PROLOGUE

IT’S ALL HAPPENING AT THE ZOO
LOS ANGELES ZOO
WEST HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

LOCATED IN GRIFFITH Park, a four-thousand-acre stretch of land featuring two eighteen-hole golf courses, the Autry National Center, and the HOLLYWOOD sign, the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens is more of a run-down tourist attraction than a wildlife conservation facility.

Funded by fickle city budgets, the zoo resembles nothing more than a tired state fair. Garbage cans along its bleached concrete promenade spill over. It is not uncommon to catch the stench of heaped dung wafting from cages where ragged animals lie blank-eyed, fly-speckled, and motionless beneath the relentless California sun.

To the northeast of the entrance gate, the lion enclosure
is ringed by a slime-coated concrete moat. Once—if you squinted, hard—it might have resembled a small scrap of the Serengeti. But these days, undermaintained, underfunded, and understaffed, it looks only like what it is: a concrete pen filled with packed dirt and bracketed by fake grass and plastic trees.

By 8:05 in the morning it is already hot in the seemingly empty enclosure. The only sound is a slight rustling as something dark and snakelike sways slowly back and forth through a tuft of the tall fake grass. The sound and motion stop. Then, fifty feet to the south, something big streaks out from behind a plywood boulder.

Head steady, pale yellow eyes gleaming, Mosa, the Los Angeles Zoo’s female lion, crosses the enclosure toward the movement in the grass with breathtaking speed. But instead of leaping into the grass, at the last fraction of a moment she flies into a tumble. Dust rises as she barrel-rolls around on her back and then up onto her paws.

Lying deep in the grass is Dominick, Mosa’s mate and the dominant male of the zoo’s two Transvaal lions, from south-east Africa. Older than Mosa, he shakes his regal reddish mane and gives her a cold stare. As has been the case more and more over the last few weeks, he is tense, watchful, in no mood for games. He blinks once, briefly, and goes back to flicking his tail through the high blades of grass.

Mosa glances at him, then toward the rear fence, at the big rubber exercise ball she was recently given by one of the keepers. Finally, ignoring the ball, she slowly leans forward to nuzzle Dominick’s mane, giving him an apologetic, deferential social lick as she passes.
Mosa cleans the dusty pads of her huge paws as the large cats lie together under the blaring-blue California sky. If there is an indication this morning of something being amiss, it is not in what the lions are doing, but in what they aren’t.

For lions as for other social mammals, vocalizations play a major role in communication. Lions make sounds to engage in sexual competition, to compete in territorial disputes, and to coordinate defense against predators.

Mosa and Dominick have become less and less vocal over the past two weeks. Now they are all but silent.

Both lions smell the keeper well before they hear him jingle the chain-link fence a hundred and fifty feet to their rear. As the human scent strikes their nostrils, the lions react in a way they never have before. They both stand. Their tails stiffen. Their ears cock forward as their fur bristles noticeably along their backs.

Like wolves, lions hunt and ambush in coordinated groups. The behavior the two display now shows their readiness for taking down prey.

Dominick moves out of the grass and into the clearing. Even for a male lion, he’s enormous—five hundred pounds, nearly nine feet long, and four and a half feet tall at the shoulder. The king of the jungle sniffs at the air and, catching the human scent again, moves toward it.
TERRENCE LARSON, THE assistant big-cat zookeeper, opens the outer chain-link door of the lion enclosure, swings its hook into a waiting eye to keep it open, and drags the red plastic feed bucket inside. The sinewy, middle-aged city worker swats at flies as he lugs in the lions’ breakfast, twenty-five pounds of shank bones and bloody cubes of beef.

A dozen steps in, at the end of the chest-high wire mesh keeper fence, Larson, a former studio lighting tech at Paramount, dumps the meat over the fence and retreats a few steps. The meat plops onto the dirt in a tumble of wet slaps. Beside the open outer fence, he flips the bucket over and sits on it. He knows he’s supposed to stand behind the tightly locked outer fence to watch the lions feed, but it’s July Fourth weekend and all the bosses are on vacation, so what’s the fuss?

Sitting in the enclosure with the lions in the morning be-
before the zoo opens is the best part of Larson’s day. Tommy Rector, the young head of the big-cat department, likes the smaller, sprier, more affectionate cats, the jaguars and lynx, but Larson, ever since a life-altering trip to a Ringling Brothers circus at the age of seven, is a passionate lion man. There’s a reason this animal is a symbol of might, danger, and mystery, he thinks; a reason that all the famous strongmen—Samson, Hercules—had to wrestle these guys. Their power, their physical grace, and their otherworldly beauty still amaze him, even after fifteen years of working around them. Just as he did when he was working on films, Larson often tells friends he can’t believe he’s actually getting paid to do his job.

He takes a pack of Parliaments from the breast pocket of his regulation khaki shirt, and as he slips one between his lips and lights it, the Motorola radio clipped to the pocket of his cargo shorts gives off a sharp distress-call beep. He reaches for it, trying to guess what the problem could be, when the reedy voice of Al Ronkowski from maintenance comes squawking through the static; he’s bitching about how someone’s parked in his spot.

Larson half laughs, half snorts, turns down the radio’s volume, and exhales smoke through his nose in twin gray streams as he scans the grass at the other end of the hundred-by-two-hundred-foot enclosure. He wonders where in the hell the two lions could be. Mosa is usually waiting for him when he opens the gate, like a house cat who comes running at the sound of an electric can opener.

When he hears the splash, Larson flings away the cigarette and stands up. Panic.
What? No! The moat?

There is a raised berm and a protective platform to prevent the lions from falling into the water, but it actually didn’t stop one of them from falling in once before. It took the staff two hours to direct a terrified, soaked Mosa back to dry land.

That’s all he needs, with the bosses gone and the crew at half-staff. Play lifeguard to four hundred pounds of pissed-off, sopping-wet lion.

Going into a cage without backup: definitely a no-no policywise, but in the reality of a workday it’s done all the time. Quickly, he throws open the keeper’s gate and runs to the edge of the raised berm above the water.

He lets out a breath of relief when he spots one of the green Swedish exercise balls bobbing in the moat. He forgot about the stupid things. That’s all it is. Mosa somehow knocked the ball over the platform. Whatever. Whew.

Turning back around from the edge of the berm, Larson stops. He stands by the edge of the moat, blinking. Directly between him and the open gate in the keeper fence is Dominick, the male lion: still, tail swishing methodically, golden amber eyes riveted to Larson’s face. His breakfast lies untouched beside him. He sits there, huge, silent, staring at Larson with those flat, flame-colored eyes.

Larson feels his saliva dry up as the immense cat leans forward, then back, like a boxer feinting.

He’s posturing, Larson reasons to himself as calmly as he can, trying to keep his body perfectly still. Of course, the old tomcat’s simply surprised by his presence out here in the middle of his territory. Larson knows that in the wild, this grumpy twenty-year-old would have long ago been
killed by a younger challenger who wanted the females in his pride.

Larson figures he’s in a spot of bother here. He thinks about the radio, decides against it. At least not yet. He’s been in the cage with Dominick before. The old man’s just throwing his weight around. He’ll get bored with this little game of chicken and start eating any moment. Dominick has known Larson for years. He knows his scent, knows he isn’t a threat.

