

*Mad  
Mischief*

— A NOVEL —

Susan St. John

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## PROLOGUE

The door flew open and a tall, soaking-wet figure catapulted into the room wearing a confident grin on his ruddy face. Protecting a slide carousel under his well-worn leather bomber jacket, he landed next to a Kodak projector, his drenched boots touching down on the conference room's plush carpeting. He clicked his slide tray into place.

Sarah and Peter, who lived in California, were guests of a prominent Atlanta couple who had invited them out for a weekend of fishing and golf. When rain washed out those plans, their hosts suggested they watch a presentation by a well-known private safari guide, a guide they themselves were going to go to Africa with as soon as their schedule permitted. This was what accounted for Sarah and Peter now being in the well-appointed conference room of their host's business.

With the faint residue of a Scottish burr spicing his speech, the guide introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Max Einfield. Sorry to be so late, but I rode my motorcycle across town as fast as I could. It's a bit wet out there!"

Sarah became spellbound, even seduced, for although there were traces of an Atlanta rainstorm all about this famous guide, to Sarah, he was dripping with charm, accented by the scent of musk and leather.

She looked over at her husband, Peter, rigid in his determination that he not be moved against their plans to only travel to East Africa with Abercrombie and Kent, as planned. When Max began to speak, Sarah sensed that those very plans, which she had so meticulously organized, might shortly be undone. It was a premonition arising out of her once infallible sixth sense.

After casually flicking beads of water from his face and hair, Max removed his jacket, revealing a faded blue cotton short-sleeve shirt. His Levi jeans showed the early signs of being worn through.

The unusually high regard in which Max was held resulted from the fact that he had earned a PhD in Zoology and a master's in teaching, giving him an advantage over other guides when it came to understanding and predicting animal behaviors, thus bestowing to his clients a studied appreciation of their sightings. He had also received private flying instructions as a gesture of appreciation from a wealthy repeat client, thereby allowing him to become a licensed pilot; soon thereafter, he purchased a six-passenger plane. He was a self-taught, world-class photographer, and, not insignificantly, was reputed to be one of the most effective game spotters in East Africa.

Straight, bluntly cut red hair fell over his forehead like a burnished Celtic helmet. Max could be forty-five or fifty-five; there was youth in his step but statesmanship in his stance. His expression suggested mid-forties. His creased face said over fifty. No single factor betrayed his age, a fact that further enhanced his intrigue.

He made his way around the conference table exuding an air of assurance, his badly scarred right arm

## PROLOGUE

moving as his advance man. "Hi there. I'm Max. And you are—?" he asked in one form or another, managing to elicit a smile from every handshake.

When he reached Sarah, his roughened hand took hers and, glancing at her pale skin, he smiled into her eyes.

Max completed his circuit, then picked up the projector's remote switch and commanded the lights to be turned off. Like a gunslinger shooting cans along the top of a fence, he began to punch the forward button, triggering a succession of *National Geographic*-quality images. For Sarah, sitting still in her seat, the lifelike pictures became a magic carpet, transporting her more than nine thousand miles away to the East African veldt. The subjects were unfamiliar, yet for reasons she could not understand, they struck a haunting, personal chord.

One moment the peripatetic Max was at the side of the projector. The next, he was at the front of the room, standing beside a crisp close-up shot of a lion's head, pointing to the magnificent animal's whisker pattern.

"Every one of these configurations," he informed the group as he traced the facial hair and the ears of the beast depicted on the screen, "is different, unchanging, a unique fingerprint. It's their personal identification."

Image after image pulled Sarah deeper into their thrall. Nature, without Max to interpret it, would never hold the same allure. Even a series of pictures depicting a monstrous crocodile lunging at the belly of a zebra and exploding its stomach in midair only heightened Sarah's growing desire to be on the river's far shore. She whispered her enthusiasm into her husband's ear. "I can get us out of the Abercrombie arrangements. We must do

the safari this way, with Max! He could help you get just the type of quality pictures you want.”

After almost twenty years of accommodating Peter’s overbearing personality, she realized the risk in altering their journey.

Peter sighed in that way Sarah knew to mean he did not want to have this conversation. “A trip with Max would be a unique adventure and yes, I could get great photographs with him, but this is nothing like the safaris we’ve read about. This is hard work. I can’t get pictures like we’ve just seen without hours of waiting around, and I don’t want to have to deal with you.”

Sarah could well understand how someone, some other person in the room perhaps, might look at her and judge her as an improbable candidate: the makeup, the perfume, the perfectly coordinated outfit, the hair pulled back into a tight chignon secured with a black velvet bow. “Peter, you of all people should know I can handle anything, and that I have.”

Of course Peter knew that Sarah could handle all that was thrown at her, she thought with subdued frustration. That is why he had married her instead of all the other women he might have chosen. And perhaps when he witnessed her handling everything that a safari would entail, he would be reminded of why he had wanted her to be his wife. Maybe this safari would bring them close together again. A personal safari with Max would be intimate. And, Sarah dared to hope, perhaps she and Peter might be intimate again on what would be their biggest adventure. The issue of going to Africa with Max or with a more conventional operator came down to a match of wills. “Peter, this is not a coincidence, our being

## PROLOGUE

here. It's fate. There are no coincidences. We're meant to go on safari with Max."

Sarah could see that Peter was beginning to bend, perhaps not because of her but by the unflagging strength of Max's conviction in himself. This was a trait that Peter identified with. He shrugged, and Sarah breathed a sigh of hope.

