...” Andrea winced, as if realizing he wasn’t helping.

“Ass. Holes. Both of you! Let me go, Andrea,” Geo cried out, furious. The entire situation was out of control, and now he was stuck out here between one cheating bastard of a boyfriend and his new squeeze.

“Dammit, Geo,” Danie cursed as he pressed a T-shirt against his nose. “I keep forgetting how fucking hard you punch. Shit, just settle down, okay?” He gingerly tested the cartilage in his nose and sighed in relief.

Geo wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or sorry that Danie’s nose wasn’t broken. He’d have to be content with enhancing Danie’s good looks with a set of raccoon eyes. The thought made him smile, which in turn made Danie look at him with suspicion.

“You always treat me like I’m a flower, Danie. But I’m a man. Apparently not man enough for you, but I’m certainly man enough for me.

“You know, I never believed Oupa when he told me all the tales of you running around with the tourists and staff. It never fit with what I knew about you... guess the joke’s on me.” Geo’s bravado failed him at the end, and his voice cracked.

“I guess for you I’m just a nice way to while away the afternoons out in the middle of the bush. But for *me* it was always more. I haven’t been with another man since I met you. So maybe I should thank you for presenting me with a front row seat to the Danie Swart show!”

Danie dropped the shirt, wiping his hand across his face, smearing a line of blood across one tan, impossibly beautiful cheek. Geo was on his side, Andrea curled around him, trapping his arms and legs with his own, so when Danie knelt down to lay in front of him, he had no defense. Not against the hand that cradled his face, stroked his hair, wiped away the tears as they formed in the corner of his eyes.

“Don’t be dof, Geo! You’re dead wrong about me, and we both know that this has nothing to do with us. I won’t say that the timing was perfect, but you wouldn’t be complaining if you were the one under Andrea, and I was walking in on you. Fuck, Geo, if that was the case, I’d have stripped down and be halfway to heaven right now.

“I thought we talked about this already, or did I just imagine you saying you wanted Andrea, too?” Danie stared at him intently, and Geo felt himself flush again.

“I think you...” he started to push back from Danie, but Geo couldn’t think; that was the problem. He let out a shuddering breath, and the arms around him tightened, pulling him closer.

Andrea whispered into his ear. “Caro, let it go for one night. You might say that the milk has been spilt, but is it so terrible to be desired by both of us?” He used Geo’s stillness to take advantage, stroking his stomach and working his finger under the cotton of his khaki button-up. Geo shivered, and Andrea’s lips joined in planting delicate kisses behind his right ear.

Danie used his distraction to come close once more. He cupped Geo’s face, gently kissing him, slipping a tongue between his lips. It was unfair. Geo never had any defense against Danie once his mouth came into play. He knew every single sensitive spot on Geo’s body by now, and he was happy to spend the long afternoons searching for more.

Andrea's lips had slid down his neck during Danie's assault on his senses, and were now worrying the skin at his throat, alternating between biting and sucking. Geo writhed, though for a thoroughly more pleasurable reason than just wanting to kill Danie. Geo followed that skittering thought, and was satisfied. The desire to kill was still there... he'd finish Danie off... later.

Somehow Danie had worked his shirt loose. One second it was unbuttoned with Danie's hands stroking his sides underneath the cotton, the next it was gone and he could feel Andrea's trailing fingers on his bare stomach. His gut clenched and he moaned into Danie's mouth.

Andrea shifted away, and Geo was suddenly on his back under both of them.

"Tell me now, caro, if you want me to stop," Andrea purred, gazing down at him with eyes shiny in the low light.

"Geo, tell us to stop, or let us go." Danie broke off his kissing and was gazing down at him with such a look of intensity that Geo's throat closed. He couldn't make a sound, only just managing a short nod. It was enough. The other men, obviously waiting to take advantage of his permission, leapt on his acquiescence. Suddenly it felt like there were multiples of four hands, two tongues, and two mouths.

Geo was in sensory overload. Teeth dragged across the skin of his belly while someone's tongue teased his left nipple. Hands first on his chest, then on a thigh, then running down his arms; he lost track of who they belonged to. Was it Danie easing his shorts off, or Andrea? Time was stuttering, slowing down, speeding up, then stopping completely when a warm, wet mouth covered the head of his penis, working its way down while a tongue painted the rim of his taint, probing his hole with the tip before moving upwards. The tongue disappeared long enough for the mouth to ease around his ball sac.

The fire racing over Geo stole his breath, stole his mind. He levered himself up enough to gaze down at the two heads working him over. It was Danie working his cock while keeping one hand rubbing a small circle over his

heart. Geo gulped. Andrea had moved between his legs at some point, hooking his knees over his shoulders.

*He could have missed all of this* was the last coherent thought for some time. It felt... oh, he felt so much.

A wave of raw emotion broke over him, and tears flooded his eyes. The attention from these two men felt like more than just sex. The tenderness in their touching, the intensity of their focus, all worked together to make Geo's heart hurt. He closed his eyes and let go.

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## CHAPTER SIX

Danie held Geo in his arms. Andrea lay snuggled up to both of them, wrapping one arm around Danie's shoulders and putting the other hand on Geo's hip, keeping them all connected. He felt the Italian nuzzle his neck and Danie turned to face him.

"Drea."

"Mmm. I like that," he murmured back. Danie smiled, kissing the other man's lips gently. The passion they'd unleashed over Geo spilled over and caught them all by surprise. Taking Geo apart, getting him to drop his walls, bringing him off twice before they'd finished with him, leaving him limp and exhausted before turning to each other... that was the obvious plan. But when Andrea rolled on top of him with unexpected strength and determination, frothing against him until they both needed more...

Danie could feel the burn of that hurried penetration, even now. Andrea had taken him at his word. Danie barely allowing any stretching before begging the Italian to take him. It had been years since Danie had bottomed for anyone. Geo's bottoming was a natural preference, and since they'd been together, Danie had kept his desires as a switch hidden from the younger man, not wanting him to feel like he wasn't giving Danie everything he needed. But Andrea knew just how to work him, hitting every button he had, finding new ones with every thrust of his elegant cock and the grip on his wrists.

Geo had just rolled over, curling up next to Danie, kissing him deeply as Andrea fucked him. It had been perfect. He was still hard when Andrea pulled out, rolling them over until he was on top, still groaning with displeasure until Andrea pushed lube and another condom into his hands. Those long hands had just pulled his legs back to his chest, presenting himself to Danie.

It was Geo who slid a finger into the man, working and stretching him until he was hard and leaking once more. And while Danie had eased himself into that velvety heat, Geo was matching him with his tongue and mouth, sucking down the man's length as Danie stroked in, pulling back off as Danie's cock retreated. They'd made the man a writhing mess by the time they'd both come,



collapsing in a tangled heap, Geo hovering above them stroking himself to his own finish, spraying them with his come.

Geo had found the bloody shirt, wiping them all down before wedging himself between Danie and Andrea, taking his customary spot in Danie's arms, where he still slept.

"Drea," he began again, pulling himself out of his reveries.

"Yes Danie?" There was just a tiny lilt of teasing in his voice.

"Do you do this... a lot?" Danie tried to keep his tone neutral and quiet.

"Ah... no, Danie. Like you, I tend to lead with my heart, so no. I don't. Never, actually." His fingers gently stroked Danie's shoulder as he spoke.

"How do you know that? That I don't?" It was completely dark in the tent now, and Danie was grateful for the cover that hid his face from the Italian. He could feel the intensity coming from the other man.

Andrea scoffed quietly, "You and Geo wear your hearts on your sleeves. No wonder his grandfather has been working you both over. It's as plain as the sun in the sky and the dirt under your feet that you're both mad for each other. I assume that if everyone isn't convinced you're already lovers, they believe it's just a matter of time.

He continued more softly. "It's a beautiful thing to see, Danie. I would give anything to see that look directed at me."

Danie couldn't resist. He reached across Geo to the other man, pulling Andrea's head close enough to kiss him deeply. Andrea sighed, relaxing into him. Danie felt waves of tenderness for the other man. He pulled back.

Andrea sighed. "It's okay Danie, you don't have to worry about me. I'm not as pathetic as this must seem. I'm really very happy with my life..."

Danie scoffed and pulled Andrea closer than before, his kiss demanding.

"Ge'roff!" The muffled protest from Geo, who was struggling to get out from underneath and between them, made them both laugh. They turned their

attention instead to the younger man, covering him with kisses and gentle bites until he was breathless, swatting at them both. “Stop, stop, stop!” he swore.

“Geo, caro...” Andrea purred. Danie was amused. He was now on the bottom of the pile, and Andrea had Geo pinned up against him, rubbing his rather nice erection along the top of Geo’s thigh. Geo was panting, and Danie could only assume that Andrea had put his talented fingers to use. He could just hook the strap of his pack with a pinky finger, carefully pulling it close enough to grab the supplies that Andrea would soon need.

Geo wiggled in his lap, sending Danie into orbit. God, if they kept that up he’d be finished before the pair even started.

“Danie,” Andrea whispered, “I think Geo is ready to learn what being with two men is really all about.” He grabbed the lube from Danie, and Geo arched backwards, clipping Danie on the chin with his head, and Danie laughed, throwing his arms around his beautiful man as Andrea worked him over with his mouth and fingers.

Geo’s moaning became frantic, morphing into whiny, incoherent pleas for Andrea to stop, to start, to go... he started howling when the other man popped up to give Danie a smirk before burying his face in Geo’s lap. He flipped a condom blindly in Danie’s general direction. *Lovely.*

It wasn’t the easiest thing to do with Geo surfing his chest, but he managed, rolling the rubber down and finding the slick rolling around next to them.