Besides, if worse comes to worst, Larson has the moat behind him. Three steps and he’ll be over the side and safe. Wet and humiliated and maybe with a broken ankle, but by the time the other keepers arrive, his skin will still be covering his bones and his guts will still be on the inside of him, where he likes to keep them.

“There, there, buddy,” Larson says—in a whisper, a shhh, baby-go-to-sleep voice. “I like your Mosa just fine, but she’s not my type.”

Larson senses more than sees the movement at his left. He turns in time to see something burst from the grass, massive, tawny, throwing a column of dust into the air as it rockets at him, growing bigger, picking up speed.

The keeper isn’t able to take one step before Mosa springs. Her head slams into his chest like a wrecking ball. All the wind is knocked out of him as he goes airborne and then down on his back ten feet away.

Larson lies on his back, dazed. His heart is beating so fast and hard, he wonders if he’s having a heart attack. The thought goes away as Mosa’s low, compressed growl reverberates beside his ear.

He reaches for the radio as Mosa puts her paws on his
shoulder and bites into his face. Her great upper canines puncture his eyes at the same moment the cat’s lower incisors slide with ease into the underside of his jaw.

Larson is as helpless as a rag doll as Mosa shakes him back and forth by his head. When his neck breaks, with a crack remarkably similar to a pencil snapping, the sound is the very last thing his brain registers before he dies.
MOSA GRUNTS AND releases the dead keeper. She uses the thumb-like dewclaw of her right front paw as a toothpick to dislodge a sliver of meat from her teeth. What’s left of Larson’s wristwatch falls to the dirt as she licks blood from her mouth.

Dominick, having already fed, is starting to jog for the open gate. At the end of the fenced corridor, the two pass the tiny crush cage the keepers shove them into when they need medical attention. They aren’t going to miss that.

They quickly cover the length of the big-cat service yard. At the far end, by the hoses, is a low gate and the zoo’s bright white concrete path on the other side. Both Mosa and Dominick clear the gate in a leap easy as a breath, and soon are racing down the zoo’s empty promenade. The two lions spring over the turnstiles and skirt
the parking lot for the nearest cluster of Griffith Park’s oak and walnut trees.

They trot up a scrubby brush-dotted hill and down its other side. They catch a human’s scent again on a hot breeze. They spot its source a moment later on one of the golf course fairways. He’s a handsome young black man in a red shirt and black pants. Getting nine holes in before work. He looks surprised to see lions on the golf course.

Dominick charges, knocking the man sideways, out of his shoes. His death bite takes away most of the golfer’s neck in a flowering burst of blood.

Dominick releases the dead man and rears back slowly as a police car glides down alongside the fairway from the north. He can smell that there are more humans inside this shrieking, shining box. He wants to stay and attack, but he knows that this box full of humans is of the same cold, difficult material as his cage.

The two lions run for the cover of the trees. At the top of the ridge, Dominick stops for a moment, gazing down at the city. Los Angeles spreads out beneath him, a brown field of humanity, woozily shaking in the smoke and the gathering morning heat, dissolving into fuzz at the edges.

That smell is stronger now, coming from everywhere. From the buildings and houses, from roadways, from the tiny cars snaking along the highways. The air is saturated with it. But instead of running away from it, Dominick and Mosa run toward it, their paws digging for purchase, mouths wanting blood.
BOOK ONE

THE BEGINNING OF THE END
Chapter 1

I WOKE UP shaking.

I panicked at first, thinking I was having a stroke or something. Then I opened my eyes, relieved, as I remembered it wasn’t me that was shaking. It was my apartment.

Outside the wall of dusty industrial-style windows beside my bed came what sounded like a regiment of giants rhythmically striking concrete with their rifle butts in a parade drill. But it wasn’t the jolly green marines. I knew it was the elevated number 1 Broadway local, rattling to shake the dead back to life next to my new fifth-floor Harlem loft apartment. Hadn’t gotten used to that train yet.

I winced, covered my head with a pillow. Useless. Only in New York did one have to actually pay for the privilege of sleeping beside an overpass.

But I was so broke I couldn’t even afford to complain. I sat
up. I couldn't even really afford to sleep. I couldn't even afford to think about money. I'd spent it all and then some; my credit was in the sewer. By that point I was in tunnel-vision mode, focusing my entire life on one desperate need: to figure things out before it was too late.

Things hadn't always been so dire. Only two years before, not only had I lived in a nonvibrating apartment, I was actually on the PhD fast track at Columbia University. I was the golden boy in the ecology, evolution, and environmental biology department, so close to the brass ring I could practically smell the book contracts, the cocktail parties, the cushy university appointments.

But then I came into contact with the event—what others called the mistake—that changed my life.

I noticed something. Something that wasn't quite right. Something I couldn't let go.

That's the way it happens sometimes. Life is flowing along like a fairy tale, and then you see something that you just can't categorize. Something that starts filling your every thought, your every dream, your every waking moment.

At least, that's the way it happened with me. One minute I was about to realize my goal of academic greatness, and the next I was wrestling with something I couldn't stop thinking about, something I couldn't shake, even as my world crashed around my ears.

I know how nuts it sounds. Intellectual promise plus obsession plus throwing away conventional success usually ends pretty badly. It certainly did for Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and Chris McCandless, the Into the Wild guy, who died on that bus.
But I wasn’t some malcontent or mystic trying to form a deep intrinsic connection to an ultimate reality. I was more like Chicken Little, an evolutionary biologist who had detected that the sky actually was falling. Except it wasn’t the sky that was falling, it was worse. Biological life was falling. Animal life itself. Something very, very weird and very, very bad was happening, and I was the only voice shouting in the wilderness about it.

Before I get ahead of myself, my name’s Oz. My first name is Jackson, but with a last name like mine, no one uses it. Unfortunately, my father is also known as Oz, as are my mother, my three sisters, my uncles, and all my paternal cousins. Which gets confusing at family reunions, but that’s neither here nor there.

What is here and there—everywhere—is the problem I was monitoring, the global problem I’d by that point pretty much devoted my life to trying to figure out.

It sounds grandiose, I know, but I feared that if I were right—and for the first time in my life I truly hoped I was wrong—a planetary paradigm shift was underway that was going to make global warming feel like a Sunday stroll through an organic community garden.
Chapter 2

I HOPPED OUT of bed wearing a pair of wrinkled gray pajama bottoms that Air France had gifted me with on a recent flight to Paris. Shaved, showered, teeth brushed, I got back into the fancy French pajamas. Working from home has its perks. Okay, “working” implies I was making money. This was another kind of work. Anyway. They were really comfortable pajamas.

Coming out of my bedroom, I retrieved another prized possession from the doorknob—my fire-engine-red woolen hat, which I’d acquired on a recent trip to Alaska. With my thinking cap firmly on the bottle, I got down and pumped out my daily hundred push-ups, a habit I’d picked up on yet another jaunt, a four-year stint in the US Army before college.