She looked out through a small parting in the curtains of the boardroom. The rain had stopped, and a sliver of sun spread across the screen, lighting up the savanna.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE FIRST RELEVANT QUESTION

Sarah has stayed on in Nairobi after the safari so she can write in her journal, conduct interviews, and check facts that seem to elude her. And, she has been planning her own going-away party for the following week. But her days have been eaten up by Max and his endless requests for favors, which, for some reason she cannot grasp, she feels obligated to grant.

But at last, the day would be hers. Sarah's hand rests on the proof of it: a large brass handle protruding from the thick mahogany door. She releases the gold safety lock, feeling like a thief, for she is taking the first moment of time that will belong entirely to her.

To announce the irony of her plan, the phone peals out insistently just as the latch chain releases. The concierge had phoned earlier to inform her that her driver waited downstairs. Sarah is thirty minutes behind schedule and thinks the ringing is a courtesy reminder.

"Sarah, this is Eric, the pilot who flew you to the Aberdares. Has Max's lawyer been in touch with you?"

"No, I haven't heard a thing. Why? What in God's name is wrong now?"



Eric's lips sound as if they are pushed against the mouthpiece to shelter his voice from others. "Max has been arrested. The authorities grabbed him the minute he landed here at Wilson Airport with his group."

Sarah has already squandered her allotted time extension in Nairobi. She cannot afford another day that ignores her purpose for having stayed on in this frantic city. "Okay, Eric. I've got a driver waiting downstairs. I can be there in twenty minutes."

"Sarah, whatever do you imagine you can do?" he asks, sounding so damn British.

She has no idea what she is going to do. All Sarah knows is that she has managed to escape her husband, responsibility, and sanity, the effect of which is she esteems herself capable of anything.

Downstairs, Moses introduces Sarah to her driver, who, like most others in her service thus far, has been given the first name of a biblical figure or American president. He is Joseph.

Joseph opens the back door of the cream-colored Mercedes-Benz, motioning Sarah inside. She declines his offer in favor of riding in front with him, a position of proximity the social norms frown upon, and which she relishes all the more for this very reason.

The driver is almost six feet tall. His frame is sturdy, as if his muscles have been hard-worked and well-tested before settling down into a strong physique. A somewhat passive face bears the suggestion of extraordinary serenity. He comports himself with self-assuredness, a quality that stands out in marked contrast to Sarah's anxiousness, as she delivers instructions contradicting the trip sheet he holds up as if it is a winning lottery ticket.

“Joseph, we’re not going to the museum or the library. I need to go to Wilson Airport, and I want you to get me there in fifteen minutes instead of twenty-five. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Madam. And shall I wait for your flight to return?”

“I’m not flying anywhere. I’m going to Wilson because a man’s been arrested, and is, I’m afraid, in a great deal of trouble.”

“And Madam, you are able to fix this problem?”

“I don’t know. It’s an immigration issue involving his visa and Kenyan work permit.”

“Oh, then I will help you. I have a relative at the Immigration Department. I will take good care of you. Yes, Madam, this is why I am here: to help you. And after I am done and have solved the problem, I would like you to be my wife.”

Ordinarily Sarah would have judged his remark to be impudent, but he has delivered it in far too earnest a manner to receive any reprimand. Joseph—almost angelic in his appearance of wanting to do good—defies any harsh word. “I think you are asking quite a lot for helping me. Let’s just get Max out of jail before we start making any long-term plans.” Sarah laughs, certain he understands her effort to diffuse his intentions.

But the imperative has shifted, for he is now pushing the car beyond the pace of Nairobi’s traffic jungle, adding to the volume of sound by his unrelenting use of the horn. He steers the vehicle deftly around an overcrowded matatu minibus, dodging rusty, skeletal bicycles, skimming past throngs of moistened bodies crossing the busy streets, and creating scenes of chaos.

The colors of countless lavender Jacaranda trees swirl together with the effusive purple bougainvillea flowers hanging over gray cement walls. Yellow-green bananas and orange-yellow mangoes are piled high on fruit stands set back only slightly from the street. Blankets of variegated green leaves cover the sidewalk. Blacks, Asians, and whites whirl against the tightly rigged canvas of an intense blue sky.

Joseph is racing madly to create a tornado of blurred color. He has understood Sarah's directions perfectly.

"This person we will help, he is your husband?"

No, Sarah thinks. Her husband is gone, and within the shocking context of this realization, she has to ask herself, "What am I doing here? Why am I forcing this gentle man to break the law, to speed along the dangerous, madly congested streets of Nairobi, to help Max, a man who has expressed such obvious contempt for me?"

The answer is the same excuse she has used to rationalize every other action she has taken throughout her life: because it's the right thing to do. "No. He's not my husband. He was my safari guide."

"Ah, I see, Madam. He is your very good friend?"

"No, actually, I don't think I even like him anymore.

But he was the reason I was able to so completely experience the areas we visited, the animal behaviors we observed, and even some of the history of your country."

"I am very sorry, Madam, but I do not understand. If you don't like him anymore, why, then, will you help him?"

"Because, Joseph, he's an American citizen."

"Yes, I see. Then it is a very good thing to be an American citizen. No one would help me so much."

There it is again, Sarah acknowledges, the persistent conviction seemingly bred into every Kenyan man, woman, and child she has encountered thus far, that everything about America is unequivocally good.

Joseph speeds past the guard gate, the car's trunk barely escaping a hard slap by the armature's red metal limb. Sarah directs him to the last hangar in the long row of gleaming, corrugated tin. Here, he screeches to a stop, scattering dust about as if trying to disguise their arrival. This is a place Sarah has come to know over the last several weeks. Once again, she is at the home base for private charters, Kenya's Wilson Airport.

"Where should I be?" Joseph asks before unlocking and opening the door.

"Stand right behind me. Be close enough for me to turn around and grab you, okay?"