“Ready, Drea...” God, was he ready. They worked in tandem, flipping Geo over onto his chest. Geo immediately latched onto his mouth, biting Danie’s lips, invading his mouth with his tongue. Danie was distracted enough that he hadn’t felt Andrea’s hand on his cock, guiding the head of his penis to Geo’s entrance. It was soft and wet with lube, and he slid in easily, eliciting another moan from the man in his arms.

Geo struggled to sit up, drawing him in deeper. He let him take control for a moment, getting comfortable around Danie’s prick. God he loved this man.

Danie pulled him back down on his chest, giving him short little thrusts that were driving Geo mad with frustration.

“Don’t worry, caro, we’ll give you what you need,” Andrea whispered in Geo’s ear. Danie watched him stroke along Geo’s sweaty back before picking up his own condom. He lubed two fingers and gently inserted them next to Danie’s imbedded penis, gently loosening the muscle of Geo’s entrance further.

“So tight,” worried Geo, freezing until Danie resumed the soothing strokes down his back.

“We won’t hurt you, caro. We’ll take this slow, but one word and we stop, okay?” Andrea had slipped next to Geo, so he could look into his face and plant gentle kisses on his shoulder.

“No, don’t. I want... this,” Geo confessed, and Danie could imagine the blush that must have risen on Geo’s cheeks with his confession.

“No, caro. I won’t stop, not until we’re done with you and you’re begging for your release. We can keep you on edge all night long. Is that what you want, caro? Is that what you need from us?” The tone of Andrea’s voice had gone from solicitous to seductive to flat out wicked, and Danie could feel himself swept along with Geo.

Andrea moved back, a hand pushing Geo back down to lie against Danie’s chest, leaving the man’s ass fully exposed to Andrea’s ministrations. Danie slid his hand between them, wrapping it around Geo’s cock as a distraction. He felt Andrea’s prick slide over his hole and gently nudge his sac as Andrea added more lube to Geo’s hole, stretching it a final time before moving the head of his penis in position and giving it a little thrust.

Geo keened, rearing up as Andrea breached his entrance and slid deep alongside Danie. Danie couldn’t imagine what Geo was feeling. He’d never felt anything quite like this before. The heat and the pressure were lighting up all his nerve endings, and he vaguely wondered if he could talk Geo into topping him along with Andrea.

The thought that there should obviously be more opportunities with the Italian surprised him before slithering away as Andrea slid all the way in, chasing the breath from his lungs.

“Oh, Danie,” Andrea crooned, “our Geo feels so good, so tight, with you alongside me. How are you, caro?” He leaned into Geo, planting kisses wherever he could reach without moving too much.

“Move, move, move...” groaned Geo. His body was limp, draped across Danie’s chest, but his own cock was hard and twitching in Danie’s hand. Danie started slowly, stroking Geo’s shaft, relishing the silky skin, the spongy resistance as his thumb slid over the head, dipping into his slit to paint pre-come over the helmet. He could taste Geo on his tongue without much trouble; he’d had the real thing so many times in his mouth that his imagination wasn’t taxed. He loved this man, loved his body, and loved his heart. But in all the time they’d been together he’d never experienced this shaking, shuddering Geo, calling out to them, begging for their hands and pricks.

With his free hand, Danie stroked through Geo’s hair, pushing the sweaty strands from his face. He relaxed and let Andrea drive the sensations into his body, opening up to both men, playing the anchor for their pleasure. Geo groaned and whined, writhing against Danie until he started thrusting in counterpoint to Andrea. Geo really would make a lovely switch; he was certainly trying to top from the bottom here... well, maybe from the middle. Maybe that’s what it took for Geo to take charge.

They couldn’t last much longer. Geo was the first to spill his release, thrusting into Danie’s hand until his come spurted over Danie’s belly. The clenching of his pelvic muscles set off a chain reaction, spurring Andrea faster until his friction sent Danie over the edge. Andrea followed along seconds later.

Danie was so elated in the afterglow of his orgasm he started laughing, setting them all off.

“Holy fuck, Drea— that was glorious!” Danie, laughing, eased himself carefully out of Geo. Andrea was stripping them of used condoms and cleaning them all up.

“Oh, God,” Geo groaned. “Good thing there’s two of you and we don’t have to go anywhere tomorrow. I’m going to be closed for business for the foreseeable future, and you two are going to have to carry me around.”

“Caro, it will be a pleasure. And I promise, whenever you’re ready, Danie and I will be on our knees ready to service you, any way we can.”

“Oh, sounds nice. But not now. Sleep now. Blowjobs later. Much, much later.” Geo barely had the words out of his mouth before his breathing changed, Danie recognizing it as the first stages of sleep. Andrea returned to his original position next to them, though this time he kissed Danie thoroughly before closing his own eyes.

Danie lay awake in the dark, listening to the two of them breathe. He had no idea how to reconcile the competing emotions. All he knew was he wanted this feeling to last as long as it could, as long as they were together. Beyond that, he had no hope. Really, in that sense, nothing had changed for him except that he now had even more to miss.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Apart from an obvious soreness, Geo managed to wake refreshed. He was alone in the blankets. From the light inside the tent, he could tell it was still early. The gurgling of his stomach reminded him that they hadn't managed to eat last night. The intensity of their activities had pushed all thought of food from their minds. No one wanted to stop. In fairness, Geo suspected they were all of a similar mindset—the fear that once they stopped, it would be impossible to recreate the circumstances that had both Geo and Danie opening up their relationship far enough to invite Andrea in.

Geo felt fundamentally changed by the experience, and he wasn't sure what that meant for today and the days after. He stretched gingerly, taking inventory of tired and sore muscles. It wasn't bad except for the literal pain in his ass.

He carefully rolled to his knees, crawling around the limited space for his bag. The last thing he needed was to pull on his crusty shorts. Apparently they became indiscriminate in their cleanup at some point. He ran across the pair he'd worn yesterday and could barely bring himself to touch them long enough to stuff them into the deepest recess of the duffle.

His next cleanest pair retrieved and donned, Geo tugged on his socks and looked around for his boots, eventually finding one wedged under their bed and the other in the opposite corner of the tent.

He smirked, remembering the eagerness of both men as they stripped him, and exited the tent. Danie was crouching next to the fire, Geo's French coffee press at his feet. Andrea hovered over him with his nose stuck in a bag of Geo's favorite blend.

“Oi!” Geo cried, trying his best to sound irritated. “Hands off the merchandise!”

“Ah, caro...” Andrea purred, a brilliant smile on his face, “it's too late. We've already handled the merchandise, and I think we'll keep it.” He handed the coffee to Danie and crossed the distance between them, pulling him into a close embrace with a kiss as sweet as any he'd ever had.

Breathless, he pulled back, only to find himself swung around into Danie's strong arms. He enjoyed the moment, snuggled close with his head tucked under Danie's chin.

"Missed waking up with you," Geo whispered into the man's shirt. The hug tightened, and Geo knew Danie had heard him anyway.

"Mmm, me too. We wanted to let you sleep and bring you breakfast in bed. I guess we weren't that quiet sneaking out."

"Probably the giggling woke him," Andrea laughed and poked Danie in the side. He kissed Geo's hair before waving the pot of coffee under his nose. The perfume of dark French roast curled into Geo's nose, and he began to salivate.

"Oh, yeah, coffee. Gimme before you ruin it." Geo made a grab for the pot, but Andrea held it out of reach.

"What? I'm insulted by your insinuation that I would ruin coffee. I'm Italian! We have espresso in our veins!" His mock ire was ignored by Geo, who managed to rescue his pot in time to plunge it.

"That might impress me if this was Italian roast. As it stands, unless you have a Frenchman in your pocket, you're not much use to me. And frankly, if you do have a Frenchman in your pocket, it would explain a great deal about all the extra pairs of hands last night."

Danie burst out laughing at Andrea's pout and passed tin cups over to Geo to fill. The beverage was dark and smoky, steaming hot. Geo loved it like this, though the metal lip tended to give a little kiss of pain with the first sip.

Andrea pulled up another campstool to sit next to Geo. "Seriously, caro. How are you feeling this morning? I'm worried we tore something last night." Geo could feel the heat rush into his face. *Shit.*

"No, I feel okay. Sore, but no pain." He buried his face into the cup to avoid discussing his anatomy further with this beautiful man. Instead, he occupied himself by staring at Danie as he worked an iron skillet set over coals from their overnight fire. They used an old camp stove grill, balancing it on rocks to hover six inches or so above the coals. Danie had found their supply

of potatoes and onions, and the smell of them frying along with the unmistakable fragrance of bacon and biscuits toasting made Geo's stomach gurgle loud enough for Danie to turn, casting Geo such a look of affection that his breath stilled in his chest.

The early morning sun danced across the gold in the man's tousled hair. Danie didn't bother to do more than run his fingers through his short hair before rolling out of bed. Usually Geo would track him down later, running his own brush through it as he sat and drank coffee. This morning he had no idea where he'd even find his brush. The tent was a disaster, with half their things packed haphazardly in random tubs or bags. Geo hoped they wouldn't need anything in a hurry, because he had no idea where to begin.

Three plates of food appeared, balanced in Danie's large hands, and Geo wiped drool from the corner of his mouth, hoping no one had seen him. He loved when Danie cooked for him. Danie handed out the plates, pulling a bottle of red pepper sauce from the side pocket of his cargo shorts and passing it over to Geo.

Andrea raised his brow in disbelief, choking as Geo proceeded to shake it over every inch of food on his plate. He scooped the mixture between the biscuit halves and started shoving the mess into his mouth. Geo tried to keep the food from flying out of his mouth as he and Danie laughed at the look of horror on Andrea's face.

"Drea, this is Geo's secret. It's why he hasn't been swept up into another's arms before now. One dinner out and they realize he was raised by wolves and has hollow legs. He will eat for days without gaining an ounce, and unless you want to lose a finger, keep your hands away from his plate.

