

## CHAPTER I



**W**ayne West looked up from his oxtail stew when the female walked into the bar. Her ponytail bounced as she crossed the floor. A few brown tendrils that had escaped the elastic band feathered over her cheeks. Eyes greener than the first spring leaves sparkled with life. The smile on her full lips wasn't aimed at anyone in particular because she wasn't looking at any of the four people in the bar. She seemed oblivious to the stares as she made her way to the counter.

Khaki pants stretched over a tight ass as she put her butt onto a barstool and propped a hiking boot on the foot bar. As enticing as the sight was, it was the green vest with the SANParks emblem on the breast that held his attention.

Dropping a day backpack at her feet, she said to the barman, Jack, "A Diet Coke, please."

In the corner, Thinus nudged Nelis, motioning at the woman with a toothy grin.

Jack tore his eyes away from the rugby match playing off on the television screen and straightened his heavy frame. Even though he said nothing, no doubt Jack had seen the logo too. For a mammoth

sloth, the barman was deceptively perceptive. He was already watching the game again before banging a can of Coke on the counter and sliding a glass her way.

“Thanks,” she said in a wry tone before adding with sarcasm, “The service here is very friendly.”

The husky voice was too old for her young body. She cracked open the Coke and took a long drink straight from the can. The arc of her neck and the swallows that rippled her throat as she thirstily gulped down her drink were graceful.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and rested her arms on the counter. “What’s on the menu?”

“Oxtail,” Jack said, his eyes glued on the screen.

“Do you have anything vegetarian?”

Jack graced her with an incredulous glare and said, “Oxtail,” before turning back to the game.

“Sandwich? Salad?” She made a face. “Anything that hasn’t been killed?”

“This ain’t no fancy pansy roadhouse in the city, darlin,” Thinus called from the back.

Wisely, she ignored him. “What do you serve with the oxtail?”

Jack popped a matchstick in his mouth. “Rice.”

“Haven’t had that in a while,” she said with a chuckle. “I guess I’ll have the rice.”

Jack turned his head an inch and called to Johannes in the kitchen, “One special, no meat.”

The woman either didn’t mind the hostility or decided to ignore it. Either way, she was a fool walking into the Outeniqua Woodcutters Bar with a South African National Parks Board jacket.

Wayne brought the fork to his mouth, watching Nelis and Thinus from hooded eyes. The two cousins giggled like high school girls.

“Where’s the bathroom?” she asked.

Jack threw a thumb over his shoulder.

She picked up her backpack and made her way to the toilet at the end of the short corridor.

Nelis and Thinus exchanged a look. After a second, Thinus got up and headed for the bathroom.

Wayne wiped his mouth on a napkin. His chair scraped over the hardwood floor as he pushed to his feet. Before Thinus reached the corridor, he stepped into his path, blocking his way.

Thinus planted his feet wide and hooked his thumbs into his belt. “Whazup, West?”

“I don’t know, Thinus,” Wayne drawled. “Was just about to ask you the same thing.”

“Stand aside, man.”

Wayne braced his shoulder on the wall. “Need the can so badly you’re going to piss in your pants?”

Thinus took a step forward. “I’m warning you, man.”

Wayne smirked. Thinus didn’t bully people when their fists were free. He only punched when they were tied up.

“The lady is busy,” Wayne said. “You’ll wait.”

Thinus smiled, exposing the perfect white teeth that had cost his daddy a fortune. “The lady may enjoy it.”

“Outside,” Wayne said with a flick of his head.

Thinus took another step, putting them toe to toe. “What did you say to me?”

“Piss outside, or the only thing the lady will enjoy is how far you’ll fly when I use you for discus practice.”

“I’m not a dog.” Thinus spat on the floor. “Dogs piss outside.”

“Well, then.” Wayne looked him up and down. “You’re going to have to hold it in or piss in your pants.”

“I swear to God, I’ll piss on your shoes,” a red-faced Thinus said.

“Better take it outside.” Wayne narrowed his gaze. “Because if you soil these boots, you’ll lick them clean and polish them with this nice new shirt your mama ironed,” he said, flicking the collar of Thinus’s shirt.

Jack uttered a snort-laugh.

Thinus slapped Wayne’s hand away and pushed a bony finger in his face. “Don’t you forget yourself now.”

Wayne stiffened at the threat. He’d been out on parole for a year, but Thinus still held the conviction like a sword over his head.

“Yeah.” Thinus pulled himself to his full height. “That’s right, *murderer*. Remember who you are.”

Thinus wasn't stupid enough to push it. With that verbal victory, he stalked outside. It was best to keep him in sight just in case he got it into his dim-witted skull to fetch a gun from his truck. The woman was still in the loo. What was it with females that took so long?

Leaning in the exit, Wayne waited until Thinus had relieved himself on the tire of Wayne's truck like the dog he'd said he wasn't. The green Jeep parked next to his battered Land Cruiser had to belong to the woman. Thinus zipped himself up and gave Wayne a triumphant smile as he shouldered him on his way back into the bar. By that time, the food had arrived, and the woman was back in her seat.