"Yes, Madam."

Sarah spots Eric immediately. He scratches his head, as if agitating his memory to recollection. The last time he saw her, he was looking over his shoulder from the cockpit of his plane to the backseat where Sarah was putting ink to paper thousands of feet above the sprawling Kenyan countryside.

"They just left for Nyayo House with Max. They're going to detain him until his trial."

As she heads back to the car with Joseph, Sarah's heart spasms in irregular palpitations and perspiration forms rivulets down her face. Somehow she must bluff through the next crucial stage: rescuing Max. He has inspired Sarah's picture of Nyayo House—the government building housing the offices of immigration and customs—during the safari, describing it in terrifying terms.

With Joseph again at the wheel, the car careens around corners and obstacles, as if attempting to shake sense into her, the horn screaming for all to hear. Sarah vaguely understands that there is no rationale for her rescue of Max, but she is operating on the very edge of reason, a place where her actions make perfect sense.

Joseph's worn shoes press hard on the accelerator, his broad shoulders swinging from right to left and then back again in a ride of professional daring. He bends the car to his own will and passes every impediment in the way of his single purpose.

At last, they approach a building reaching over twenty-seven redwood stories high, emboldened by a length of granite bearing large, white, badly soiled lettering: NYAYO HOUSE, Nairobi Provincial Hall. So this is it, Sarah realizes. Nyayo House. As Max had explained to her one night on the safari, at some point in history, in the lower hold of the building, prisoners were stripped naked, beaten, and made to suffer indignities. Cigarettes had been used to burn skin. Razors made to slash. Food and water withheld. It was Amnesty International's classic description of human rights abuse. The worst of these horrors may have been reserved for political prisoners, but it is, nevertheless, the building where Max is now being held.

Before stopping, Joseph elevates his body above the driver's seat, reaches into his back pocket, and withdraws a fat, dilapidated wallet. He fishes out a tattered business card. "I'm taking you to see my cousin, Cecil. Put this card in your purse. When I introduce you, take it out and give it to him. Tell him you are a good friend of this man. Then

he will be sure to help you. Get it back from him but don't do anything to let him see it belongs to me."

Sarah inspects the card inscribed with the words UNITED NATIONS and a name, under which bears the title "Representative to Kenya."

"Joseph, who is this person?"

"He is a man who is my friend. I was his driver and his bodyguard for many years, a long time ago."

No parking space is available, causing Joseph to position his vehicle illegally along a wedge-shaped piece of ground adjacent to the government building's lot. He motions for the nearest policeman. When the guard appears in front of Joseph, he is given the car keys along with a fifty-shilling note.

Then they are there, within the chamber of Nyayo House, running upstairs, turning through dank stairwells, moving past throngs of disconcerted foreigners, expatriots, black and white Kenyans. All are clamoring to be heard, their hands reaching out forcibly with fistfuls of paperwork, frayed files shoved under their arms.

They smoke, swear in their disparate languages, huddle, sweat, wear expressions of despair or frustration or, more often, fierce distrust, as if Sarah's and Joseph's legs will take them to their desired results faster than the others might reach theirs.

At the top of the seventh floor, Sarah finds a corridor that appears to be more abyss than hallway. The office belonging to Cecil is directly ahead. Joseph hovers a moment at the open door, saying nothing, his eyes lowered in a tactical effort to prevent Cecil from glancing up and becoming alarmed at the large, bulky intruder standing in his doorway.

Cecil finally takes notice, and when he does, there is an expression of abject surprise. Joseph begins to speak their common language. In a jocular voice, Cecil invites, "Oh yes. Come in, cousin. Come in."

Joseph and Cecil speak again, still rapidly, in the lingua franca of Kenya, Kiswahili, so that they alone understand what transpires between them.

While they banter unintelligible words, Sarah studies Cecil and, occasionally, he studies her. His pale gray pin-striped suit is contemporary and impeccable. He looks like a dandy, and yet his appearance reflects a radiance of childlike mirth, as if firecrackers in his soul were once lit and continue to sparkle. Bright teeth flash against his charcoal face, a contrast as compelling as the sun unexpectedly bursting through dark clouds.

He turns to Sarah and clasps her hand with both of his. Holding on in this personalized clench, he pumps her arm up and down in a careful, calculated manner. "I am so very, very glad to meet you, really. Joseph, my cousin, whom I have not seen in many years, has just told me about you. I know who you are, and why you are here. I think you have nothing to fear, really. I would be only too happy to be of service to you. But, first, let me tell you what I must do. I must obtain the file on this Max person. Then, it will be necessary for me to speak to 'the big man upstairs.' Quite coincidentally, I am about to see him soon, for a meeting in town."

With an exaggerated flourish, he picks up the receiver from the old-fashioned dial phone and brings it to his ear. In the demeanor of a man comically displaying power, he speaks words that result in a woman wearing a florid dress to enter his office, Max's file in hand.

Cecil asks Joseph and Sarah to step into the hallway. He sequesters himself inside his small, functional space only to open his door a few minutes later. "I will be out for a while, so please, go to lunch. Come back in about an hour, and we shall work everything out."

Sarah realizes she has not yet given Cecil the business card. She quickly withdraws it from her pocket, allowing him to study the implicit message. When he has reviewed it sufficiently, she takes it back. "Could I speak to Max for a moment, just so he'll know everything's going to be okay?"

"Oh no. Max isn't even here yet. Don't worry." He skips down the steps with the file neatly packed into his black leather briefcase.

"My God, Joseph, what did you tell him?"

"Madam, I told him you are the mistress of my friend, the UN Representative. He was very impressed."

"You did what?" Sarah interrupts. "How could you have said such a thing without my permission?"