PE complete, I headed into my shop. I flipped the surge-protector switches, turning on the TV sets that I’d lined
across a metal workbench in the center of the industrial-style room. There were eight of them in all. Some were nice new flat-screens, but most were junkers I’d picked up diving Dumpsters after the digital signal changeover. Behind them, a Gordian knot of wires connected them to cable boxes and satellite receivers and a set of laptops and computer servers that I’d modified with the help of some electronic buddies of mine into the world’s biggest, baddest DVR.

As I waited for everything to boot up, I popped my first Red Bull of the day. Another number 1 train kicked up my heart rate along with a cloud of dust off the windowsills. Call me crazy—go ahead, you wouldn’t be the first—but after the initial shock, I kind of liked my apartment’s MTA-provided sound track. I don’t know why, but from the time I was a little kid up until I received my Rhodes Scholarship, my ADD-addled brain tended to fire on all cylinders when it was surrounded by headbanging noise. Old-school AC/DC, that was my bag. Metallica, Motörhead, with all the knobs cranked to eleven.

I frowned at the lightening screens, remembering my father, a lieutenant in the FDNY, watching the evening news. After a Bronx four-alamer, he would come home, drop in front of the tube, and at the first commercial, after a Miller High Life or two, he would say, “Oz, boy, sometimes I think this world of ours is nothing but a goddamn zoo.”

In front of me, animals began to fill the screens. Lots of them. All of them behaving very badly.

Fathers really do know best, I guess, because that’s exactly what was happening. The world was becoming a zoo, without cages.
SETTLING BACK INTO my tag-sale leather rolling chair, I lifted a new legal tablet from the fresh stack on the table to my right, clicked a pen, wrote the date.

I turned up the volume on set number four.

“A missing seventy-two-year-old hunter and his fifty-one-year-old son were found dead yesterday,” said a correspondent from WPTZ in Plattsburgh, in upstate New York, a good-looking brunette in a red coat. She held the microphone as though it were a glass of wine. “The men were apparently killed by black bears while illegally hunting outside of Lake Placid.”


“No, there was no way they could have been saved,” the
trooper said. He blew his p's and b's straight into the mike. “Both men were long dead and partially eaten. What's still puzzling to us is how it happened. Both of the men's weapons were still loaded.”

He ended the report with the claim that the father and son were known poachers, fond of using an illegal hunting method known as deer dogging—using dogs to chase out and ambush deer.

“Back to you, Brett,” the brunette said.

“Not good, Brett,” I said as I muted set four and cranked up set eight. Blip, blip, blip went the green bars on the screen.

On it, a news program from NDTV, a sort of English-speaking Indian version of CNN, was starting.

“A Keralan mahout was killed yesterday while he was training elephants,” the middle-aged anchorman said. He had a mustache and a Bollywood swipe of hair; there was something of Clark Gable about him. “Please be advised: the footage we are about to show you is graphic in nature.”

He wasn’t kidding. I watched as an elephant, tied to a stake in a village square, stomped a little guy in front of her into the ground. Then she wrapped her trunk around the guy’s leg and tossed him up in the air.

The anchorman explained that the attack had occurred while the mother elephant was being separated from its baby during a training ritual known as phajaan.

I’d heard of it. Also known as torture training, phajaan is the preferred way of elephant training in rural parts of India. A baby elephant is separated from its mother and put in a cage so villagers can whack it with hot irons and sticks that
have nails on the ends. The brutal beating continues to the point where either the baby elephant allows itself to be ridden or dies.

“Guess Ma wasn’t down with the program, dude,” I said to the dying elephant trainer on the screen.

But the pièce de résistance was the breaking news I pulled off Fox News on set two. The Barbie doll on TV informed me that two lions from the L.A. zoo had not only killed their keeper and escaped, they’d also killed some guy on a nearby golf course. On the screen, half a dozen LAPD with M16s cordoned off a block lined with palm trees, people from animal control milling around behind them in white jumpsuits.

“The lions were last spotted in the La Brea neighborhood, near Beverly Hills,” chirped Megyn Kelly, her vacant eyes nailed to the teleprompter.

I threw down my pen. I was pissed, pissed, pissed. Skin itching, heart going like a hammer. Was everyone asleep? Under hypnosis? High? Was everybody frigging stoned?

I grabbed the pen again and scribbled three letters on the pad, hard enough to tear the paper.

H A C

Then I threw the pad of paper across the room.

“When will you people listen?” I yelled at my wall of media. It was time for more caffeine.
Chapter 4

I SAT BENT over in my chair for a few minutes of therapeutic seething. I listened to an uptown train blasting by my window, then a downtown one. Then I crossed the room, picked up the pad again, and went back to work.

HAC: Human-Animal Conflict. This was the theory I was working on.

Basically, it was my belief that all throughout the world, animal behavior was changing. Not for the better, either. Not even a little. On every continent, species after species was suddenly displaying hyperaggressive behavior toward one particular animal.

The enemy was us. You and me. People. Man, man.

The facts were undeniable. From Romania to Colombia, from the Pyrenees to the Rockies, from St. Louis to Sri Lanka, there’d been an exponential increase in animal
attacks on humans—by wild leopards, bears, wolves, boar, all kinds of different animals, you name it. In fact, the worldwide rate of wild animal attacks in the last four years was double the average of the previous fifty. For emphasis, I repeat: double.

It wasn’t just wild animals, either. In Australia, injuries from cats and dogs had swelled by 20 percent. In Beijing, it was 34 percent. In Britain, nearly four thousand people had needed hospital treatment for dog bites in the previous year.

For some reason I hadn’t pinned down yet, some kind of concerted transspecies evolutionary backlash against Homo sapiens was underway. Or, to put it in other terms, something was driving animals to go haywire, and the time to do something about it was running out quicker than the plastic wand supply at a Harry Potter convention.

I know how it sounds—wing-nut city. Different species of nonhuman animals working in some sort of collusion against humans. It’s absurd. Insane, impossible. I used to think it was a big, strange coincidence, too. Just lots and lots of totally unrelated, isolated incidents. Initially, it was just a goof among my colleagues that I’d started to track the phenomenon on my tongue-in-cheek blog, Man Against Nature.

I stopped laughing when I started looking at the evidence more closely. Nature, actually, was at war with man. And our side wasn’t even noticing.

The expression “between the devil and the deep blue sea” is a nautical one. The devil is what old sailors used to call the seam between two hard-to-reach planks on a ship. In order to caulk it, one had to be suspended from a plank held over the water. If you fell into the ocean, it was certain death. If
you didn't caulk the plank, the ship might sink. Either way was dangerous. Either way, you were screwed.

That's exactly where I was now, out on a line, suspended between bad and worse. I felt like I was out there caulking the devil, hanging above the deep blue sea.

If I was wrong, I was crazy. If I was right, the world was doomed.

I’d been doing my best to get the word out, but was getting nowhere. I’d maxed out all my credit cards and those of several sympathetic relatives, speaking to anyone who would listen. My trip to Paris was for the purpose of attending an animal rights conference that I’d fibbed my way into in order to get some speaking time. I only got about halfway through before I was laughed off the stage.