"Back at the compound his grandfather makes him dine in the kitchen, or if they have company he sends him out to eat in the kennels!" Geo paused long enough to flip Danie his favorite American salute. Andrea just cocked a brow and studied him like a bug.



“So then it’s good for us that he’s part animal, in and out of bed.” He smiled and turned his attention back to his own food while Geo choked for real.

Danie patted him on the back. “S’okay, Geo. You can eat anything of mine you want.”

Geo glared at him. “Don’t know, sounds like you’re afraid I might *bite* you. Wouldn’t want you to run the risk of losing something. Think I’ll keep my mouth to myself, thank you.” He huffed and went back to eating.

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After breakfast, Geo made a point of tearing apart the tent, airing the bedding and repacking both Danie’s and his own bags. The medical kit was tucked just inside the tent flap where it belonged, and they’d taken the time to inspect both rifles. Andrea used this time to climb on top of the disabled Rover, taking photographs across the veld.

Geo watched him for a while. “Hey! Andrea,” he called over to the man. The Italian swung around with a smile and waved. Geo wandered over with a metal case containing their satellite phones and solar charger. He hefted it up to the photographer before stepping onto the doorframe to raise his chin above the roof level.

“Here,” he said, flipping the case open and pointing. “Set this up. Like this...” He pointed out how the array unfolded so the collectors were now pointing up. He plugged their phones into the leads and pulled a couple of bungee cords out of his back pocket.

Andrea was fascinated as he watched the younger man work to secure the equipment to the roof, threading the cords through metal loops on the case before attaching them to the luggage racks. Geo smiled at the question in Andrea’s eyes. “In case of rhinos. We’ve already lost one unit that way. Oupa never lets Danie forget it. Since we’re stuck, I thought we might as well make the most of a nice day.”

“Aren’t all the days nice out here?” Andrea asked, gazing around in awe.

Geo grunted and hopped down to the ground. “Mostly. One day in paradise is much the same as the next. The trick is to not forget that it *is* paradise. Otherwise you become jaded and nothing is ever beautiful enough again.”

“Hmm... I’ll think on it, caro. But from where I stand, it is not Africa itself that is paradise; it is the treasures one finds there. The true beauty can be found here, in you.” Geo rolled his eyes. *Save me from bad Italian poets.* He shook his head and smiled at the man grinning like an idiot.

“Danie! I’m going for water!” Geo called out across the empty campsite, slinging his rifle over a shoulder and grabbing two empty five-gallon containers.

He’d gone about three hundred yards into the bush when Danie popped out to his right. “Geo, what have I said about heading off on your own?” Danie looked stern behind his sunglasses, his accent thicker than ever. Geo decided now wasn’t the time to be smart.

“One of us is going to have to be alone at some point.” Geo was trying to be reasonable.

“Why? Drea can just as easily take pictures while you pick up sticks and I haul water. It’s safer that way.” Danie took the empty jugs away from him with a frown.

“No, we’ll be leaving the campsite vulnerable, and I’m really not in the mood for another game of rhino in the tent.”

“That happened once.” Danie folded his arms across his chest making Geo sigh. *Stubborn.*

“Once is all I need, I’m a fast learner. We’re smack in the middle of their range; I’ve seen signs of them all over the area, and they’ll have their young with them. I’m just as happy leaving Andrea on top of the Rover with my phones, out of harm’s way.’

“Maybe he’s out of harm’s way, but you’re not,” Danie persisted.

“I have my rifle.”

“On your back, Geo! Not much help if you accidently step into the path of a charging animal. Please don’t be stupid now, of all times. We always work as a team. It keeps us safe...” Danie moved closer sliding his palm across Geo’s face, cupping his cheek. “I need you to be safe, Geo.” He gently kissed him before stepping back— unrelenting once more.

Geo sighed, looking back towards the camp. “Fine. I’ll go back and get him. Meet you at the watering hole. Can you manage that on your own or do you need an escort?”

Danie considered the question for a moment, before smirking. “Go get Andrea, but hurry. I think I’ll enjoy letting him get muddy for a change.” He took the empty water containers, disappearing back into the bush.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Danie, was a hundred feet from the watering hole. Given the variety of prints at the water's edge from overnight, he deduced that it was a primary resource for the local animal populations. He identified several varieties of antelope, at least three unique sets of rhino tracks, and what looked like a leopard in the mix.

The water had been stirred into a rich, reddish-brown of African clay by the animals, not worth the time and effort it would take to make potable. Fortunately, it was fed from a nearby water source. Yesterday he'd carefully worked his way up a rocky outcropping, tracking the stream as it disappeared under the gravel and sand and bush, reappearing further away up the side of a rockfall. He found himself digging through the loose rocks until he'd uncovered the source of the stream that fed the mud hole below, then covering it back up to keep the larger animals away.

Today his job was clearing through the loose shale and boulders, working them out of the wet soil until the area around the spring was free of debris. The flow of water was slow, but pure enough that they could either boil it or add chemicals. It would depend on how long it took to collect.

This time when he uncovered the spring, he built a mini-reservoir with a piece of plastic sheeting lined with shale. It created a basin deep enough to create a constant flow via rubber tubing into water jugs carefully perched below on a flat rock jutting out of the ground. All Danie had to do was monitor them occasionally to make sure they didn't shift or overflow. So far it was working like a champ. He couldn't wait to show this off to Geo and Andrea when they got here.

Danie glanced at his watch. It had been over twenty minutes since Geo left for camp.

A gnawing at his gut had Danie abandoning his water project, automatically moving his rifle quietly off his shoulder, sliding the bolt back, and checking to see if the shell was properly chambered before cradling the gun in his hand.

He paused, slowing his breathing and sending his senses outwards, listening for the insects and birds that he'd become accustomed to while he worked. It was a flock of widow birds, exploding from the bush several hundred feet to his left, tails waving like black flags of surrender, that drew his attention, freezing the blood in his veins. Danie silently disengaged the safety, easing deeper into the grass to investigate.

He slowly circled around the watering hole. It seemed likely that whatever had caused the commotion would be centered on the only water for miles. The fine hairs on the back of his neck and across his forearms tingled with electricity, his instincts screaming out danger around him. It felt... human: something out of step with the natural order of the bushveld.

Out here, living and dying was a perfectly choreographed ballet. You couldn't spend any time here without becoming inured to that reality. Survival of the fittest wasn't just a slogan. It was necessity for the health of entire ecosystems. Only man's interference could send things spinning wildly out of control.

Last summer, Geo had just finished a course in comparative religions and had spent hours describing the various points of each to Danie as they drove across the veld. The Taoists seemed a closer fit to how Danie viewed this land. Or maybe it was Buddhists?

He reached up to finger the silver disk that Geo had given him, etched and enameled on both sides with a yin and yang, symbolizing balance in all things, before remembering that he wasn't wearing it. Danie had had the gift mounted inside a circle of platinum before hanging it from a chain. He wore it around his neck every day that Geo was gone. Not that he was sentimental, not really... though he'd tucked it away in a tiny leopardwood box before leaving to pick Geo up at the airport.

He pushed his feelings for the other man aside, focusing on his surroundings as he worked himself onto a slight rise overlooking the water. Below him on his belly in the mud, was a man sucking in great gulps of cloudy water. *He won't be feeling well soon.*

Danie kept hidden, sighting him through the scope on his rifle to get a better look. Unlike the first moment he saw Andrea, huddled in their campsite, he wasn't feeling any impulse to reveal himself or give aid. There were too many things wrong with this picture.

From the back, the stranger looked a little shorter than Danie himself, wiry and in fairly new clothes. He was a tourist, or a stranger to the bush— that much was certain. He wore trainers on his feet, not sturdy boots that protected the feet and ankles from injuries and snakebites.

The khaki shorts still showed knife-sharp creases along the backs of his thighs, and he wore a safari vest that had risen up his back far enough to reveal a handgun slipped into the back of his waistband. That was more than a little disturbing.

Danie looked around to see if he could spot a rifle. It was risky to go into the bush without a long-range weapon for defense. There was nothing around the man that showed that he was prepared for this environment, not even a hat to keep sunstroke away, or a canteen to carry any water with him when he left.

Danie glanced at his watch again. Thirty minutes. Something was wrong, or maybe Andrea had managed to seduce Geo with that promised blowjob. He gritted his teeth at the image, annoyance surging through him. Even if they had, they could be showing up any time, heading straight into the path of the stranger below.

It wasn't worth the risk. Danie slid quietly back, retracing his steps until he was in position to intercept the man if he headed towards their camp.

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Geo watched Danie disappear into the brush and sighed. Danie was being overprotective as usual, but that didn't mean he was wrong. If he wasn't watching over the campsite, even from a distance, then Andrea truly was on his own. In the short time Geo had known the man, he'd pegged Andrea as a flighty artist. It was surprising that he'd lasted this long in one piece. Well, almost one piece. The arm was still looking raw, and not just a little angry. Andy needed antibiotics and he needed them soon.

Geo turned back, following his tracks to their temporary camp. He'd made it almost all the way back, practicing his tracking skills and moving through the bush. He had visions of sneaking up on Andy from behind and scaring the living hell out of him.

It was a game he'd played with Oupa growing up, learning how to sneak through the bush undetected by either man or beast. He'd only managed to sneak up on Oupa once growing up. To this day, Oupa still swore he'd been distracted by one of the other guides who had escorted them that day, but Geo knew better. His grandfather had been standing staring out across the veld, looking for him in the wrong direction.