"Please forgive me, but you are an attractive white woman. He would have made this conclusion once he saw the name of my friend, even if I had said nothing."

Sarah is appalled, but his logic acts like a sharp slap across the face, awakening her to the street smarts Joseph possesses and she so obviously lacks. "Did you also tell him you want to marry me?"

"I only told him, Madam, that we had spoken of it. Shall I drive you somewhere for lunch?"

"No, I don't intend to move. Christ, if we leave and Cecil returns, he'll think we've eloped! Joseph, you stay here in case Cecil comes back. I'm going to walk around."



"All right, Madam, but please, if people talk to you, never appear afraid. They like very much to intimidate foreigners."

"Joseph, you have nothing to worry about. In fact, your fears should be the other way around."

"I am sorry. I don't understand."

"I cannot be intimidated! If anything, you should be concerned with just how boldly I might act."

Her reply brings his first smile of the day.

As Sarah walks up a flight of stairs, a pungent ammonia-like odor fills her nostrils. When she reaches the eighth floor, she looks directly at a white plastic nameplate affixed to a door. Its black letters read: J.

Z. ONDUKO, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL IMMIGRATION OFFICER. Underneath is a second, black plate: PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRINCIPAL IMMIGRATION OFFICER.

Onduko is the very name Max used whenever he spoke of the person whom his lawyer was endeavoring to reach. Onduko is where the bribes stop. Onduko is "the man."

Sarah opens the door to find the same professional-looking woman who had earlier brought Max's file to Cecil. "Pardon me, I'm waiting for Cecil. I believe he's gone to a meeting with your boss. Do you know when they're expected back?"

"No, you are wrong. Cecil is not with Mr. Onduko. Mr. Onduko has gone to lunch alone."

"Are you absolutely sure? Cecil told me he was just going to a short meeting with your boss."

"Yes. But they are not together. I am certain."

"Then could you tell me where you detain individuals who are awaiting their hearing?"

"No, I cannot." She returns robotically to her typewriter.

Sarah's anger heightens, as evidenced in the clutched sound of her voice. "If I'm not mistaken, you're the secretary to the second most important man in this building, and you can't tell me where they hold people?"

She nods that this is so, and without looking up, her nails continue pecking at the keyboard, sounding like a blackbird working its beak feverishly on cheap metal.

Sarah rushes down the stairs to find Joseph propped up, as if he is a leaning sentry, his face blank, exactly as she had left him. "Goddamn it, what the hell's going on around here? Cecil didn't go to a meeting with 'the big man upstairs!'"

Joseph looks at Sarah with the same vapid look she just witnessed on the secretary. She feels every symptom of her low blood sugar, each one ushering in a concern that she is part of a shadowy something she cannot fully comprehend. Her shaking is not fear, but anger submerged in an underfed, exhausted body. "Never mind, Joseph. I'll handle this myself."

Joseph hears her, but his bland face makes it clear he does not intend to reply. He stands there, an enigmatic, ebony puzzle wrapped in pressed khaki slacks and a sporty short-sleeve striped shirt.

Sarah tries to open Cecil's door without success, then attempts the door to the right. Locked, it shelters several men whose voices can be heard within. With a force of desperation driving her, Sarah bangs on the door with her open hand, increasing the intensity of each thump. At last the door opens, revealing a tall wiry black man with sick, fluid eyes, yellow in the area that is usually white.

His open mouth gives way to badly discolored teeth. His anger holds him erect until he falters and sways toward her. His breath reeks of alcohol. Behind him, in his small, stuffy office, sit two other men who have taken off their suit jackets and draped them across the back of their chairs. Bent over, shirtsleeves rolled up, they are picking from a pile of rancid-smelling French fries spread on sheets of grease-stained wax paper.

"Why do you knock on this door? Stop. It is my lunchtime. I don't have to talk to you now."

"Just tell me where they keep someone when they bring them here, before their trial."

"No!" He thrust the door in Sarah's face with a force she did not anticipate from one so inebriated.

She pounds again with both hands. Moments feel like forever until the man abruptly reopens the door. "Tell me where Max is and I won't bother you again!"

"I don't know about any Max. You are not to knock again or I will call someone to take you away." He pushes the door into Sarah's face with a final slam.

She turns to Joseph and notices a delicate woman in her early twenties leaving an office at the far end of the hall, locking it behind her. Sarah walks up to the young woman, gathering her shredded composure. "Hello. I am from the American Embassy and I want to visit a citizen who's being held until his trial tomorrow. Mr. Onduko said I could see him, but I forget what floor he said he was on. Can you tell me where the American might be?"

The girl covers her small mouth, hiding her poor dentistry. She giggles, embarrassed at her fascination with Sarah's makeup and gold earrings, which must strike her as amusing in contrast to Sarah's stained and

crumpled safari outfit. "I do not know which room he is in, but he would surely be somewhere on this floor."

"Really? Thank you so much." Sarah returns to Joseph who, at a distance, looks as if he already knows Max might be on this floor. But perhaps, she thinks, it is just her imagination.

"Joseph, I don't know what the hell's going on, but I can assure you that I am very much up for the game. You better think about whether you want to stick around, because I can't predict what might happen."

Joseph shakes his head affirmatively. He leans back against the wall, the slightest smile lurking behind his face.

Sarah begins at one end of the hall, shouting, "Max, are you in there?" She plunges from one door to the next, knocking hard and bloodying her knuckles.

At the very last room, at the opposite end of the hall from where Sarah started, she is rewarded by the words, "In here."

She scans the door for a way to see him. A panel of glass at the top appears to be the only way this might be accomplished. Sarah motions for Joseph. "Put your hands together so I can stand on them. I want to see if I can reach up there."