No, people weren’t getting on board in the slightest. You’d be shocked and dismayed at the amount of intellectual intolerance directed at people who favor red lumberjack hats and wrinkled pajamas.

The L.A. zoo thing I’d just seen was the topper. The report had said that the cats had been born in captivity. Why would a pair of zoo lions one day just decide to start killing people and rampage through a city? Because there are two hundred channels and nothing is on? It didn’t make sense. Zoo lions don’t just go out berserking. There’s simply no reason for them to. Until now.

I speed-dialed my press agent to try to get on Fox. As usual, I got kicked immediately into voice mail. Even she thought I was nuts, and I paid her. Not a good sign.

After I recorded my latest plea to her, I decided to do the only thing I could think of. I plugged myself into my iPod
and blasted some Motörhead to get some much-needed mental juices flowing. Help me, Lemmy. I slurped more Red Bull and tried to think while watching some more of the world’s unfunniest videos.

I sat up when Attila yanked my earbuds out.

“Yo, Attila,” I said. My roommate held out his hand for a low five. I gave it to him. “Look at this craziness. Every time I think things are going to calm down, the activity doubles. Sarah won’t call me back. Boy Who Cried Wolf, I feel your pain, you know?”

“Heeagh! Heeagh! Heeagh!” said Attila.

Then he made a few panting hoots and scrambled into my lap and gave me a sloppy kiss and hairy-armed hug.

Attila, by the way, is a chimpanzee.
Chapter 5

I KNEW THE TVs bothered him, so I took Attila by his hand—it was leathery and surprisingly soft, like a glove—and led him into the kitchen. Attila: five years, four feet, and a hundred pounds of chimpanzee.

For breakfast I gave him a mango, a stack of Fig Newtons (which he went ape over), and half a leftover turkey club. Today’s featured dessert was applesauce mixed with crushed-up vitamins and Zoloft.

That’s right, Zoloft.

Even apes need happy pills in our crazy world. Or maybe just the ones who live in New York City.

I brushed Attila’s teeth and brought him back to his room. Scattered across the newspaper-covered floor were Attila’s playthings: a sandbox, a toy chest filled with balls and dolls, an air hockey table, and an old pop-a-shot basketball
machine. Actually, those last two were more my toys than his. But the Wii was definitely Attila’s. He could kick my ass at bowling.

I stood in the doorway and watched him play a little while. I’d fixed up the doorway to his room with a sturdy grate of steel wire, though he was getting older and I knew it wouldn’t be long before he found a way around it. I’d have to find another home for him soon. Attila’s favorite toy these days was an American Girl doll I’d recently bought him. She had braids and a gingham dress, very Little House on the Prairie. Attila rocked the big blond-haired doll back and forth and kissed her. Then he brought her over to me and held her up so I could kiss her, too. Attila panted, content, and took the doll back over to the beanbag chair in the corner and began to pretend to feed her.

The people who say their dogs are like children to them never lived with a chimp, believe you me. I shook my head and smiled at my little buddy. It was nice to see him quiet, calm, having fun. That certainly hadn’t been the case when we first met.

I found Attila two years before at the Willis Institute, a South Jersey bio-med shop where I’d been hired as a lab temp. I was cleaning up late on my second day when I opened a door, and there he was. The cutest damn three-year-old ape you ever saw, lying there with his pink face pressed against the cold bars of his tiny cage.

He was staring at me miserably, his eyes red-rimmed, his nose running to beat the band. Most biomedical research with chimps works like this: they infect the chimp with some disease before giving it the new cure they wanted.
to test out. If the cure doesn’t work, then whatever; the chimp dies. Or they look for side effects and so on. Flipping through the paperwork attached to the cage, I saw that some intrepid human had been doing some type of weird olfactory research on him. Testing perfumes or something.

When this little ape—he wasn’t Attila yet; back then he was number 579—looked at me so searchingly, so sadly, with his big brown eyes, my sucker’s heart came up with a plan. A week after the job ended, I found myself heading south down I-95 again with the DO NOT COPY lab key I’d very absentmindedly forgotten to return. When I pulled out of the lab’s parking lot after midnight, Attila was lying down in the back of my beat-up Hyundai Sonata, covered in Papa John’s pizza boxes.

The first few weeks in my apartment he’d been wary, hypervigilant, hardly getting any sleep as he waited fearfully to see if I would hurt him. A vet friend of mine diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder and wrote out a scrip for the Zoloft, which worked like a charm.

I know what you’re thinking. I’m either a left-wing animal rights loon or I watched one too many episodes of B.J. and the Bear as a kid. Or insane. Or an idiot. I usually don’t tell other scientists I have a chimp in my apartment. I never planned on being the twenty-first-century Man with the Yellow Hat. It just kind of happened. My original thought was to drop Attila off at an animal sanctuary in rural Louisiana that takes in retired research monkeys. And that is still my eventual plan. But for the time being, Attila lives with me.

Attila put the doll down and walked to the door of the
terrace off his room, tapping on it to be let out onto the fenced-in outdoor space, where I’d set up a tire swing.

“Think fast, Attila! Pit attack!” I said, digging in for tickles.

“Oo-oo-oo-oo ah-ah-ah heeaagh heeaagh hyeeaaaaagh-hhh!”

I watched him knuckle-run over to the swing and jump on it with a scream of joy before I turned, shut the gate, and headed back to work.
LYING FACEDOWN IN the tire swing, Attila waves his long, powerful arms to swing himself back and forth. The tips of his long, knotty fingers graze the ground. Strong, lean arms, built for climbing trees. Like most chimps, Attila likes to play. He likes wrestling, laughing, being tickled.

And, like humans, he is sharply status-conscious and capable of deception.

He is more like people than any other living creature.

When Attila spies the man down the hallway, he makes a high, curt cry, indicating his agitation, his anxiety. Getting no response, Attila crashes back into the tire swing and hurtles himself back and forth, the chain creaking loudly under the strain.

Everything is so strange. The moving, boxlike shapes below. The small thunder overhead sometimes. Sometimes,
everything suddenly has the smell. The Smell. The scary smell, the Bad Smell, the one that used to fill his cage in the big bright room, the smell that makes Attila's stomach hurt and the fur on his back stand straight up. The smell is getting stronger. Always stronger. Even outside. More and more each day.

Bored, angry, afraid, Attila turns away from the window and searches around his play area until he finds the mirror. He holds it up in front of his face and looks at himself. Like all chimps, he recognizes himself. He's now five, and his face is losing its pinkish tinge and getting darker. His tuft of wiry white chin hair is almost gone.

Tiring of the mirror, he puts it aside and runs back and forth, shaking the fence, shrieking down at the strange walls and moving things. After a while, he begins to amuse himself by tossing around the stuff on the terrace. The plastic chair. The Thomas the Tank Engine big wheel. Then his gaze falls on a stuffed bunny. He picks it up and brings it over to the corner.

He cuddles it, delicately petting its soft fur with his fingers, when a breeze wafts in over the terrace, and the Bad Smell hits his nose like a punch.

Attila rips the bunny in half with his hands. A chimp's grip is as powerful as a pit bull's jaws. He makes a low howling sound as he tears it to fluff and tatters. Then he stuffs the pieces of bunny through the holes in the fence, hooting as they flutter like snow, like ash, down to the rear alley of the building.