Geo had used a grazing herd of antelope and a bush fowl to provide a diversion. He'd flushed the bird into the path of the antelope in such a way that no one could pinpoint the disturbance. He then circled back and had managed to jump the old man from behind. It was the best day of his young life. Now he continued his game, quietly working his way from cover to cover until he was only a short distance from the camp, but close enough that he could still see Andrea's back. The Italian was lounging on the top of the Rover. He laid still, an arm flung across his eyes, shielding them from the late morning sun.

*Completely ruins the spirit of the game. I could walk straight up to him and say "boo" before he'd notice.* Geo was about to do just that when he heard a rustling in the bush, followed by the quiet murmur of voices.

Slightly ahead of him and to his left, Geo could just make out the profiles of at least two men. He watched as they settled down behind a screen of grass and shrubs, gesturing at Andrea, their whispers floating just out of hearing.

His breath froze in his chest, adrenaline pumping; these men were hunting, and the only prey in view was Andrea. Geo slid back as quietly as he could. He was too close to the men to effectively ambush them. One wrong move and he'd be the one being hunted. He bit his lip, checking his watch. Danie would be expecting them both back at the watering hole soon. If nothing else, Geo had to make sure that Danie didn't stumble into the middle of this.

He'd backtracked almost to the water when the shouting started. Any thoughts of getting help fled as Geo tore through the grass at top speed.

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## CHAPTER NINE

“Hallo, my vriend. Is jy verloor?” Danie stepped out from behind the tangle of trees and bushes surrounding the watering hole. He’d waited until the stranger had drunk his fill, sitting back onto his feet in preparation to rise, not much interested in letting him have the advantage.

The moment Danie asked if he was lost, the man spun on his knees reaching for his gun. *Simplifies things.* Danie thought. He was prepared for the movement, kicking him in the chest and knocking him backwards onto the muddy bank. The gun sailed out of his hand into the middle of the pond beyond reach, giving Danie time to level his own rifle at the man.

“Wait, wait! I don’t speak African! Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! I’m a friend!” The man wailed in panic, his eyes shifting back and forth, trying to find either rescue or escape.

Now that he was on his back, Danie could see a strong resemblance to one of the men in Drea’s photograph. His brown hair was thin and shaggy, hanging around his ears in uneven strands. His eyes were bloodshot, and any visible skin between the grey-and-black bristles was sallow. He looked unwell, and given the quantity of fetid water he’d just drunk, Danie wasn’t surprised.

“Well this is your lucky day, *friend*. I speak English just fine. So do you mind telling me what you’re doing all alone in the middle of the bush?”

The man blanched when the rifle remained trained on his chest. He glanced over his shoulder; the only evidence left of his gun was the slowly dispersing rings spreading out across the water. He sighed, looking resigned.

“Uh... trouble with the jeep. They sent me to find water...” He trailed off as he looked into Danie’s face. Whatever he saw there drained the last of the color from his face.

“Without any way to carry water back? Seems a little impractical,” Danie intoned flatly. “So where are your two friends?” Danie continued to stare the man down.

“Um... friends?” he stuttered, trying to ease away from Danie but sliding deeper into the mud, pulling a hand out with a squelching sound.

“Mmm hmm. The other two—the ones who sent you for water... for the... jeep?” Danie prompted. He didn’t have time to wait for this man to break. He needed to speed things up; the other two from the photo must be close by, which meant that Andrea and Geo were vulnerable.

“Uh, umm... yeah. They’re back where we— uh, um... broke down.” Sweat formed on his brow, rolling off his forehead and dripping onto his shirt. Danie didn’t think he could look suspicious if he tried. Wiping a muddy hand across his face, the man continued, “I could sure use your help friend if you don’t mind lowering that...” he cajoled, waving a finger at the barrel of the rifle, which Danie ignored.

“We’re looking for our buddy. We got... um, separated, and then we had the problem with the... um thing... Maybe you seen ’im? An I-talian kid?” Now he was just trying to look innocent and sincere. Danie resisted the urge to roll his eyes as the man continued. “He just went off into the brush with just his camera. We’re trying to find him, make sure he’s okay.”

“And how far is your base camp?” Danie gave a quick glance at his watch. They were definitely late. He’d tuned out the torturous tale being spun for his benefit, and so only caught the last part.

“He was kind of delirious...” The man trailed off, wriggling deeper into the muck with his squirming to get free. He was lying, of course; even before he started trusting Andrea, Danie had believed his version of events. The Italian’s body language as he shivered in terror was practically screaming his own innocence. This one, however, hadn’t said a single true word.

Andrea was still in danger, and, by extension, Geo. There was only one thing left to know: where were the other men now? He wasn’t going to get it from this man’s lying mouth. His only hope was to watch for his tell.

*No time like the present.*

Danie tried his best to keep his expression bland and potentially helpful. “Why don’t you take me to your vehicle? I’ll take a look at it and see if we

can't get you out of here." He paused, giving the other man a chance to relax, thinking that Danie had fallen for his bullshit. "Where did you say you left it?"

The man instantly whipped his head around, looking slightly south of the camp. He turned sheepishly back, "Um... it's... I'm..." It was enough. If they were there, Danie would find them, but first things first.

The man was still blustering when the rifle butt struck him on the chin, leaving him out cold, lying across the bank. Danie paused long enough to strip him of anything useful or dangerous.

"Hope you're awake before the dinner rush... *friend.*"

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Geo's heart skittered. He'd worked his way to the top of the outcropping above their camp, the one that Danie had waved from. He had a perfect view of the action below and what he was seeing turned his stomach and made his skin crawl. There were two men in the middle of their camp. Geo didn't recognize either one, but it hardly mattered since their intentions were obvious.

Andrea was lying face down on the packed earth next to the Range Rover. One of the men knelt on his back keeping his arms twisted behind his back. Even from this distance Geo could make out Andrea's cursing and struggling to get free.

Geo considered his options. He had the range with his rifle. He could take out the man waving his own weapon at Andrea's head, though there was no guarantee that he wouldn't get off a round of his own, and Andrea was much closer to the end of that barrel than Geo could risk. It was bad enough that a bright red bloom was soaking the white bandage around the man's arm; Geo couldn't bear the thought of hurting him more.

The man with the rifle was tall. He towered over the scene in faded safari gear, the khaki cotton almost bone white. He had a bush hat pulled low over his sunglasses and sprouted a sparse beard, like he hadn't shaved in a week. His high-powered rifle was pointed at Andrea's head.

Whatever he wanted, Andrea wasn't giving it up. In apparent frustration, the man stalked over and kicked Andrea in his injured arm. The howl that rose up as blood gushed through the saturated bandage and pooled in the dust made Geo sick. He couldn't bear to leave him like this. With the other man distracted, it was his best chance. He'd have cover if he came up from behind the Rover.

It looked like they'd pulled Andrea off the truck and onto the ground. Geo looked at the satellite phones mournfully. They should have kept them on them. Both he and Danie knew better. When Oupa found out, they'd never hear the end of it.

If he snuck up behind the vehicle, he'd have half a chance to slip one of the phones off the roof before retreating back in to the bush to call Oupa. They needed help. God only knew what Danie was up to, but he probably wouldn't come after him for another half-hour or forty-five minutes.

*He probably thinks we're enjoying a nooner without him.* Geo sighed and made his way backwards until he was under cover and moving silently into position.

Pressed belly flat against the ground, he was blind. He could hear Andrea cursing in Italian and the other man yelling at him in English to shut up and lay still, but with such a thick accent that Geo wasn't sure what else he wanted. The man pinning Andrea was communicating in staccato bursts of grunts and curses, as the photographer hadn't stopped struggling.

The only chance they had was to call for help and for him to make it back to Danie in once piece. His one shot to save Andrea from a violent beating or worse was to create a distraction in the hope that the Italian could break free. He held his breath and waited for another burst of vitriol from the African before launching himself upright, grabbing the phone, and taking off into the bush like a shot.

Geo could hear the snapping of dried branches and shouting coming from behind him as he tore through the underbrush. Rifle fire cracked, sending a

flock of birds exploding from the trees and breaching the noise of blood pounding in his ears.

Drawing danger away from Andrea seemed to be working, but the stranger in pursuit wasn't a novice when it came to shooting animals in the wild. He'd felt the heat of that bullet sing past his ear before embedding to the soft bark of a thorn tree. He dropped down and scrambled under the branches of a bush, thorns tearing furrows into his tan skin. *Crap.*

He hadn't had a moment to make the call, and time was running out. He could hear the man drawing closer, still heading in a trajectory that would miss Geo by twenty feet or so if he remained hidden. He had to try. As quietly as he could, Geo powered up the phone. The telltale electronic ping of activation sounded to his ears like a bullhorn announcing his location to the entire continent. He held his breath, listening intently for the sound of footsteps coming his way.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging. His fingers shook as he tried to dial his grandfather's phone. He wrapped the phone in his shirt, trying to muffle the sounds of it connecting. It was foolish, he knew, wouldn't make much of a difference in the great scheme of things; but he felt a little more in control, and his shaking eased.

He couldn't hear the man, but he could feel him stalking him. Waiting for him to move or breathe or make a sound that would draw him into the man's sights. He slid the phone over his ear and heard the urgent voice of his grandfather calling his name.

"Shhhhhh! Oupa" He whispered urgently, wrapping himself in a ball, hunching over as much as possible so the phone was buried between his knees, driving the sound into the red dirt. "Listen, just listen. They're here, at least two men. They've taken Andrea hostage in the camp, and one of them is tracking me. He knows what he's doing. I don't know where Danie is... you just..." Geo froze, instantly muting the connection.

He left the phone on, hidden under the bush, giving Oupa a signal to find, but he couldn't risk anything else. He'd heard the snapping of a small twig. An

animal would have kept moving, but the sudden stillness pointed to the man hunting him. He was so very, very close; too close to run. Geo huddled even smaller and prayed.