Sarah is unable to gain the necessary height. Without words, Joseph points to the linoleum beneath their feet. She sits down and bends her head to the floor. From this lowly vantage point, sprawled out on cold prefabricated squares blotched with the permanent scars of accumulated filth, Sarah sees a hunched figure rocking on the edge of a mattress streaked with dirt, the squalid centerpiece of an otherwise bare room. Sarah's eyes are

drawn to the nervous, twitching fingers belonging to Max, the once supremely confident guide who conducted her private safari just three weeks before. These are the hands she remembers ably pointing out all variety of game, after which would come an explanation of the order, family, subfamily, genus, species, and subspecies. Here are the fingers on the hands that had come together repeatedly to amplify bird calls or animal vocalizations, the hands that had wrapped around complex camera equipment in a kind of private catechism.

Those hands Sarah had known so personally now knot and unknot in pained distress. He is incarcerated in Nyayo House, the very government hellhole he has so ardently tried to avoid.

"Max, get down on the floor so you can hear me. I've found someone here to help you. Everything's going to be okay."

"Sarah, I don't want you here pulling one of your goddamn 'wobblies.' Get the hell outta here. You're just going to make everything worse. We're talking about my life, and you could fuck up everything I've worked for."

Sarah is not surprised. There has been little evidence of humanity toward her during the last several weeks. Unwittingly, she continuously managed to rub him like a brass lantern, always releasing the worst of his many genies.

"Thanks for the warm welcome. How could things possibly be worse, Max? Why don't you direct your anger at your goddamn lawyer, the one who ought to be here instead of me?"

\* \* \*

First, there is just one man, and Sarah can see him clearly as he stands alone, profiled against the long hallway. But then there are more, so many that she cannot make out where one man starts and the next begins. She is looking at approximately ten figures, each dressed smartly in suits or jackets and pants. All of them stare with hardened faces.

Together, they represent one office or another of the bureaucracy that constitutes the seventh floor of Nyayo House. They chant their recrimination.

“Go away from that door.”

“You have no right to be there.”

“It is not allowed.”

“Get away from there at once.”

They move forward, stop, and then move back again. Sarah must subdue an urge to laugh, for each of the men is somehow ridiculously oversized, like putty characters of evil either grotesquely stretched up for tallness or sideways for great girth, depending on the whim of whomever pulled the clay.

After a time, their individual words fuse together: “Go away.”

Despite Sarah’s initial rounds of controlled entreaties, then stronger, louder, wilder protestations, she is not being allowed to see Max. Her incantations continue, rising periodically over Max’s repeated instructions to leave him alone, go away, and be damned to hell.

Time passes; men come and go. Even Cecil, the glib gray suit on whom Sarah had attached earlier expectations, eventually returns, looks angrily at Joseph, then bolts into his office.

Sarah screws her bottom to the plastic floor. And there is Joseph, watching her in a steadfast gaze that expresses pride, for as he has directed, his charge is not being cowed by the men looking down at her.

Sarah studies her untidy safari clothes, removes a camera from the top pocket of her shirt, and pretends to take pictures of the antagonists before her. This is an act calculated to incite the mob, but still no one opens the door to Max.

After goading these officials without results, Sarah takes out a cigarette and methodically lights it. She begins to tear empty pages of her journal from their spiral spine, crumbles them, and assigns them to a carefully constructed pile. She flips ashes atop the paper heap, thus, she imagines, threatening to ignite a fire for her audience of men, one of whom finally crosses the invisible line and approaches. In a voice of heavy concern, he both states and questions, "You are causing quite a disturbance, you know. I can tell you there is going to be a lot of trouble for you. What can I do to make you leave this place?"

Sarah looks at his young, willing face, and replies evenly. "You can do this: You can go to 'the big man upstairs,' Mr. Onduko, and you can tell him I am attached to the American Embassy, that I am a personal friend of President Clinton, and that I want this goddamn door opened in the next twenty minutes or I will call the President of the United States. Do you understand me?" As she delivers the words "goddamn door," Sarah hits it soundly with her fist, giving substance to her empty threat.

The man looks at her intently and turns around; he is heading to the eighth floor.

Sarah is fighting Max behind the door that separates them, the faceless men in front of her. Her throat is dry; swallowing has become increasingly difficult. There is nothing to drink. She continues to drag on cigarettes, consigning their ashes to the paper pyre at her side.

Forty minutes after the delivery of her ultimatum, the biggest man of the assembly appears, and for a moment Sarah thinks she might laugh hysterically. The man is so tall she indulges in a long, slow gaze to comprehend the magnitude of his height. This could only be "the big man upstairs."

But it is not a time to laugh. Onduko is in a raging fit of temper, his arms flailing out in every direction, his eyes shooting off several rounds of steel-cold indignation. When he opens his mouth to talk, he disgorges questions like the rappot of bullets from a short-range pistol. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he demands belligerently. "Why do you risk yourself for this person? Is he your husband? Is he your lover?"

Sarah tries to answer what Max is to her.

"Is he your lover?" Onduko demands again. "Answer me! Who is he and why are you here?"

Indeed, Sarah asks herself, how is it that she arrived in Nairobi with her husband, her health, her sanity, and her journal, and now finds herself alone, sick, and quite mad, throwing out insults and infuriating officials.