This makes Attila feel better.

After a minute, Attila flops himself back into the tire swing again, and wheels himself in circles with his long arms.
Chapter 7

FOR THE NEXT hour or so, I sent out feelers to all my contacts about the lion attack in L.A. to get their reaction. I made an effort to get in touch with a man named Abraham Bindix, a safari guide living in Botswana, whom I’d met in Paris. Guy knew a hell of a lot about lions, and he was actually one of the few people I’d met who didn’t think my HAC theory was total loony tunes.

I was still waiting to hear back from people and putting in my second call to my press agent when I got a text.

HAC 911! WHERE R U?

“Shit,” I said. I knew I’d forgotten something.

On my way, I text-lied back. Then I called down to my super's apartment. Five painfully long minutes later, an elderly woman arrived, faded floral-print dress dangling from her little bones, arms full of needlepoint and Spanish crossword-
puzzle books. It was the super’s mother, Attila’s occasional babysitter. She didn’t have to do anything except call me in case of an emergency.

Attila was looking in the mirror I’d bought him when I arrived at the terrace door.

“Hey, good-lookin’. Mrs. Abreu is here to watch you, buddy, so be good, okay? I have to check something out, but when I get back, we’ll play some soccer. I promise.”

Attila dropped his head, his lips protruding in a pout. Until I opened my arms. He almost knocked me over as he leaped into them. He let loose with a series of whooping howls. It was his signature pant-hoot, which chimps use to identify themselves.

Attila was visibly pleased as I copied his pant-hoot back at him, whoop for whoop.

Farewells over, I threw my Cannondale road bike onto my shoulder, carried it down the five flights of stairs, and started to ride north up traffic-clogged Broadway. Head down, I put it into overdrive, sailing past gypsy cabs, C-Towns, flower shops. My thighs began to throb around the 140s as Broadway started its long ascent into Washington Heights.

Cutting off a garbage truck at 159th Street, I made a left onto Fort Washington Avenue and followed it as it looped around to the north. A few minutes later I took a right onto narrow 181st Street and squealed to a sweaty stop in front of a once-grand prewar building. There was a 99 cents store beside the building’s entrance, and after I U- locked my bike, I went in and made a purchase that made the stone-faced Chinese lady behind the counter break into a leering grin.
I dripped sweat in the building’s dingy vestibule as I thumbed the buzzer for the apartment of “N. Shaw” and received an immediate buzzing-in. N. Shaw met me in the sixth-floor hallway just outside the elevator, her sneakered foot below her blue-green scrubs tapping agitatedly against the faded tile floor. This really was one HAC emergency, it seemed.

“I can’t believe you. You know how little time I have between class and my shift,” said Natalie, as she shoved me down the hallway and into her apartment.

Natalie was statuesque in scrubs. Bottle-green eyes, red hair—and I mean red, red, Irish girl’s red hair—creamy skin, so many freckles on her it was like a pastry chef had been at her with a cinnamon shaker.

“You promised you’d be here waiting. ‘With bells on,’ I believe was the term you used,” she said, green eyes glowing like kryptonite as she yanked at my shirt in her foyer. Now her hands were on my belt. “Let’s see some bells, Ozzy.”

Natalie was an explosion of sex, a queen-size libido in hospital turquoise. She was also a brilliant Columbia med student on track to becoming a neurologist. It was a nice combination, though sometimes I wondered if she wanted me more for my body than my mind. Guess I’d have to live with it.

“No bells, but I did manage to pick you up a little something,” I said as I took my 99-cent purchase out of my back pocket.

Dangling from my finger was a pair of the slightest, rudest thong panties Thailand had ever produced, candy-apple red and transparent as cellophane.
“Who says I don’t know the value of a dollar?” I said. Natalie planted her hands on her hips.

“Let me get this straight. First you’re late for the only chance we’ve had to have sex in three days,” Natalie said, cocking her head, eyes in slits. “Then you show up wanting me to slip into some slutty trash a streetwalker would be embarrassed to wear?”

“Pretty much,” I said.

“You didn’t kiss that monkey before you came over here, did you? If you did, then turn the hell around.”

“Nope,” I lied with perfect conviction.

“In that case,” she said. She grabbed the panties from my hand. They stretched, snapped like a rubber band off my finger.

“I really hate you, Oz,” she shouted over her shoulder on her way to the bedroom.

“I hate you too, honey.”

“Get on the couch,” she ordered from behind her open bedroom door. I could just see her shimmying the panties up her legs in the bedroom mirror. “Take off your shirt, leave the pants. I want to undo the belt with my teeth.”
“THAT...WAS...,” NATALIE started to say. She was out of breath, biting a knuckle, her slippery body sprawled like a broken marionette on the floor of her bedroom, where we’d ended up half an hour later.

“Jungle love?” I asked, untying the 99-cent purchase, which had somehow become tangled over my left shoulder. I brushed back some broken glass from a picture frame that had fallen off the wall. It was a photo of her dad, a Connecticut equities trader. Girl had some blue blood in her. I turned it over and scooted it under the bed.

“Equatorial rain forest love,” Natalie said, rolling on top of me. She licked my earlobe. “I mean, doing it standing on a couch?”

“Well, if you recall, I was the only one standing,” I said. In
the corner of my eye, the winking red light of my iPhone let me know I had a message.

“How could I forget?” she said, thumbing sweat out of her eyes. “That wasn’t biology. That was geology. You know, seismology, tectonics.”

“It’s like Archimedes and I always say,” I said. “Give me a place to stand, and I can move the world.”

I waited until Nat headed for the shower before I retrieved my phone. My message was a text from Abraham Bindix, my lion man.

Oz, unbelievable. It’s not just L.A. It’s happening here, 2!

I called him immediately.

“Oz, you are not so crazy after all,” Abe said in his Afrikaans accent, with his slightly rolled r’s and chopping-block consonants. “You were right. Lion behavior is wrong, absolutely wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. I just got back from a curtailed hunt, up north, near Zimbabwe. We came upon a village—an entire village—emptied out. From one end to the other was lion spoor and blood. I’ve never seen or even heard of such a thing.”

There was a note of panic in Abe’s voice. Which was odd, coming from this burly Afrikaner who looked like a retired strongman from the circus.

“In fact, I’m here dealing with the military, so I cannot exactly talk about it. But when I saw on the news about the lion attack at the L.A. zoo, I knew I had to call you. You have to come here to Botswana, man. And bring cameras. You and the rest of the world have to see this to believe it.”

“Say no more,” I said. My iPhone pinched under my jaw, I snatched up a pen and looked around Nat’s bedroom for
something to write on. “I’m packing a bag and catching the next flight. Where can you meet me? At the airport in Maun, is it?”

“Right, man. Maun. Let me know which flight you’ll be on as soon as you can. This is incredible, terrible, incredible.”

“I’ll call you when the first flight changes over,” I said as Nat came in, wearing a towel.

“Right, man,” said Abe, and hung up.

“Um, flight? You’re going somewhere?” she said. I was scribbling notes on the receipt for the panties.