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Danie slid through the grass listening for any sign of Geo, who could remain undetectable when he wanted to be. He was about a hundred yards from camp when the howling started. It turned his blood cold. It wasn't Geo. He knew Geo's pain, his voice. No, this had to be Andrea, which surprisingly for him wasn't the least bit better. Danie pushed those thoughts away and focused on what he was hearing.

There were two distinct voices. One was obviously the Italian. The other? Likely one of the other men from the photograph... which left two missing: Geo and the third man. He crept slowly forward until he had a view of half the campsite.

From this angle, he could see the front end of the Rover off to his right and a little beyond it he could see a pinned Andrea struggling weakly against the man sitting on him. He was facing the opposite direction, and the man on top of him was keeping hard pressure on him, keeping his arms pulled up high behind him. It was a brutal hold.

He couldn't see the rest of the campsite clearly enough to risk a rescue from where he was. He couldn't spot Geo, which didn't mean he wasn't being held out of sight. He needed to make it back up to the higher ground, regain the advantage. Moving under cover, praying that Andrea could hang on, Danie eased back into the bush.

It felt like a lifetime, though it likely only took a few minutes to get in position on the rocky outcropping overlooking the campsite. Someone had already used this spot; there was fresh sign, scuffs in the rocky soil, and a handprint in the red dust. God he hoped it was Geo's.

He focused on the Range Rover for a moment. Geo must have set up the satellite phones to charge, though the solar panels looked wrong— as though half folded up or damaged in a struggle. He could see only one phone still

attached to the charger. A quick glance at the handprint and he could guess what Geo would have thought, seeing the phones so clearly, the vehicle providing cover from the rest of the campsite. He was tempted to go back down and grab the other phone for himself.

It looked like the rest of the area was clear. From this angle he could see a short way into the open flap of the tent. It was too small to hide movement from someone searching their things. It was possible that Geo was incapacitated in some way and hidden from view, but from this vantage point it looked like Andrea and his captor were alone in the camp. He turned his attention to the man using both hands as he struggled to control the weakly writhing Italian.

There was a military-style pistol grip sticking out of the back of his khakis that worried Danie a great deal. At any minute that man could lose patience with Andrea and decide he had a more efficient method of subduing him. It pushed Danie to act now, before Geo arrived back at camp and embroiled himself in the middle of this mess.

Danie raised the rifle and carefully aimed, checking the area one last time through his scope before firing. He watched blood spray into the air in a fine red mist as the bullet caught the man in the shoulder. The force of the bullet spun him off Andrea and into the dirt. He roared in pain, scrambling to reach behind for his gun.

Andrea had rolled over and was grappling with the man to control the pistol. *Fuck*. There wasn't much Danie could do while Andrea was in the way; he was regretting not picking a more permanent placement for the bullet. Sliding down the face of the rise and ignoring the scrapes along his back, he managed to keep his feet and propel himself forward until he was within a few feet of the struggling men.

"I wouldn't, *friend*," Danie hissed. "Kick the gun over to me. Drea, are you okay?"

Andrea was gasping in pain, trying to move his arms gingerly. His shirt was bloody from his reopened wound, and the side of his face was covered

with blood from the impact of the bullet. He looked pissed. “I’ll live. Fucking bastard kicked me.” He reached carefully for the handgun lying in front of him. His assailant was now settled on his knees, hands held in front of him as Danie moved closer.

“What a mess.” Danie muttered under his breath. He held out a hand to Andrea to give him some leverage to stand, all the while he keeping his eyes and rifle trained on the other man.

The man was still bleeding freely, and Danie knew he’d have to do something about that soon unless they wanted a body on their hands. *Always so much easier to hand them over still breathing.* The authorities were less likely to make a fuss over a little bodily damage.

“Friend of yours, Drea?” he asked. Andrea barely looked able to stand. He was as pale and shaky as the other man, and twice as bloody.

“Karl’s just the muscle. Botha— or Ronson I guess, just took off after someone. I was hoping it was you. I haven’t seen the third one yet...” He trailed off, wincing as he gripped his arm.

“Keep that on him, and shoot if he gives you any trouble. I need to get something to stop all this bleeding, then I’ll go find Geo. He can keep out of trouble on his own, but eventually he’ll be back here trying to rescue us. Can’t let him have all the fun, can we?” Danie’s words were light, but the tone was wrong even to his own ears. Andrea gave him a sympathetic look before wincing again.

Danie ducked into the tent to grab the red backpack where Geo had the medical supplies stashed. He paused a moment, going in deeper for his own duffle. In a side pocket was his collection of tape, string, wire, and *yes!* He found his assortment of zip ties. Opening the package of longer straps, he extracted three before heading back to Andrea.

“First things first, Drea.” Danie knelt behind the other man. “What’s your name, *friend*? And while you’re thinking of a lie to tell me, please note that Andrea will happily put a bullet into that head of yours if you move your little pinky. Yes? If you play nice, I’ll see what I can do about stopping the bleeding



in your shoulder. Otherwise, I'm not too concerned about you living to see another day. Do we understand each other?" He poked the man in his wounded shoulder, until he got a grunted response.

Satisfied, Danie quickly zip tied the man's hands behind his back before strapping his feet together, as well. He wasn't moving very quickly now. Andrea eased into a nearby chair and laid the gun in his lap. He was pale and shaking, and Danie wished Geo was there... for so many reasons. He focused on the chore at hand and wrapped the wounds of both men in pressure bandages. It would have to do for now. Danie's head and heart both screamed at him to find Geo.

"Go Danie. Go get him. I'll babysit." Andrea was still drawn, but his color was slowly returning.

Danie handed him a warm Coke from Geo's medical bag and nodded. "I'll drag him into the shade. I think he'll be fine out of the sun for now. You should go lie down."

"I'll think about it." Waving him away with the Coke, Andrea settled deeper into his chair, taking a sip, grimacing at the taste. Danie felt himself smile, and he leaned down, pressing his lips against the man's brow. "Be well, Drea." The Italian looked surprised and a little pleased.

"Be well, Danie. Go get our boy," he murmured, turning his attention to the glaring man laying still in the shade of the tent.

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## CHAPTER TEN

Geo held his breath. The grass and leaves sheltering him itched. He wanted to scratch his nose. His left foot was going numb. He could feel a burn running through his back muscles as he kept himself wrapped into a tight ball. He ignored all of that and focused instead on the sounds around him.

That was the real problem. It had fallen silent. Even the whirring of insects had faded away, which meant that either his hearing had failed completely, or the man was virtually on top of him. He couldn't risk any movement that would identify his location. *Crap.*

"I think it's time to give up this little game, don't you?" The voice was rich and deep, the Afrikaner accent had a sultry quality. This was a man used to seducing as much as he forced. Geo tried to swallow. "I could just shoot you where you are, but there's not much sport in that. You were doing so well, too." He now sounded a little regretful, and it brought to mind all those low-budget horror films that Geo had watched in the dorms about kidnapped co-eds turned into human prey for depraved hunters, turned out into the woods with their false head starts.

Right now Geo didn't feel very optimistic that he was about to be rescued. *Where are you Danie? Oupa?*

"I'm losing patience here. I need to finish this little farce and get back to my recovery operation. So if you would be so kind...?"

The barrel of a rifle eased the few branches away, leaving Geo in plain view. He couldn't help himself, and he looked up into the eyes of the man Danie had identified as Ronson. They were a cold steel-grey. The tight smile playing across the man's lips never reached them.

He was almost handsome. Geo could see that in the right circumstances he would attract attention. He had an air of mystery and danger that was always a potent combination over drinks in a Cape Town bar. Geo wondered what it was that made him think of that, given that he was likely within moments of his last breaths.

“Oh, this is interesting.” The man’s brows flew up in surprise as he got a good look at him. “I thought I was hunting bush fowl, and I manage to capture a peacock in my trap, instead. How delightful. And inconvenient...” He motioned with his rifle for Geo to rise, stepping back as he did so.

“I saw you two summers ago. You attended a fundraiser in Johannesburg with your grandfather. You’re the next Christiansen heir. Pride of the Veld, apple of the old man’s eye, savior of the reserve to hear the old man brag about you. Some sort of environmentalist, aren’t you?” He made the word sound dirty, as if Geo was a disease or a foul substance tracked in on the bottom of your shoe.

“Why are you here?” Geo really wanted to understand. He’d been worrying that question in the back of his mind since Andrea had appeared. It never made much sense to him that a man like Ronson would bother masquerading as a guide. He’d assumed that poaching was the reason, but that wouldn’t explain dragging the Italian into this mess, unless he needed the illusion of a legitimate cover.

“I misplaced something, which I’ve since found, thanks to your friend. He was just a convenient excuse to be out here, searching. Finding you, however, poses an interesting problem for me, Christiansen.

“I only have a few more things to clean up and then I can be on my way, but I think I can use you... at least for the moment. I’d recommend keeping your nose out of my business and doing exactly as I say. By the look of you, I imagine you’re used to being under another man’s... thumb. So let’s see how well trained you are, shall we? Let’s go.”

Geo wanted to puke. He only hoped that Danie was somewhere safe, that he would stay hidden until Oupa and his men arrived. He worried about Andrea, about the arm, about the missing third man. He was less worried about himself at the moment, his blood too valuable to be wasted in the bush, apparently.

They worked their way back to camp, and Geo had to admire Ronson’s skills. He knew what he was doing. It also took a little of the sting out of being

discovered. They took a circuitous route, backtracking several times until Ronson was sure that they weren't being followed themselves. Geo didn't bother telling him that Danie was far better at this than even he was. They wouldn't have spotted Danie unless he'd wanted them to... though Geo wasn't sure what he wanted. No, not true.