Why, she wonders, is she risking her life for Max, who has so adversely affected hers? Although she is barely able to think clearly, the shadow of an answer forming around the edges of what is left of her mind suggests



that all her life she has been a caregiver, ministering to the real or imagined needs of others. And that is why she is here now.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TEMPLATE

*Sarah's mind time-traveled to the stretch of the Serengeti where the scents of nature allied to perfect intoxicating perfumes. Confined as she now was, she could only inhale the stench of human waste.*

*She reflected on the animals that had looked upon her in varying degrees of assessment. There was no hatred in them such as that which now bore into her from the suited men held at bay by an invisible force.*

*Where there had been endless openness, now there was only the narrow passageway of the building with its bureaucrats. Flickering florescent lights replaced the bygone blue sky.*

*"The Big Man" interrupted her flow of memory. He bent over her as if he might strike her. Even then, she could not bring herself to care. Had he dared to do so, she only knew she would slap him back. Such was her false sense of fearlessness.*

\* \* \*

September 1993, several months after meeting Max Einfield and hiring him for their private safari, Sarah and Peter deplane at Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya.

Claiming their possessions at the luggage platform, they take their first steps into East Africa, each of them carrying the maximum-weight twenty-five-pound duffel bag on one arm, Peter with his camera in his free hand, and Sarah with a small blank notebook in hers.

It is 9:00 AM and already the effect of the intense equatorial sun has rendered the building's fan system useless. Outside the steamy, frenetic Immigration area, Max stands restlessly, trying to pick out of the crowd two faces he saw only once, monthsearlier.

Peter calls out Max's name, bringing him and his exaggerated smile immediately to their side. Max slaps Peter fraternally on the back, welcoming him to Kenya. He removes the weight from Sarah's shoulder, greeting her with a stiff one-armed hug and a sandpaper kiss.

"God, am I glad I found you. Your travel agent didn't give me any information except the airline. No problem, though, I figured it out."

They have only just arrived and already Max has secured their gratitude with the same diffidence as a porter matching suitcases to claim checks.

\* \* \*

Clean and rested, Max, Sarah, Peter, and a second imposing couple stand beneath the porte cochere of

the historic Norfolk Hotel, a relic of colonial times, with public and private rooms stiff from history, tradition, business deals, romance, and gossip. Right now, there is no opportunity for Sarah to contemplate the past, for the antiquated London taxi whistled out of traffic by the transportation captain putters its anxiousness to be off.

"Are you ready?" questions the man dressed in green livery.

"I was born ready!" Max responds. He will ride shotgun alongside the taxi on his motorcycle.

With the taxi door opened, the four enter, sitting on the edge of sun-parched leather seats. The taxi's first gambit is a quick U-turn and then a brief jolt to the end of the street. The taciturn driver turns again, making his way into the heart of the jumbled-up downtown area of Nairobi, a place of incongruities, where each sight stands alongside its definitive counterpart.

Sarah peers out at a freshly washed black Mercedes reaching the stoplight just inches ahead of a splintered wooden cart pulled by a dust-coated black man whose frame curves downward, his eyes fixed on the buckled pavement beneath his callused feet.

The hands of the other drivers on the street apply pressure to their horns, blasting loudly in protest of the unmoving traffic. These sounds compete with the urgent voices of mothers laden down by one or two babies strapped to their back, maneuvering between children and elders who are begging, and momentarily grateful, for anything their solicitations produce. Vendors scramble to sell one of their innumerable trinkets.

An armed policeman can be seen apprehending a small child whose companion has jumped on the back

of a white woman, tearing a chain from her neck and making off with it. The child, judged to be an accomplice, lies crouched under the raised stick of two uniformed men who have witnessed the attempted robbery.

The driver explains, "We don't want crime. It is very bad for tourism. I should not have come this way."

"But why must they beat a child like that?" Sarah demands to know.

"Oh, the child? He would only sell the stolen necklace and buy glue to sniff behind some building. He will die anyway, and probably very soon."

Others in this kinetic picture take a few shillings in exchange for something tangible. The sale of Chiclets in colored boxes appears to be monopolized by children with pronounced deformities. Able-bodied teenagers rush cars at traffic signals, eagerly hoping to sell yesterday's newspapers and week-old magazines at a steep discount. Headlines scream of brutal killings, kidnappings, bold robberies, surprise attacks, and political strife, while visitors leaving for or returning from their safari look out in bewilderment from behind the closed windows of their air-conditioned tour buses.

Corporate advertisers hawk their products from billboards, cinder-block structures, and the side of buildings. Philips, General Electric, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Gillette, they are all here, waiting to pass off merchandise that Sarah will learn has little or no remaining shelf life, flowing through distribution systems comprised almost exclusively of white men.

Old-fashioned storefronts stand in formation alongside modern edifices, like defeated militia unable

to pass inspection, with their faces of deteriorating paint, bones of broken bricks, and eyes of shattered glass.

The neo-cosmopolitan skyline starts to light up as numerous small bands of homeless people begin the nightly ritual of igniting fires in the city's parks, creating a source of heat against the coming cool of Kenya's night.

In the midst of all this activity, boys and young men are seen leaning on crumbling walls, sitting upon cracked curbs, or standing on the sidewalk against a building, causing a pattern of irregular dark stripes. Here are once hopeful men, gone from villages in a quest for jobs and a desire to work in a city that is without sufficient means to employ them.

And on every block, Askaris, drab-green-uniformed figures, wearing dark olive berets pulled low and clenching long wooden batons or rifles, can be seen. They are poised to deter the crime awaiting any opportunity within the jagged pieces of this scrambled scene.

Altogether, Nairobi is an energized dichotomy of past and present, a strange cavalcade of mixed messages daring the foreigner to understand. It discharges energy capable of igniting a flame. Sarah is aglow. She is falling passionately in love with this city. Falling in love in the way one does when infatuation is sudden, inexplicable, because of a look, a sound, a fragrance, a gesture—striking and combusting without reason or logic, just love for love's sake.