“On a, uh... a trip,” I said.

“I gathered that much. Where?”

“Botswana,” I cough-said.

“What?”

“Botswana.”

“Botswana. Africa?! Are you nuts?” She flicked her wet hair over her shoulder. “No, of course you are. Silly question. But you can’t do that. People can’t do that. You can’t get a phone call, and then, like, call a taxi out to JFK and go to Botswana! Especially if you’re unemployed!”

“You’re right,” I said. “What the hell do I do with Attila? Can you watch him for me?”
“SO NOW I have to babysit a monkey?”

“An ape,” I said.

Nat was beginning to get actually pissed at me now, not just play-pissed.

“The answer’s no, Oz. You know how creeped out I get. Besides, I have class.”

“Relax. My super’s mother has it mostly covered. You just have to check in on him once a day and give him his meds. Please. You could polish up your bedside manner.”

“On a monkey?” she shrieked.

“An ape!” I said. “Besides, this trip is the breakthrough I’ve been waiting for. If I get some tape of abnormal lion behavior in Africa and couple it with the L.A. zoo breakout, people might listen, and we can start trying to figure this thing out for real. Humanity is in jeopardy. We can—”
“Please,” she said. “Don’t give me the HAC spiel again. Just don’t. I really can’t believe you, Oz. First, you drop out of the PhD when you’re practically ABD—”
“I was bored.”
“Then for over a year—I don’t know, for a hobby?—you decide to randomly disrupt classes at New York’s finest institutions of higher learning. You were lucky NYU didn’t press charges for the chemistry thing.”
“I was trying to get people to use their goddamn heads.”
“I like you, Oz,” Natalie said. “I know you’re brilliant, but this HAC thing is really starting to get between us. With my class schedule, there’s barely enough time for us to even see each other. I mean, I can’t even remember the last time you took me out to a real restaurant. Now you’re leaving for Africa.”

I looked at my girlfriend, perched on the edge of the bed. She was gorgeous. And she liked beer and Chris Farley movies. She played Modern Warfare 2 with me—and was good at it. We watched basketball together. She was a Celtics fan, but that was one of her only flaws.

That’s when I shocked her—and myself.

“How about this?” I said. “I go to Africa. If it’s another dud, I pack up my End-Is-Nigh sandwich boards, hand in my white–Harlem Globetrotter ID card, and get a job where I have to wear pants. Agreed?”
“If you come back.”
“Don’t be ridiculous. Is it a deal?”
She rolled her bottle-green eyes.

“Fine, Tarzan. I’ll watch King Kong while you go into the jungle, even if it means for the last time. But concerning
Attila, don’t think this is some sort of mommy tryout. I told you I don’t want kids. Not with you. Not with Leonardo DiCaprio. No one.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “Relax. I just have a chimp who needs to eat. Have you seen my boxers anywhere?”

She finally smiled.

“Try the couch cushions in the living room.”
Chapter 10

I LEFT NATALIE’S apartment, a little uncertain of what I’d just gotten myself into. What if Botswana was a bust? Sometimes I wish I could put my mouth in a cage. It’s always pushing me into corners. I’d rather picture myself in a coffin than in a cubicle.

But by the time I unlocked my bike, I decided that I actually needed my own ultimatum. This was it. It really was time for me to put up or shut up concerning HAC. If a pride of maniacal lions didn’t open the world’s eyes to what was coming down the pike, then nothing would.

Back at the apartment, after I relieved and paid Mrs. Abreu, I took out Attila’s folding cage from the closet and assembled it. Attila whimpered when he saw me putting it together, knowing what it meant when I had to bust the thing out. I hated to delegate the poor guy to six-by-four-foot
solitary for the time I’d be away, but there wasn’t much else I could do. I wrote a quick note for Nat to double his Zoloft and increase his vitamin D supplements, since he wouldn’t be able to exercise out on the terrace.

After I got the cage put together, I let Attila in from the terrace and set him up in his beanbag chair for a special treat. I gave him his lunch as I played his favorite Beatrix Potter DVD, *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies and Mrs. Tittlemouse.*

As he sat contentedly watching, I ran downstairs to get my bags from the storage bin. When I came back less than five minutes later, I couldn’t believe what was going on.

Attila wasn’t in front of his DVD player anymore; he was in the shop. He’d already hurled two of my TVs into the wall and was standing on the table, banging a laptop against the corner.

“Attila!” I shouted. “Stop it! Get down this instant! What the hell are you doing?”

Attila turned, screeching.

For a moment—just a brief, brief moment—I saw something in his eyes, a coldness, a meanness, that I’d never seen before. I actually thought he would swing the laptop at me.

Then the moment passed. Attila dropped the computer and leaped off the table and into the corner with his head down.

“March, mister,” I said, grabbing his hand and taking him to his cage. He tried to pick up the American Girl doll as we passed his room.

“No,” I said, snatching it away.

“Bad Attila. Bad boy,” I said, shutting the gate and locking it. After I swept up the broken glass and cleaned the chimp
crap off the DVD player, I got on the Internet to book a flight to Botswana. The best I could do was a flight that left the next morning, with a stopover in Johannesburg, for three thousand bucks. My parents wouldn’t be happy, but I’d have to dip into the principal of the small trust Grandpa Oz had left me.

I packed. Passport, clothes, gear. I had a 35-millimeter Nikon with a superzoom lens, but my pride and joy was my professional-grade Sony DSR-400L camcorder. I took it out of its padded bag and tested its lights and charged up its lithium batteries before I stuffed it all away again.

I was hustling, bringing everything into the hallway, when I heard the whimpering.

It was Attila. He was sobbing after receiving his scolding.

I went into his room and opened the cage.

“Are you sorry, Attila? Are you really sorry?”

A high yelp assured me that he was, and we hugged it out for a while.

I let him romp around while I kept getting things ready. I was almost all packed when Attila tugged my shirt and clicked his teeth repeatedly. I knew what he wanted. We finally kissed and made up. Natalie would have puked.

“I have to go away for a few days now,” I said after I put him back into his cage. “It won’t be easy, but you’re going to be fine. Mrs. Abreu will look in on you early tomorrow, and so will Natalie. You remember Natalie. You be good to her, hear me? I know you understand me.”

Attila made a couple of whoops of complaint.

“I know, I know. It can’t be helped. I’m going to miss you, too.”
IT WAS EARLY summer. The morning light illuminated the crushed Marlboro boxes and Happy Meal cups in the roadside weeds.

Terrific. I’d just started my amazing journey, and I was already lost in the wilds. Of Queens.

Staring out from the back of my sticky JFK-bound taxi, I cursed as we slowed to a dead stop. Again.

We lurched forward a bit, and then stopped again. The cabbie bashed the horn and spat out a string of curses, went back to talking to somebody on his headset. Sounded like he was talking business. He was very dark and matchstick-skinny, a lot of red in his eyes.

Above the dash I could see that the LIE had become a frozen, curving conveyor belt of red brake lights. It was so
bad even the jackasses on the shoulder trying to cut people off were jammed to a halt.