He knew the “who, what, where, and whens” of his desire— he just didn't think he'd get a chance for any more of it in this lifetime. He wanted Danie and Andrea to have that chance, even if he couldn't be with them when they took it. *I wonder when I started thinking of them both as part of us?*

“Step lively, Christiansen. No need to pretend on my account. I don't think we'll worry too much about being subtle.” He put his beefy hand on Geo's neck, squeezing it hard before dropping back a step. The hand was replaced with the barrel of the rifle now nestled at the base of his skull, settling nicely into the notch at the top of his spine. A shiver ran down his back, and Geo swallow hard before stepping into the camp.

“Stop!” Ronson hissed in his ear. The scene in the camp had changed during the time that Geo had been playing the game of hare and hound with Ronson. Andrea now sat holding a pistol pointed in their direction. Geo remembered Andrea's confession that he couldn't shoot and grimaced. Hopefully he could bluff.

Geo looked him over. Even from this distance the scent of blood still hung heavy in the air. Andrea was covered in it. His arm looked freshly bandaged, and Geo recognized Danie's handiwork with the surgical tape. At his feet, stretched out on the ground, was the other man, his shoulder wrapped in another pressure bandage, already seeping red at the edges. That one could go fuck himself, Geo thought, still pissed at all the pain he had subjected Andrea to earlier.

“Andrea. I see you managed to make yourself a little more comfortable,” Ronson rumbled from behind. “But I think we both know a charade when we see one.” He shoved Geo forward.

“Unless you’re interested in seeing the inside of our young friend’s head, I suggest that you lower the gun and toss it into the bush— behind the tent there. Any move in my direction will result in me shooting first this one, then you.” Geo watched the wheels in Andrea’s mind spin furiously, looking for another solution. The man glanced down.

“I really don’t care if you shoot Karl or not. I won’t be taking him with me if he’s going to slow me down, so feel free.” Andrea deflated.

“Geo, are you all right?” Andrea whispered, still clutching the weapon pointed at them. He was brave; Geo would give him that.

“Andrea, I’m fine, but he needs me. He won’t hurt me. I’m worried about you. Don’t give him your gun!” He would have said more, but the rifle jammed into him painfully.

“You’re not helping your friend any, Christiansen. Now...” he turned his attention back to Andrea. “I’d like you to consider your options very carefully Andrea. We both know that you can’t hit me with a bullet. You’ve already said as much to me. I think we can wrap this up very quickly with your cooperation, and in the end you and your friend might both just live.” He paused, waiting for some signal from Andrea.

“What do you want?” Andrea sounded tired, resigned, and it made Geo’s chest ache.

“I need your camera, Andrea. You have some pictures that would be inconvenient if they came to light.” Ronson was practically purring, trying to woo the other man into complying. It made Geo sick.

“Why? What?” Andrea was genuinely confused, and Geo wished Danie was there to see it. If there were any lingering doubts about Andrea’s innocence, these last few moments would have removed them.

“The plane crash, Andrea. It’s one of mine, and unfortunately it was carrying something very, very important to me. When it went down, I only had a very general idea of its location. There was no flight plan, no transponder. Who would have thought that a wildlife photographer stumbling around the bush would find it for me? I should have done this months ago!” The man’s

laugh raised hairs on Geo's arms, and he could tell Andrea was very upset at the news.

“Okay, David. Just, just let me get it. You can have my camera if you just take your friend and leave. I don't want anyone else getting hurt because of my stupidity.”

“Well, Andrea,” Ronson chuckled, “that's the first sensible thing I think I've ever heard you say. Let's start by putting down your gun.”

Geo tensed all of his muscles, desperate to leap across the camp and throw himself at Andrea. He couldn't possibly be so stupid that he'd believe this man. He finally couldn't contain himself.

“Don't Andrea. He won't let any of us live. Don't kid yourself, Andy. The only chance you have is if you shoot him. Just shoot him now. I'd rather be dead than used as a tool against my grandfather. Just. Shoot. Him!” By the end Geo was screaming at the Italian, trying to get him to snap out of it. Geo needed him to be brave enough to save himself and Danie. He needed Andrea to act.

Flinging himself backwards as hard as he could, Geo tangled himself with the man behind him, the rifle now wedged between them, as much of a danger to Ronson as it was to himself. He was vaguely aware of Andrea's panicked cries echoing across the bush.

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Andrea's shout of horror tore through Danie. He'd picked up Geo's trail, and the sign wasn't boding well. There were two separate sets of tracks. Recognizing Geo's boot prints was easy, but it was a set left by a heavier, bigger man that worried him. The tracks synched with Geo's perfectly, leading Danie to believe that Geo was now a hostage. He tracked them on a route that was difficult to follow at times, until they made a beeline straight for camp.

Danie heard the struggle before he saw it. He slid into the camp just a few feet from where Geo lay entangled with Ronson in a struggle for his life. They were both trying desperately to control a rifle, and, thus, the outcome of their fight. As Danie watched, Ronson wedged a knee under Geo that allowed him

the leverage to flip him over onto his back. But he still hadn't wrested control of the weapon from Geo; the rifle was still being yanked back and forth between them, any shot potentially fatal to either.

Danie shivered. It was now or never. He raised his rifle and jammed it against Ronson's head. The man froze with a hiss, and Geo was able to yank the rifle out of his face at last.

"Think about your next move very carefully, Ronson. At this minute, no magistrate in the land would convict me if my trigger finger slipped and you found my bullet lodged in your brain. I believe there's a bounty on you dead or alive, Ronson?"

"You have a choice to make, my *friend*. Will you live to see another day? Or will you simplify my life by making a single move towards my man? And while you're considering how much help your man in the bush will be to you right now, you should know that he's currently unconscious and laid out like a lunch buffet for the crocs."

Ronson sneered at Danie, but released his grip on the rifle, relinquishing it into Geo's hands. Danie didn't waste any time, putting him on the ground with a well-aimed blow to the face.

Geo rolled to his feet, standing out of reach of the man lying stunned on the ground. Pointing his own rifle at Ronson's chest, Geo caught Danie's eyes, giving him a huge smile. "Nice timing, Danie. Didja have a sweet stroll in the bush?"

Danie could feel his own grin, his relief overwhelming. Andrea rushed over, throwing his arms around Geo from behind, kissing the side of the man's neck. It made Danie's chest tight to see the affection between the two.

The distraction gave Ronson new life. "Fuckin' queers," he snarled.

Andrea whirled on him, furious. "You bastard! You dare threaten these men! They are without question the best men I have ever met. I would never betray them!" Without hesitation, Andrea slammed his boot into the man's ribs, kicking him as hard as he could, while still holding onto his arm. Danie

didn't even need to hear the snap of bone to know that Andrea had hit home with that blow. Ronson's howl would have been enough.

"It's fine, Drea. We're okay. You're going to be okay, and this animal will be gone for a very long time. But now, I think you need to sit." Danie was watching Andrea closely, so when he lost all color in his face, Danie had just enough time to sling his rifle over his shoulder and catch the man as he fainted.

"Andrea!" Geo was shocked. He could see that the wound had started bleeding through the bandages, and was immediately torn.

Danie caught Geo's eye. "Drea lost a lot of blood earlier, but he'll be fine. Watch this one for me." Danie nodded at Ronson, still writhing on the ground. He carefully lifted the Italian higher in his arms, carrying him back into their tent.

When he returned, Geo was standing further back from Ronson, and Danie approved. Ronson was a snake waiting for the first opportunity to strike. He stayed carefully out of Geo's line of fire while he trussed the man with another set of zip ties. When the last one was in place, linking his cuffed wrists from behind his back to the ties around his ankles, Danie stepped back satisfied.

"Okay, call Oupa back would you? So he doesn't have a heart attack? Oh, and remind me I need to find the other phone... I buried it under a bush somewhere." Geo gestured vaguely as he headed back into the tent, pausing only briefly to check the status of their other prisoner.

"Geo, I need to go back for the third soon. I'll find their jeep and go get him before the animals do," Danie called out as he disappeared. He waited for the grunt of acknowledgement to come before heading off.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

George Christiansen had done one better than they'd hoped for. While Geo worked to stem the blood loss in camp, Danie had rounded up the other prisoner, finding him wandering through the bush in circles. If he had had to guess, he would have suspected sunstroke rather than a concussion, though the jaw was probably broken from Danie's blow. The man was so grateful to be found and so terrified of the area wildlife, that he made no trouble at all while being cuffed with more of Danie's zip ties.

Geo had shoved him in the tent along with his other two patients. He'd activated a chemical cold pack, placing it next to his spine to cool down his core. Danie watched him work in silence. Andrea was sleeping. His color had improved, but the arm still oozed blood.

More worrisome for Geo was the stranger Danie had shot. The shoulder wound was large and serious. Geo could see shattered bone in the entry wound, and there was probable nerve and ligament damage. He kept it packed, but Danie could tell he wasn't happy.

He entered the tent to give Geo an update. "George just called. They should be here within the hour. He managed to get us a military medevac. Will you be ready to go?"

"Me?" Geo looked up, confused.

"I'll stay here and help repair the Rover, get our stuff packed and hauled out. They may call an inquiry before I can get back, and your word has more weight than mine." He paused to reassure Geo, running his hand through the blonde hair. "Besides, these are your patients. You'll just drive me up a tree worrying about them."

Geo made an effort to smile a little. Danie leaned forward to kiss him. The moment was broken by the sound of rescue. Geo darted past him to watch the brown-and-tan camouflaged helicopter land a short distance away.

The first man out of the sliding doors was George Christiansen, standing like a tower against the brilliant South African sky, his white hair gleaming as he lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

Danie watched Geo race across the space and fling himself into his grandfather's waiting arms, looking more like a child than an adult. To date, the elder Christiansen had been the one male constant in Geo's life.

