

## CHAPTER 1



*Ian*

Some will find it strange to see a man carrying an unconscious woman in his arms. Not so if that man is me. I'm a criminal, the most wanted man on the continent, and this time I stole myself not money or jewels but a woman.

My woman.

I knew she was made for me from the moment I laid my eyes on her at Sun City while the heist was going down. I told her so in no uncertain terms when I claimed and marked her even as I prepared to leave her, because a man like me is forever on the run.

Then I went back for more. I couldn't stay away. Lusting after her cost me. I paid a heavy price for a night with her. I got myself shot and left DNA behind. The police have photos of us. They know my identity. They no doubt scared her shitless when they took her in for questioning, but I told her I was coming for her. I'll never throw her to the wolves. Yet she outsmarted the biker I commissioned to bring her to meet me at the airport, stole his bike, and tried to run from me.

It's not going to happen. I thought I could let her go, but when I stood in front of the door of the hotel room in which she was hiding, I

could only do what was always destined to happen. I could only steal more, not simply a few more hours of her time but her life.

I'm taking her home with me.

The pilot is waiting and the plane ready for takeoff when we arrive at the Wonderboom Airport outside Pretoria. Cas passed out sooner than I hoped, but it's already dark outside, and there's no one around to see me carry her unconscious form to the plane.

It's the drug I gave her after she fought me like a lioness.

Walter, the guy I paid to keep an eye on her, leaves after dropping us off with my promise that payment will be in his bank account in twenty-four hours. He knows I'm good for my word. It's not the first time we do business.

"She okay?" the pilot asks, shooting a worried glance over his shoulder as I secure Cas's safety belt.

"She will be."

The look I cut him tells him to mind his own fucking business, and he turns away quickly.

I let her limp body rest against my side and support her with an arm around her shoulder for the takeoff.

"There's a storm building," the pilot says over the noise of the engine, not looking at me this time. "Do you want to divert?"

I tighten my arm around Cas. "How bad?"

"We should be able to make it if the current weather prediction holds."

It takes a second to make up my mind. "Go for it."

"If it gets worse, we won't have a choice but to divert to Polokwane."

I acknowledge with silence but pray the weather will play in our favor. Every minute we're on South African soil is a minute closer to getting caught. There won't be any deals for Cas. Not any longer. She's chosen sides, as per my making. Wherever I go now, whether it's up or down, I'm dragging her with me.

Peeling back her eyelid, I check the pupil. The black is dilated, but not overly so. I move her handbag that's pressed between us to make sure she's comfortable.

A good hour into the flight, we hit the thunderstorm. Lightning cuts open the sky and raindrops the size of four-carat diamonds pelt the windscreen. A thin trickle of water runs underneath the glass onto the dash. The pilot tears paper towels from a roll and sticks them against the windscreen to stop the leak.

For the first time in my life, I fear in spades. Not for me, but for the woman I'm towing along. The plane rattles as lightning crashes on the left. I see the flash three seconds before I hear the sound. That means it's close.

I don't bother the pilot with meaningless questions. His knuckles are white from how hard he's clenching the yoke. I let him concentrate on navigating the storm while I rub a hand over Cas's arm. I take her hand in mine. Her skin is cold, too cold for my liking. It bothers me, even if I know it's a side-effect of the tranquilizer.

I'm torn. On the one hand, I would've preferred not to drug her. On the other, I feel better not submitting her to the stress of being abducted to a different country and a place she doesn't know.

The plane drops as it hits an air pocket, startling me from my thoughts. The aircraft hits a second pocket, the drop significant enough to make my stomach climb into my throat. Only the seatbelts prevent our heads from bumping against the ceiling. Another few minutes, and we break through the cluster of clouds and hit a clear night sky.

The pilot wipes his brow. One more hour to go.

Cas moans next to me. I push two fingers on her wrist. Her pulse is strong. Keeping an eye on her, I let the steady tempo of her pulse reassure me.

The rest of the flight continues without hiccups. We land just after eight. The air is warm and the airport building stuffy. The last commercial flight has landed at five. There's no one except one security guard who doesn't lift as much as an eyebrow as I walk underneath the buzzing overhead lights with Cas in my arms. The pilot follows with our bags. He dumps them in the back of the Jeep I'd left in the parking while I lower Cas into the seat and fasten her safety belt.

He refrains from looking at her when he says, "Will you need me anytime soon again?"

I take a stash of cash from my bag and hand it to him. "I'm good for a while."

"In that case, I'll be heading back tomorrow." He grins. "I've got an airhostess waiting for me in Johannesburg. Her flight landed this morning."

I nod. "I'll let you know if anything changes."

With a salute, he walks off.

Cas moans again when I start the engine. She either has a strong system or she's used to taking drugs. The tranquilizer should've lasted for another few hours.

It's a bumpy ride to the lodge, but I take it easy, making it home in forty instead of twenty minutes.

The lights burn in the entrance, but the staff has already retired to wherever they choose to spend their evenings, either at the shebeen or at their respective bungalows.

A fire burns in the pit on the front lawn by the river. Leon and Ruben get to their feet when I exit onto the deck with our bags slung over my shoulders and Cas in my arms.

"What the fuck happened?" Leon asks. "Is she...?"

"Drugged." My tone is clipped. "Cas tricked Walter. She managed to get away. I had to go after her."

Ruben's smile is wry. "Let me guess. She didn't appreciate your effort to save her hide."

"Shut the fuck up," I say, my jaw tight. "Her hide wouldn't have needed saving if it weren't for me."

They don't say another word as I make my way past them to my bungalow. I don't bother taking a rifle as I still carry my pistol.

At my room, I drop the bags and go through the usual routine of checking for reptiles and scorpions before laying Cas down on my bed. She looks pale on the white linen, all the color gone from her cheeks. I put her handbag on the chair next to the bed and take off her jacket and shoes. Her ankle is a little swollen from when she twisted it, but it doesn't seem too badly banged up. I check her pulse one last

time, and, reassured that her heartbeat is strong and normal, I cover her with a blanket.

I stare at her, laying there in my bed, this stunning woman I've stolen. I've stolen many things in my life, a lot of money and jewels and cars, even food and books when I was younger, but I've never taken a person. I should be feeling a lot of things—guilt, remorse, and disgust—but all I feel is the sweet taste of possession.