The seduction is interrupted when the cab stops in front of a whitewashed building with windows spilling rusty orange stains.

\* \* \*

The group arrives at the Haandi restaurant, named after a cooking utensil with a concave bottom for the even distribution of heat. Peter has selected this place for dinner after carefully reading from an assortment of guidebooks.

The room is filled with sophisticated locals, businessmen, politicians, and Asians and their families, all glancing about, occasionally casting eyes upon the open kitchen and Indian clay ovens. There is a swirl of turbans, beards, long black hair, bald heads, fair- and dark-skinned patrons, sarongs, safari outfits, suits, khaki slacks, and words spoken in foreign tongues. Smells of curry, herbs, and ground spices hang pungently in the air. Tea is passed at tables, oils sizzle, and waiters move about with specialties in covered dishes.

Max follows the maître d' to a table in the very center of this rich Punjabi cuisine. It is only now, after the challenge of ordering, that there is time to settle in, to learn more about Max, the plans for the next two and a half weeks, and to become acquainted with Thad and Julia, who have become Sarah and Peter's last-minute safari companions.

To Sarah, the couple appears especially dramatic, with their tall muscular bodies and fresh-faced good looks, as if nature had a special interest in how they were portrayed.

Sarah judges that Thad is above six feet tall and probably weighs in at well over two hundred pounds. His head juts forward so as to hear every word. His ears look like a pair of catchers' mitts, making the sentences of others into baseballs each glove reaches out to catch. He has the appearance of a yuppie poster child for the

forty-something success story that he is. The group soon learns that he has the financial means to indulge in off-road biking in the summer and downhill skiing in the winter. He drives a sport-utility vehicle when he could well afford a Porsche, even if his large physique could not.

He grins gamely and makes one thing clear: extracting the full measure of the days ahead is his single objective. His Nordic blue eyes hold a steady, animal-like alertness, conveying an acute concentration that Sarah judges will be expertly deployed during the safari.

Inspired by Thad's powerful physique, light blond hair, stubble of a beard, and newly purchased safari clothing, Peter has already begun to address him as Indiana, short for Indiana Jones.

Julia, Thad's girlfriend, is in her late twenties. She is tall enough to look him directly in the eye, and blessed with classic good looks that are emphasized when she removes her oval tortoiseshell spectacles and releases shoulder-length blond hair from her thick ponytail.

She exudes a charming naiveté and appears eager to please Thad, but not, Sarah guesses, at the expense of erasing herself. Bereft of all pretensions, Julia unabashedly refers to the safari as her first "serious trip."

Thad states for an invisible record that he was once divorced, noting that he is inclined to maintain the status quo. Julia shakes her head as if it is a neck exercise she has become accustomed to doing. They appear perfectly suited, but for their differences on the matter of matrimony, which will often be in the margins of what they say.



Peter sits uncomfortably, and Sarah knows that it is because he is always the one in charge. But for the next eighteen days, Max will run the show.

Peter's unease did not begin tonight. At his insistence, Sarah had sent Max innumerable questions prior to leaving for Kenya. Just days before leaving, Peter insisted on having Sarah ask Max to allow him to review the maintenance records on Max's plane, a request that Sarah finally refused, leaving his worries to form a feeding frenzy around the issues inherent in regular safety checks.

Looking at her husband, Sarah's imagination unfurls. With his silver hair and gray mustache, Peter, fifty-five, is about to push his Jewish heritage into the bush, looking somewhat like a slimmed-down version of Ernest Hemingway. Now, in an era of conservation awareness, when it is more acceptable to hunt with a camera instead of a gun, Peter will shoot with his Canon EOS II. Sarah knows that, claiming his photographs as his prize, he will be every bit as content as was Hemingway triggering his custom-made Springfield.

"Try this sauce," Max suggests to Sarah.

"What is it?"

"It's called garam masala."

"It's fabulous. There are so many different flavors. Cloves, cumin. I can't figure it out."

Max takes a pen clipped to his shirt and reaches in his back pants pocket for a small tablet. He writes down the recipe and pushes it towards Sarah. While spooning out generous portions of Navratan Biryani and Murgh Tikka Tandoori, Max blazes with boyish enthusiasm, fielding questions and asking several of his own.

"Hey," he asks, "where were you when I asked your travel agent to reach you about Thad and Julia joining us?"

"We were in the middle of the Baltic Sea, headed for St. Petersburg," Sarah answers.

"Why there?" asks Julia.

"Peter and I have traveled quite a bit to different parts of Europe, but I've always hoped to go to Russia. Peter took me on a cruise there for my forty-fifth birthday. My heritage is Russian, and I have been fascinated by Peter the Great for years."

"Why him in particular?" Julia wants to know, her face expressing genuine interest.

"He was just the most amazing man, interested in astronomy, agriculture, architecture, the construction of vessels. He traveled to the major shipbuilding cities of Europe dressed like a commoner and swore his attendants to secrecy regarding his true identity in order to avoid the ceremonies of court, but it was actually impossible for him not to stand out. He was a giant, so much taller than most everyone! He was six eight and—"

"No, Sarah, he was not six eight. He was six five," Peter, who has not read about Russia's czar, corrects her.

Conversation stops. Sarah's momentum and conviction are arrested.

"Peter, I've read every—"

"He was six five, but it's not important. Go on. It doesn't matter whether he was six five or six eight."

"If it's not important, why did you interrupt me?" Sarah sighs, experiencing the usual false hope that no one has noticed her small humiliation.

Max rushes in. "What do you guys know about Africa? Have you read anything?"

Thad, using his arm to wipe a thin line of beer foam from above his lip, is first to respond.