Danie hoped that he would be the one to change that, though maybe that wasn't so true anymore, given the deep affection he'd spotted between Geo and Andrea on more than one occasion. So much had happened to them all, and in such a short amount of time, that the three of them had formed a deep bond. Danie couldn't predict what would happen with it in the coming days, weeks, or months, so he stopped worrying about it.

Danie watched the helicopter depart with a heavy heart. George seemed to sense his sorrow. Standing next to Danie, he slung an arm across his shoulders before patting him in consolation.

"I brought whiskey" were the last words either of them spoke for a long time.

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Geo stood on his balcony overlooking the compound, gazing far into the bushveld and the coming violet of twilight beyond. He watched a winged changing of the guards: the last of the birds flew to their nesting sites, settling in for the night, while bats rose, flapping heavy wings against the sky, feasting on the mosquitos and flies that rose with the moon. He sighed.

Yesterday he'd returned to the compound from Johannesburg, where he'd been giving testimony in front of the magistrate about the events in the bush.

Andrea was being held in a secure hospital suite until he could be cleared of charges of trespass, poaching, and collusion with a criminal enterprise. No one really believed that Andrea was guilty, but they were being very cautious, not wanting Ronson's very expensive attorneys to take advantage of Andrea's absence as a strategy to shift blame.

Andrea had technically hired Ronson and his crew to take him out to the area of the bush where the single-engine bush plane had been recovered, along with the remains of a pilot and a package of uncut diamonds valued at three million pounds sterling.

Everyone was being very, very careful with the case, so careful that Geo hadn't been allowed to see Andrea after those first moments in the emergency room. He'd been escorted out of the hospital once he'd given the head of emergency services a rundown on how the injuries occurred and the field medicine he'd employed to save the men's lives.

He was installed in a very nice hospitality suite not far from the courthouse that included a very nice man in a dark suit at the door who wouldn't exactly say he couldn't leave but then didn't say he could. He'd just politely ask what Geo wanted and took down orders or messages, calling out on his cell before nodding to Geo pleasantly and reseating himself.

So, there Geo sat for almost a week without further news, until he was suddenly offered a seat on the flight out of Rand Airport, eventually hitching a ride out to the reserve. The timing seemed lucky until he arrived, hot and dusty, with only the shirt on his back, to find that Oupa and Danie had flown out that morning for their own round of testimony in Johannesburg. They'd been planning on surprising Geo by meeting him there. *Surprise*, he thought.

One hurried phone conversation with Oupa between meetings during the week wasn't enough to satisfy Geo. He hadn't spoken to Danie at all since he'd boarded the medevac flight, and he'd heard nothing more about Andrea.

All of this was ridiculous. The man in the suit had found out about the other injuries for him. Andrea had broken two of Ronson's ribs and cracked a third. The damage to Karl's shoulder was so extensive that it was doubtful he would regain more than nominal use of it, and the third luckless thug had gotten himself a fine case of dysentery to go along with his heat stroke. All he got about Andrea was a "condition satisfactory," whatever that meant.

It seemed inevitable that he and Danie were back to playing employer and employee in front of Oupa. It was the only reason Geo could think of that

would explain the lack of communication from Danie. In the end, Geo found himself stuck, waiting on someone else to give him information. He gave the staff grief for an entire day, until he finally took himself back to his rooms to mope in private.

The evening slid quietly into the arms of night as Geo stood in the gloom, lost in thought. In the morning he'd go back out to the bush. It was the only place he'd found peace. The waiting was killing him, and worse— he wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

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He intended to leave before dawn, taking one of the guest Range Rovers already packed with a tent and supplies. He wouldn't need much on his own. So when he woke in the middle of the night he simply threw off his covers and started dressing without checking his watch.

“Geo...” the voice whispered in the dark, beyond his bed, “what are you doing? It's still the middle of the night.”

Geo yawned, rubbing his eyes. The figure rose, looking as if it was formed of shadow, slowly becoming solid until it stood close enough to wrap a hand around his neck and tug him forward into a kiss.

The kiss was slow and thorough, and Geo wondered if he was dreaming, or the victim of an African spirit come to visit him in the shape of his lover, brought forth by too much yearning and unhappiness. But the arms that now held him felt real enough, and the skin pressed against his nose smelt familiar and comforting.

“Danie?” he whispered.

“Yes, love.” And Danie kissed him again. The night wrapped around them, and Geo felt like he was enclosed in a bubble outside of time and space. Danie wasn't really here, but the dream Danie was now nibbling down his throat and running his hands up and down the skin of Geo's back. He shuddered at the delicious sensations and wondered when he would wake up.

“I don’t wanna wake up, Danie,” Geo pleaded before being silenced once more with a kiss.

“You’re not asleep, Geo, but you should be. Go back to bed, love.” The dream Danie finished unbuttoning his shirt, easing it off his shoulders and down his arms before dropping it onto the floor. He eased Geo’s shorts off next and took his hand, leading him back to his bed.

He found himself tucked back under the covers, and whined as the dream Danie moved away.

“Don’t leave!” Geo cried, upset that he was always being abandoned, even by his dreams. It was so unfair. He could almost see the smirk on Danie’s face, as if it had been real. The rustling in the shadows sounded real to Geo, but his lids were already sinking, and he was losing the battle to keep them open. He briefly managed to open them once more when he felt the far side of the bed dip under a weight, and a pair of warm arms slid around his waist, tugging him backwards into a warm, silky chest.

Geo’s last thought was to wish that Danie wasn’t just a dream.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Danie was working through a medium rare steak when George Christiansen entered the dining room with the reserve's estate manager, Baruti Eze.

"I hear Geo was planning a solo trip to the bush." Disapproval dripping from his tone, he sat. Immediately a young, white-jacketed server brought him a china cup and began pouring the coffee. "I've put a stop to it," George continued, snapping open that morning's edition of Business Day.

Danie looked up from his plate and grunted at Lenka Eze, who gave him a cheeky grin behind George's back.

Baruti frowned at the grandson now taking his turn at learning the traditional service still practiced in the Christiansen dining room. Cocking a brow, Danie moved his cup away from his plate signaling a refill from the youth before whispering in Baruti's ear, "Teen-in-training?"

"Don't remind me Danie. One week in the dining room with him has aged me twenty years."

They both grimaced as Lenka over-poured Danie's cup, sloshing coffee across the pristine, linen tablecloth. At the horrified expression on the teen's face, Danie slid the napkin from his lap onto the table, covering the stain with a smile. The grin was back, and Lenka bounced out of the dining room, grin firmly in place once more.

Baruti shook his head and pulled out a slim notebook from his left shirt pocket to start making his notes for the day. Lenka came back with a cup of black tea for his grandfather, serving him with exaggerated care before refilling George Christiansen's cup from the fresh pot he'd brought along with the tea.

"We have a guest coming in later today and I need Geo to show him around. You'll drive." George laid the newspaper aside, fixing Danie with a stare.

“Don’t you think Geo has earned his privacy and time off?” Danie resumed eating, not bothering to check the elder Christiansen’s face for irritation. It was fairly crackling in the air between them.

“Nonsense. He’s a Christiansen. He has responsibilities to this family and to this land. It’s what he’s been raised for.” His familiar tirade was cut short by the arrival of his own breakfast.

Danie sighed and finished up. He wanted to go find Geo. They’d been delayed longer than intended in Johannesburg. He’d tried to get back to the reserve by late afternoon, but George’s lawyer needed additional details in order to pursue a claim for salvage rights on the property retrieved on the reserve. Andrea had signed over any claims to Geo, though Geo didn’t know it yet, and George had attached a secondary claim on behalf of the reserve.

His lawyers were negotiating release of the uncut diamonds into a trust account for conservation and education on the reserve. It was something they’d been planning for but hadn’t funded yet, and this situation presented a way for the South African government to avoid a lengthy and potentially embarrassing legal battle.

Technically there was no way to prove the ownership of the diamonds or the fact that they’d been stolen, since no claims of losses had been filed from any of the mines in the period preceding the crash. Ronson himself was being held on kidnapping, fraud, and attempted murder charges, not smuggling. It was a mess.

“Danie,” the old man cautioned, “you’re wearing your heart on your sleeve. You’re not out in the bush any longer.” The cold tone left Danie gritting his teeth against the explosion of words pressing to be released.

“And that’s wrong?” he finally responded.

“It is. Geo isn’t a homosexual. No Christiansen is. He was born for great things. He has a position that requires an impeccable reputation; his family, this reserve, require it. I’ve tolerated his little expeditions in the bush, but I won’t have it here!” He snapped the last, slamming down his cup, making the porcelain ring from the impact.

“Well then, I’ll miss you, Oupa.” Neither man had noticed Geo’s arrival, nor how long he’d been leaning against the doorframe listening to them. Geo continued, his face a study of calm determination. “But I’m gay. Life is too short; the last few days have made that obvious to me, if not to you. I’m gay and, apparently, I’m in love with two men.”

Geo finished his announcement in style by strolling over to Danie, who was still seated at the table, and kissing him in front of the staff and his grandfather.

“Two men?” Danie teased. “Do I know them?” Geo smirked but didn’t answer, sliding into the seat next to him and picking up the half eaten slice of toast from Danie’s plate. Danie watched Geo smear it with the reserve’s homemade strawberry jam before shoving almost the entire piece in his mouth.

“This is totally unacceptable, Geo!” The elder Christiansen rose, towering over them even as he leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. “I’ve made plans for you! You are the only one capable of protecting my legacy here! Your uncles want to turn this into a theme park! I love you, Geo, but you’re naïve if you think you can carry on an open affair with a man here and be safe or listened to!” George slammed his fist into the table, the white, linen cloth deadening the sound. No one spoke. Danie could see the shock and pain in Geo’s profile. All his earlier bravado seemed wiped away, when a small sound broke the silence.