She stared at the plate. "There's gravy on the rice."

Jack lifted an eyebrow as if to say, *So?*

"Gravy comes from meat," she said.

Jack crossed his arms. "Take it or leave it."

She sighed, mumbled something about being starved, and dug in with gusto. After two forkfuls, she stopped chewing and frowned. "There's something wrong with the gravy."

"Is there something wrong with the gravy, West?" Jack called across the room.

The woman turned in her seat. She could've looked at Thinus or Nelis, but she didn't. She fixed her leafy green eyes on him, assessing him as if she noticed him for the first time. Maybe she did only notice him now, not that he wanted to be noticed.

"No," he said in an emotionless tone.

Two seconds ticked by, the world turning slower as she probed him in the way people did when they looked for telltale signs of lies. Her gaze wasn't condescending, judgmental, or the worst—fearful. It was nothing like the looks he usually got. Curious, maybe. Questioning. If the light in those luminescent eyes were any indication, he'd go as far as to say friendly.

Finally, she shrugged and went back to her meal.

Cheering came from the screen as his team scored a try, but the Saturday vibe had gone as flat as the lukewarm rock shandy in his glass. No longer enjoying the game, he longed for the peace of the farm and the solitude of his cabin. Yet he didn't dare leave until the woman was gone.

She finished every morsel on her plate and asked for the bill. When it came, she looked between the piece of paper and Jack. “You can’t charge me full price for a bowl of rice.”

“Not my problem if you don’t eat meat,” Jack said.

She scoffed but left money on the counter and lifted her backpack. “The day trail, where does it start?”

Jack rolled the matchstick from one corner of his mouth to the other. “Yellow.”

“Follow the yellow markers,” Nelis said. “The path is well walked out. Can’t miss it.”

She barely spared Nelis a glance. “Thanks.”

Without another word, she headed for the forest, leaving her Jeep parked out front.

There were still twenty minutes left of the match when the cousins got to their feet and made their way outside.

Ah, hell. He’d expected it but hoped it wouldn’t happen. Trouble was the last thing he needed.

“It ain’t your fight,” Jack said as Wayne finished his lukewarm drink and got to his feet.

“Who says I’m joining?”

“She’s SAN. You saw it.”

“Doesn’t mean she deserves to get hurt.”

Jack nailed him with a hard expression. “You’ve got enough enemies.”

“With friends like you, who needs enemies?”

“Fuck you. She had no place coming in here.”

“Yeah.” Wayne planted his hat on his head. “See you.”

Outside, he stopped for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight. Thinus’s Land Rover was still there. A glance through the back window assured him the dickheads hadn’t taken their hunting rifles. Good. He jogged toward the path, following one trail of small footprints and two larger ones.



SAHARA GRAHAM ENTERED the coolness of the forest. Yellow and blackwood trees stretched thirty yards into the sky, their dense foliage throwing an eternal shadow over the damp soil where delicate ferns uncurled and red-dotted fungi were scattered like pincushions. Moss marked the trunks of the trees. As composting leaves and twigs crunched under her boots, birds flittered to the sky, calling out her presence in alarm. The deeper into the undergrowth she moved, the darker the forest grew, embracing her with silent isolation. Not a cricket chirped or a frog croaked in the Knysna sanctuary where elephants still wandered wild. Even the air was quiet.

After a ten-minute hike, she cut away from the path and followed the trail of broken shrubs. Not far from the forest border, she found the first stump. The remains of the amputated trunk stood like a severed limb in a small clearing. Raw and open, it was bleeding sap. The wood smugglers had cut away the precious cycads at the foot of the yellowwood to make space for their illegal work. She knelt next to a small heap of dead plants, their roots shriveled and their leaves black. A cycad only grew one inch per year. These had been older than several hundred years, judging by their trunks. Nine hundred years, maybe. Dusting the soil from her knees, she moved to the yellowwood. She skimmed the rings with her fingertips. Four hundred years.

“Your only fault was your value,” she said into the stillness of the forest.

No sound came in reply. It was as if the trees watching over the massacre held their breath. She turned in a circle, taking in the destruction motivated by greed. How could people be so ignorant and cruel? Not only were the smugglers destroying plants that had taken a thousand years to grow, but also the last remaining habitat of the elephants.

Like the trees, there were few of the Knysna elephants left to roam the forest. They were the last of their kind that lived unfenced. Through the years, these graceful and intelligent animals had learned to survive in the deepest and darkest parts of the forest. Despite their massive bodies weighing several tons, survival instinct had taught them to move soundlessly. Hunted mercilessly for their ivory, the animals that had once grazed the western coast had retreated farther into the

dense nature, adapting from a diet of grass to one of foliage. The Xhosa tribe living on the north-eastern border of the forest had reported the bull and two calves they'd spotted from time to time were gone, and only the old female, who they'd named The Matriarch, was left.