Surrounded by my bulky camera case, laptop, and carry-on, I checked the time on my iPhone for the five hundredth time. It was looking like making my 9:05 a.m. flight to Africa was going to need divine intervention in order to happen. I also noticed an e-mail from Natalie and made the mistake of opening it.

You don’t have to do this.

I sighed. Maybe my girlfriend was right. Maybe this was nuts. Wouldn’t it make more sense to head out to the Hamptons with her instead? Get some sand in my shoes. Eat some oysters. I could certainly use a Long Island iced tea or ten, not to mention a tan. Couldn’t this trip wait?

No. I knew full well it couldn’t. I was committed to this thing, far past the point of no return. Hamptons or no Hamptons, HAC was happening. Right here. Right now. Right frigging everywhere. I could feel it in my pores.

I went through my travel kit again. I sorted through my passport, my insurance, my federally mandated less-than-three-ounce travel toiletries, my skivvies, T-shirts and shorts, my red wool hat. Then I scooped up my antimalarial doxycycline pills that had spilled over my folded-up poncho until everything was wired tight.

To hell with the naysayers. I was good to go. Botswana or bust. The last thing to do was print out my e-ticket when I got to the airport, if I ever got there.

When we finally started moving, I took out a map of Africa. I was a forty–sixty mix of nervous–excited. Just the sheer size of Africa. Three times as big as Europe. I had
learned so much about the continent during my first trip, when I was still in grad school, but this was different. This was no field trip.

The cabbie quit nattering into his Bluetooth and turned to me.

“Which terminal, sir?” The airport was finally beginning to crawl into sight.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “My flight’s on South African Airways.”

“You are going to Africa? South Africa?” asked the cabbie. I’d been preoccupied—now I noticed the guy looked and sounded African himself. His voice had that melodic lilt of African English. Nigerian, maybe.

“Botswana,” I said.

“You go from New York to Botswana? No! For real?” the cabbie said, his red eyes wide in the rearview.

He seemed even more skeptical than my girlfriend. I was getting nothing but unbridled support and good omens from all corners tonight.

“That’s the idea,” I said as we pulled up in front of a bustling terminal.

“Well, I hope is a busy-ness trip,” he said as he printed my receipt from the meter. “You make damn sure is a busy-ness trip, mon, you know what I mean.”

I did know what he meant, unfortunately. He was referring to Botswana’s AIDS epidemic, the second worst in the world. One out of every four adults in the country was supposed to have the dreaded sexually transmitted disease.

I wasn’t too worried about it. Between my long trip and
dealing head-on with a frightening global epidemic, I didn't think I'd have much time to squeeze in any hot, wild, condomless third-world sex. Besides, I had a girlfriend.

“Don’t worry,” I told the cabbie as I opened the door. “I won't have any fun at all.”
ABOUT FOUR HOURS later I woke up thirty thousand feet above the Atlantic.

Blinking in the low, lonely roar of the 747’s cabin, I raised my seat and looked out the window beside me. Through spaces in the milky floor of dim clouds I could see the silver squiggles of the surf on the ocean far below. I definitely wasn’t in Kansas anymore—or Queens, thank God.

I yawned, unlocked and lowered my seat-back tray, and worried my laptop out of my carry-on bag. I was going to write some e-mails, but instead I found myself clicking open the file for the HAC PowerPoint presentation I’d shown in Paris.

It began with a photograph of a primitive painting from the famous Lascaux caves in France that clearly showed a guy being killed by a bison. Next was Rubens’s *Chained*
Prometheus. In the painting, the torment in the upside-down Titan’s face is pretty damn visceral as an eagle tears into his, well, viscera. The Rubens was followed quickly by Nicolas Poussin’s haunting Renaissance painting The Plague at Ashdod, depicting a scene in which God has sent a plague of disease and mice onto the Philistines for disobeying him.

Next came stranger, darker, lesser-known images.

I felt my pulse skip a little when an ancient sculpture of a reclining jaguar appeared. It was found in an Aztec temple along with an apocalyptic prophecy of animals devouring all humanity.

The jaguar was followed by an eerie illustration from the Toggenburg Bible. It shows a man and a woman dying of bubonic plague. There’s something about its bright, static flatness—a characteristic of medieval art—that makes it particularly disturbing. The naked figures lie stiffly in bed like paper dolls, their pale bodies polka-dotted with protruding buboes. The Black Death, which killed 40 percent of the known world’s population, had been started by marmots and carried throughout Europe by rats.

I looked out the window again. As I stared out at the clouds thousands of feet below me, and the ocean below that, I had a strange sensation. It was a sinking, chilling feeling. For a moment, hurtling six hundred miles an hour toward Africa, I felt suddenly very tiny and very alone. I wasn’t religious, but as I sat there, I started wondering about the inexplicable nature of these things.

It was as though I could actually feel the apocalyptic shift that was occurring. I thought of horses, birds, snakes. I
thought of the curse God puts on the snake in Genesis: he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel…

The wrath of God?

Or maybe it was just my jet lag, I thought, rubbing the gunk out of my eyes. There was no doubt that I’d become obsessed with HAC. I thought about all the sleepless nights; the quitting school. And now I was actually on a plane to Africa. Maybe I would finally find the answers I was looking for. Or maybe I was delusional. I was beginning to doubt my own sanity.

I glanced down at my laptop and saw that I had another e-mail from Natalie. This one was a real picker-upper.

Oz, I know this is probably a bad time to say this…

Oh, boy. I knew what was coming. I almost quit reading then and there. The same way I looked at my bank statements in those days. Just flick my eyes over it, knowing I don’t want to see it. Anyway. I read the rest quickly:

…but I’ve been thinking about everything, and I guess, bottom line, I just can’t do all this anymore. At least not now. I just got back my immunology midterm. I flunked it. I’ll be lucky if I get a C now. It’s not just that. I’m distracted, and I have to concentrate on school and my career. I know I shouldn’t e-mail all this. We’ll talk when you get back. And you need to get someone else to check on Attila. I’m too swamped.

Okay, then, I thought. Whoopee. I’m back on the market.

I considered replying to her e-mail, but then decided to just ignore it, leave things alone. I couldn’t turn back now. Natalie knew that, and I knew Natalie’s priority was to become a doctor. She’d always been clear about that. Maybe we did need a break.
I’d just have to call the other woman in my life. I left a message for Mrs. Abreu on her machine, begging her to feed Attila for me until I came back. She wouldn’t let me down.

I closed my laptop and stretched. I had twelve hours to go before I reached Johannesburg for my stopover. I reached into my laptop bag for my iPod, put in my earbuds, cranked some Black Sabbath, and headed down the aisle of the speeding plane in search of the stewardess and some Red Bull.
BOOK TWO

INTO AFRICA
MY FIRST GLIMPSE of Africa, twelve hours later, was actually sort of a letdown. Johannesburg, beyond the massive windows of the airport, was just a bunch of nondescript buildings; it could have been Cleveland.

An hour later, when we took off northbound for Botswana, my mood lifted considerably. The green-and-tan expanse of seemingly endless landscape looked the way the little kid in me wanted Africa to look. Hot, wild, secluded.