“I will listen.”

As one, the three men and a teenager turned to stare at Baruti. Lenka stood frozen, pressed against the dining room wall, looking like he wanted to disappear.

Danie knew that Baruti’s family had worked for the Christiansen’s for four generations. His ancestors had lived on this land long before the white Europeans wrapped their collective fist around the heart of the continent.

Baruti himself had worked for George Christiansen for more than thirty years, rising to the position of estate manager, a role uncommon even in the



decades since the fall of apartheid and unheard of for a black South African of his father's generation.

Baruti's father only managed to rise through the ranks of workers and staff, becoming the reserve's head guide in every way but name. He'd passed his deep love for the reserve to Baruti, sending him to university in England to study land management with help from the Christiansen family. From the day Baruti returned to his ancestral home on the reserve, he became the steadfast and devoted steward of both land and family.

Baruti had been sitting quietly, lingering over his breakfast, making notes to himself about the day's agenda, when the argument erupted. In all the time he'd eaten at the family table, Danie couldn't remember Baruti ever standing up to George Christiansen publically. But he spoke now.

Baruti repeated, "I will listen. And my children will listen, because young George is a good man. Your staff will listen because he is a strong man, a trustworthy man... an honest man. And this community will listen. They will listen because he is an educated man, and most importantly, a wealthy man. We will all listen."

Danie was stunned. He marveled at the quiet dignity of the man, educating them all. Geo had tears in his eyes as he reached over to hug him. Baruti himself looked surprised, aghast. Whatever led him to speak out against his employer for the first time in his life hadn't prepared him for the breach of all social protocols.

Geo patted his shoulder, quietly thanking him, before turning to his grandfather once more. "I don't expect you to understand, Oupa. I love you. I love the reserve. This is the home of my heart, and it will hurt me to leave and never come back. But I will.

"A month ago, I wouldn't have considered it. I would have kept who I am hidden, pretending I'm something I'm not. I'd like to think that I'd never stoop so low as to let you marry me off to some landowner's daughter to advance your plans... but I'm ashamed to admit that I can't."

Danie watched George Christiansen turn from white to red as he listened to his grandson's declaration. It was plain to see that he was about to object when Geo cut him off. "Oh, don't worry, I don't intend to roam the streets at night wrapped in a rainbow flag and short-shorts— that's not who I am. But here, in my home, I want to live openly with my partner... or partners."

"I can't accept this. I won't allow this." George thumped the table one last time, punctuating his words with his fist before turning away.

"I'm sorry, Oupa. This is your home first, so I won't disrespect you further by my presence." Geo dipped his head and slipped from the room.

Danie couldn't bear to see him in pain. He jumped up to follow, but, pausing briefly, he turned to George, who was now gazing out the window to the veld beyond, his back to the room. His reflection in the glass was stormy.

Somewhat fearful of breaking this reverie, Danie spoke. "George, don't lose the one person in this world that you love, the one who loves you back without condition. I experience that each year when Geo gets on that plane—I'd save anyone that pain." He hesitated a moment before continuing, "I'll be leaving with Geo. Thomas is ready to promote to head guide. You'd be a fool not to use him."

The old man remained unmoved in the reflection.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Danie found Geo sitting on the edge of his bed, a pile of shirts next to him. He was idly folding and unfolding them into progressively thinner piles. Danie watched him for a few minutes, just to absorb the “Geo-ness” of the whole scene. He’d never met anyone quite like him. He was such a mixed up bundle of refinement and horrific table manners. Education. He had the foulest, sweetest mouth Danie had ever known.

Geo looked up and smiled. “Not a dream?”

“Nope.” Danie smiled back. “You’re very cute when you first wake up. Where were you going?”

“Um, bush.” Geo went back to refolding.

“At three in the morning?” Danie grinned at the memory.

“It was three? Huh. No, I thought it was closer to dawn. I wanted to leave before anyone thought to stop me.”

“Good plan,” Danie agreed. He’d fire any of his guides that let Geo go out alone... not that it’d be a problem anymore.

“Were you stalking me?” Geo looked up with a frown on his face.

“Can you stalk someone asleep in bed from three feet away?” Danie asked in return.

“Hmm. Maybe? Why were you in my room and not in my bed?” Geo as usual put his finger straight into the eye of the question.

“Ah, well, I didn’t want to wake you.” Geo snorted, which Danie ignored. “We’d managed to wrap up all the meetings around ten o’clock. The pilot called to see if we still needed him on standby, so we decided to go for it. We got home around two-thirty and I came straight to you. I was sitting in that chair for at least half an hour, so I don’t think I woke you.”

Geo smiled at him again before sweeping all the neat piles onto the floor with a flourish. He patted the bed next to him, and Danie sat, taking him into his arms.

“Are you okay?” Danie whispered.

He felt Geo’s nod. His head tucked under his chin.

“You know this isn’t over,” Danie reminded him, pressing a kiss into his hair.

“No, you’re wrong this time, Danie. It feels done.” Geo pulled away to look him in the eyes. They were clear, which was a relief.

“You coming out to your grandfather, that’s done... but this thing between you two? That’s not finished. You’ve upended his careful plans, Geo. He loves you, but he wanted your life to follow a certain path, the dreams he has for this place. He’s not a bad man, Geo. He’s just been hit upside his head with your reality stick.”

Geo snorted. “Reality stick? Are you watching American TV online again?”

“I miss you so much when you’re gone, Geo. Can you blame me?”

“Not for the missing me, no. But the bad references, yes.” Geo lay back on the bed and flung his arms wide. “I have to leave, or he won’t take me seriously. He may change his mind, but I won’t. I’ll only be here on my terms.”

“Ah yes, your terms. That would be you and your harem of men? Will you at least share them with me?”

Geo sighed and pulled Danie down on top of him. Danie could feel the heat from his chest to his thighs. Their cocks lay nestled next to each other through the cotton of their pants. There was a stirring of interest. Danie ignored it for the moment.

“I already have,” Geo whispered into his ear, dragging Danie’s face close enough to kiss. He opened his lips just enough to encourage Geo to slide his tongue into his mouth. The sweetness of jam still lingered.

Geo drew back, and Danie shifted down slightly so he could settle his head over Geo’s heart. He listened to it beating as Geo gently stroked fingers through his hair. He was almost asleep when a knock sounded at the door.

Geo kept a firm hand on Danie's back, keeping him from moving away, before calling out, "Enter!"

Danie had never allowed himself to visit Geo in his room in the lodge. In the early morning hours he figured it was safe enough— he'd missed Geo desperately, and so much had happened between them that needed to be discussed. But with every opportunity that presented itself to call or see Geo, circumstances, or more likely George Christiansen, had kept them apart.

So as he had passed Geo's door on the way to his own room, he couldn't resist. He'd sat there staring at the man, watching the moonlight throw light across his face. After Geo finally rolled over on his side after five in the morning, Danie had slipped away again. Now, here he was on the man's bed, wrapped in his arms, and the idiot was inviting to world to witness his rebellion first hand.

It was Baruti. "Excuse me, sirs. After this morning, I thought it best to bring this man straight to you. Your grandfather is in his study." He smiled briefly before waving in their guest and shutting the door behind him as he left.

Andrea stood, looking better than ever to Danie's eyes.

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Geo felt his breath leave his lungs. Hope struggled with a fear so feral it ravaged the edges of his sanity. He tore his eyes away from the man standing silent and so very close again. Danie looked up at him, the question was in his eyes, too, but no anger, no disappointment or jealousy— just love.

Could this be possible, Geo wondered. Was this connection between the three of them real? They'd only really had hours together, under the most extreme circumstances. Psychologists had names for things like this, none of them particularly flattering.

He knew he loved Danie, had loved him for years. Each parting under the gaze of Oupa had been heartbreaking in its silence; just Danie carrying his bags to the plane, a brief squeeze of fingers as Danie handed them over.

He would live, holding his breath, until the next summer, when he'd feel the overwhelming need burn bright again. Stepping into baggage claim, hoping to see Danie there, but inevitably finding Oupa; the man who would scoop him up into the air no matter how tall he'd gotten.

He'd lived entire lifetimes in seconds. His whole relationship with Danie stretched and retracted like one of Einstein's rubber bands. So, was the attraction to Andrea any different?

Certainly not for him, but, honestly, he knew almost nothing beyond the man's heart. A heart that represented a new wilderness for Geo to explore. And, as with every other adventure over the last few years, Danie was by his side. Geo had already burned the bridges keeping him securely anchored in his old life. All he knew was that Danie was there, getting ready to fall off the edge of the world with him.

He lifted his arms at the same moment as Danie, welcoming Andrea home.

*...to be continued.*

## Author Bio

*At seventeen, LE Franks walked away from writing for love. Jumping head first into real life and travelling the world seemed to be fair compensation until the characters in her head demanded their turn. Now, living in the San Francisco Bay Area, surrounded by inspiration everywhere, LE is finally taking off the filters and giving the stories free rein. These days, LE can be found frequently writing about sexy men who desperately need a happily ever.*

*LE writes M/M Romance in a unique mix of humor and drama with enough suspense to produce fast-paced stories filled with emotion and passion and featuring characters that are quirky and complicated. Don't expect the typical, rugged hero or sophisticated businessman with the world at their feet; LE's men are living in the margins— they're in the middle of their journey, doing the best they can while searching for a connection to something bigger than themselves. With a little effort, and a lot of luck, they may actually find their happily-ever-afters.*

*When not writing, LE wrangles an odd assortment of jobs (six— both paid and volunteer), houseguests (including pro baseball players), family, and friends. Manifesting an odd combination of contradictory talents and traits, LE is tragically honest and personally deceptive and makes the best piecrust— ever.*

## Contact Info

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