Sahara's job was to ensure the species would survive. The task was twofold—find out how many elephants were left and protect their habitat. Some would say both goals were impossible. The elephants were too good at hiding, forever on the move, and the smugglers made too much money with the priceless yellowwood to give up their illegal activity without a violent fight. Poachers often murdered parks board members threatening their criminal trade. Elephant trackers before her had always failed, but she had something the trackers didn't. She had a special gift, an ability to connect with animal spirits.

She left the plundered clearing and ventured back to the path, an uneasiness creeping up on her. The feeling was more than a heaviness of heart after witnessing the destruction. A sick feeling took root in her body. She couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Usually, she'd be in her element. In nature, she experienced her art the strongest, but for some reason, she was disconnected from the animal life. The birds, one of the easier species to command, closed themselves off to her. They scattered like she was foe instead of friend. Gravity seemed to increase tenfold as her body turned heavy and her steps slowed.

Wiping away the sweat from her forehead, she leaned against the wooden path rail for a rest. The world tipped, and the landscape crinkled like corrugated iron. She dropped the backpack that suddenly turned too heavy at her feet.

Damn, she really didn't feel well. The perspiration coating her skin wasn't from the hike. It was the kind of sweat she broke into before emptying her stomach. Tilting her face up, she took a steadying breath, but the sky started spinning. She looked down quickly to ground herself, only to spot a nest of snakes at the base of a tree. Snakes didn't scare her, but these slithered over each other in menacing loops that looked like nooses meant for strangling.

Uttering a shriek, she scurried backward to escape the forked

tongues. No matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't command these Medusa-like creatures to drive them back. The sound of their rattling vibrated in her skull. It was like sharpening teeth with a metal file.

*Tsssk, tsssk, tsssk.*

Why couldn't she control them? What was wrong with her? The wiggling bodies advanced on her, a cesspool of squirming, sand-colored snakes. She retreated but stumbled over the roots of a tree and fell right into the lap of a giant oak. She pushed her back against the trunk, the rough bark biting into her skin with magnified intensity. Her tongue was thick in her dry mouth. The smell of plant decay and wet earth was a cool vapor that filtered through her nose. All of her senses were heightened.

A flash caught her eye. Something sifted down. It was a huge, brown butterfly. No, a moth, a big, fluttering moth. More followed. They flapped around her face, the poisonous powder on their wings becoming dust particles suspended in the wedge of sun cutting through the branches. She swatted at them, jerking her head from side to side. The roots around her lifted, no longer solid. They were snakes that writhed under her body.

Her scream punctured the silence. Its echo was a laugh. Male laughter.

She looked up. Two men stood in the path, surrounded by moths. She recognized them from the bar.

"Help." She raised a hand. "Please."

The skinny one with the moustache jabbed his friend in the ribs. "Wow, she's trippin big time, man."

"How much did you put in?" the friend asked.

"Only a quarter of a *bankie*."

The stickman gurgled and spat on the ground. "This is gonna be fun."

Even in her strange state of mind, her thoughts were clear enough to realize what was happening. They'd drugged her back at the bar.

She pushed to her feet, feeling the effort. Shit, she was heavy. Too slow. They'd catch her before she'd taken two steps.

She held up a finger, backtracking. "Stay away, or else."



The men glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

“Come, now, darlin,” the stickman said. “We ain’t gonna hurt you.”

His friend, a thickset man with slits for eyes, took a step forward. “Just gotta stay still and Thinus, here,” he pointed at the stickman, “and me will show you a real good time.”

She backed away further. “I work for the government. I’ll have you arrested.”

The fat guy unbuckled his belt. “Where’s the crime in sharin? You gave us your *consent*,” he said as if it was a big word. “Didn’t she, Thinus?”

“Consent,” Thinus echoed.

She kept on putting distance between them. A weapon. She needed a weapon.

“What’s with the waitin?” Thinus said. “Get her, already.”

“Nah.” His friend started taking off his boots. “I want a good chase.”

She didn’t wait to hear more. Grabbing a rock, she hurled it at the fat man. It zinged past his head, missing his ear by an inch.

“Oooh.” Thinus cackled like a hen. “She’s got claws.”

She couldn’t fight them off, not the two of them, but she was fast. At least, she was fast when not drugged. Still, flight was her only chance. She turned and broke into a sprint.

Her heart protested, and her limbs refused to cooperate. It was like running in place in a bad dream. No matter how hard she pushed her body, she wasn’t gaining ground. Too damn slow. Footsteps followed, advancing. Closer.

From somewhere farther behind a voice cried, “Stop!”

She pumped her elbows. A hot breath blew on her neck before someone tugged on her ponytail. She yanked with all her might. The sting on her scalp made her eyes water. The salty tears mixed with the sweat pouring over her forehead, burning her eyes and blinding her.

“Stop,” that far-off voice yelled again.

Moths descended and branches reached down with knuckled fingers.

*Run.*

CHARMAINE PAULS

She stumbled over a rock but managed to right herself before going down.

Free.

She was free.

And then the ground fell away from under her feet.

For a terrifying moment, she treaded air before the nightmare changed from being stuck in place to falling, falling...