"I've been on the road for six months straight. Haven't read a thing but my company's P&L reports. I don't know what to expect, but I'm ready."

"I've read several novels to get a feel for Kenya," Sarah volunteers. "Of course I've read Hemingway's stories, and I've read about Beryl Markham, Elspeth Huxley, Dian Fossey, and the stories of the Leakey family."

"She's rather compulsive. You'll see what I mean. She can't help herself," Peter informs them, as if sharing a burden he has carried for too long. "She once spent a summer memorizing the entire Webster's dictionary."

Sarah would not have revealed this about herself; if questioned, she would have to admit that it was because she was put back a grade upon entering a new boarding school and that her only idea for dealing with the embarrassment was to become smart. Memorizing every word in the dictionary was, to her understanding, the way to accomplish this. She was on the Honor Roll the first semester after returning to school and every semester thereafter. The more subtle effect of her exercise was to instill in her a certainty that her intuition could be counted on to finesse any situation she would confront in the future.

"Julia, what about you? Have you read anything?"

"I haven't read too much, but I subscribe to *National Geographic* and I watch Animal Kingdom and The Discovery Channel all the time. I know a little something about animals; I train horses for a living and I hang out with vets. The only book I could find about Africa to read on this trip was *I Dreamed of Africa*."

“Uh-huh,” Max expels disdainfully. “You know, I really didn’t like that book.”

There is a moment’s lull as Max’s voice shifts into an innocent, yet mischievous tone. He leans his head toward the center of the table over the aromatic dishes. “Do you know the three things that trigger man’s survival mechanism?”

“Fear?”

“Jealousy?”

“Confrontation?”

“Lost luggage?” jokes Julia, whose bag, along with Thad’s, is missing, explaining their crisp, new safari outfits.

“Nope. The three things are the sensation of falling, loud noises, and snakes.”

Peter announces, “Well, the black mamba’s the worst. It’s absolutely deadly.” Then, with subdued curiosity, he asks, “What’s the likelihood of our running into one?”

Max deadpans, “Not significant. But the black mamba isn’t what you should be worried about. If one bites you, it’s likely I can save you, depending on the amount of venom injected. The puff adder’s the most lethal snake, Peter, and they’re definitely out there. Run into one of those babies, and man, it’s curtains. If you’re bitten, you bleed internally, and then die of exhaustion. You could accidentally provoke it, and then naturally, it’s going to react in self-defense. Yeah, we’ll have to be on the lookout for those guys.”

“I must tell you, I am going to be very nervous.”

“Do you have any other particular fears, Peter?”

“Well, I’m allergic to bee stings, so I brought along a special kit—”

Max looks at Peter with deep flexing eyebrows. "Oh, you get that nasty anaphylactic shock reaction? Well, if anything happens, I'll just 'trach' you with a straw!" Max laughs raucously at his own humor.

"God, this is going to be so great!" Thad proclaims.

Sarah is feeling invulnerable, thinking of herself as old enough to have experienced everything that life could throw at her. No, Sarah thinks, we will not encounter any difficulty. Not on this adventure.

"What are you afraid of, Max?" asks Peter, searching to even the score.

"What I fear isn't out there. It's right here in Nairobi."

Everyone strains to hear.

"It's a place called Nyayo House. Let's just say it's your worst nightmare."

Sarah notices that Peter's eyes are cast down. He no longer participates in the conversation, and she watches him withdraw into his private den of silence and thought.

Peter reaches for a small jar of peppers, but the slight tremble of his hand upsets the crockery. It drops and splinters in front of him, scattering the red-hot contents on the white tablecloth.

With this single unintentional act, the template has been etched.

## CHAPTER 3

# EPIPHANY

*"Get up. The door will be opened." It was "The Big Man." "Unlock it. Find the key. Let her see this Max person."*

*An immediate scattering followed the orders, the bureaucrats breaking rank like soldiers flying from an onslaught of pelting bullets. But the key was nowhere to be found.*

\* \* \*

According to Eric, the pilot, the Piper Comanche and its "cargo of five souls" (as he radioed in to the control tower) are flying north, from Nairobi to its destination high in the Aberdare mountain range. Max had asked Eric to fly his group this morning because he had sudden urgent business, but used the excuse of tracking down Thad and Julia's luggage. He had left it up to Eric to inform the group when he picked them up at their hotel that morning.

From the air, crop formations appear in rectangular, triangular, strip, circular, and semicircular patterns.

Gradually, this auburn land transitions to brown fertile soil swelling with mother-lode crops of coffee and tea.

The safari group's route courses above the area both history and lore refer to as "The White Highlands," a part of Kenya representing thousands of acres appropriated from the inhabitants by the British and Europeans who then proceeded to cultivate not only the earth but also a lifestyle that earned them the sobriquet "The Happy Valley Set."

Once a railway was built, the commissioner of the protectorate of Kenya intended that the line pay its own way and produce a return on the five million pounds it cost. One ambitious plan to help achieve this objective was the parceling out of a million acres of land to settlers who would cultivate farms in the highlands. In 1903, a commission granted 999-year leases, attractive to those of London's British officer class and sons of Europeans who could not benefit from primogeniture, the practice of leaving one's estate to the first-born male.

Canadians, Australians, and South Africans followed. Next came increasing scores of adventurers possessing indomitable spirits, people driven by passion. They came to be emancipated from the constraints of the restrictive society codes too civilized for their temperament. They came to escape or to avoid scandal. They came for the opportunity to make their fortune. Whatever their reason or motivation, the settlers came.

Fun and a certain bohemian abandonment flourished, while society norms, as these newcomers had known them in the countries of their birth, expediently disappeared. The White Highlands became a vast playground where repressed urges slipped out from behind stiff upper lips.