As we were beginning our final descent into Maun, I saw there were some modern buildings, but most of the structures were cinder-block and tin. Coming down the steps onto the tarmac, I saw that, beyond the flimsy chain-link fence along the airport’s perimeter, there were donkeys everywhere. There were also rondavels, the traditional African thatch-roofed round huts built of stone and cow dung. The
feel of the place—the heat, the sweetish smell of manure and diesel, even the sharp, blinding yellow light—was pleasantly strange.

After I made it through customs, Abraham Bindix took off his tattered straw hat and greeted me with a bear hug inside the run-down terminal. Abraham was a boiler tank of a man. Broad-shouldered and blocky, the fiftyish, weather-beaten man reminded me a Sun Belt college football coach. His face was as hard and creased as an old work glove, with a mustache fading into the scruff on his cheeks. A shag carpet of chest hair burst from the unbuttoned neck of his sweat-dampened linen shirt. Some faded blue tattoos on the furry wine barrels he called his arms were reminders of his navy days. It was good to see his loopy, gap-toothed smile. The last time I’d seen him was in Paris. We’d sat at the hotel bar and gotten drunk as swine after I’d been booed off the convention stage.

He seemed heavier than I remembered him in Paris. He also seemed noticeably older, and a little slower on his feet. I wondered if he was ill.

“Thank you for coming, my friend, but I have bad news,” he said as I scooped up my bags from the pile of luggage beside the plane. I liked Abraham, but took him with a grain of salt. Like a lot of Afrikaners, he was crude as oil and casually racist in a way that can make a white American dude a touch uncomfortable. Still, there was something almost grandfatherly about him, something Papa Bear.

“Unfortunately, a problem has arisen,” he said. “A family thing. Is it possible for you to wait a day before I can take you up to the village near Zimbabwe?”
“Of course. What’s up, Abe? Can I help?” I said.

“No, no. It is a family thing,” he said. Abe had a warm, brassy honk of a voice, like a muted trumpet. “My little brother, Phillip, the pacifist, is the manager at a game-spotting lodge over in the bush near the Namibian border. I take rich American tourists out to kill animals, but he takes them out just to look at them, take pictures. Lions, actually—two huge prides of them that eat the Cape buffalo up there in the Okavango Delta.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Don’t know, man. His lodge has been out of radio contact for over twenty-four hours, and me mum is worried. It is probably nothing, but with all the craziness going on I need to make sure the wanker is okay.”

“So let’s head out,” I said. “You said the lodge has lions, right? Lions are what I just came eight thousand miles to see.”

My enthusiasm seemed to brighten Abe’s spirit.

“Right, man,” he said, slapping my shoulder. It hurt a little. “I knew you were a friend, Oz. I tried to get my trackers to come with me, but the superstitious boogies are still completely spooked by the slaughtered village we came across. The pagan bastards said they wanted nothing to do with lions until, quote, the spirits are calmer, unquote.”

Uncalm spirits; lions. I thought about my sinking feeling on the plane, the feeling of God’s wrath in the air. Then I dismissed it. I wadded up my uneasiness and tossed it over my shoulder.

“Which way to Okavango?” I said, hefting my camera case.
Chapter 14

INSTEAD OF HEADING out of the airport, Abe and I walked south, inside the terminal, and made a right into a narrow, dingy corridor.

“What are we doing? I thought we were going to your brother's lodge,” I said.

“Right, man, we are. In the northern delta, there are no roads, only airstrips,” Abe explained. Walking, he dug a tin of chewing tobacco out of one of the pockets of his khaki utility vest, scooped some of it into his fingers, and put a wad under his lip. “We need to rent a plane.”

“Rent a plane?” I said. “I hope you know how to fly one, because I only know how to jump out of them.”

“That skill might come in handy,” Abe said. His jaw was working, moistening the chaw. He winked. “I have a license, but I have not flown in some time.”
We went through a door and walked right back out onto the tarmac beside the plane I’d just exited. I noticed they were a little more lax with security here on the Dark Continent. No one even asked me to take off my shoes.

We turned a corner into a hangar. A half-black, half-Asian man in a greasy fedora sat behind a desk eating some kind of barbecued meat with his fingers. Another African, who looked like a soldier or policeman, judging by his soiled gray uniform and gray beret, sat next to him and wore a flat black AK-47 over his shoulder. They both had their feet up and were watching a movie on a portable DVD player. I peeked over the policeman’s shoulder: it was *Happy Gilmore*, the Adam Sandler movie. They weren’t laughing. Granted, it wasn’t very funny, but they didn’t seem to get that it was a comedy.

Abe spent about ten minutes bellowing like a bull at the two of them in a language I soon learned was Setswana. In the end, Abraham, his face sweaty, red, and puffy with heat, fished around in the pouches of his utility vest and handed the guy at the desk a folded wad of bills. The man thumbed through them with hands that were still sticky from the meat he’d been eating, seemed satisfied, and directed us outside with a Mafia tough’s chin jerk that he’d probably learned from American movies.

We walked outside and down a lane between two rows of small bush planes. Abe threw open the door of a rust-flaked red-and-white Piper Super Cub that had cartoonishly oversize tundra tires and squeezed my bags behind the seats.

“Wait here, man,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Abe went back into the hangar. When he returned a
moment later, he was coming from the other end of the airport, riding in a battered Range Rover. Two dogs, sleek red-brown Rhodesian ridgebacks, tumbled out when he opened his door. They hopped into the plane as though they’d done so plenty of times before. Then Abe heaved two large gun cases from the truck and packed them into the plane as well.

He caught me looking at the guns.

“Better to have and not need than need and not have, right, man?” he said, giving my cheek an avuncular pinch.

Soon my ears were nestled in squishy radio headphones and we were taxiing onto the runway. On the other side of the airport’s dusty service road, I spotted a fenced field that had stones and strange striped tents in it.

“What’s that, Abe?” I shouted over the gathering roar of propeller chop, pointing.

“That’s a graveyard,” Abe shouted back. He opened the plane’s throttle and we began bouncing down the tarmac.

“So many dead from AIDS around here, they cannot dig fast enough. So they pile the coffins under tents. What’s the American joke about cemeteries?”

“People are dying to get in?” I offered.

“Right, man. That’s the one.” Abe gave me a sardonic smile. His teeth were jumbly-crooked and tobacco-stained. He pulled back the throttle and our tiny plane left terra firma. “Welcome to Africa, man.”
Chapter 15

EVEN WITH MY jet lag, the claustrophobic confinement of the plane, and a dog panting fragrantly in each ear, that thirty-minute plane ride was the most exhilarating of my life.

Flying over the Okavango Delta was like going back in time. I half expected to see dinosaurs walking around below us. There wasn’t a single building, not a house or even a rondavel, on the endless brown plain rippling along beneath us. I watched the shadow of the aircraft glide over white islands dotted between clear blue ribbons of water. On them were palm trees and giant lumps of earth that Abe told me were termite mounds.

Now that it was July—one of the winter months, Abe explained—the delta dried up and swelled to three times its normal size, attracting one of the greatest concentrations of
wildlife on the planet. We flew over hippos, hyenas, a herd of massive Cape buffalo, horned and black, which Abe told me were considered by some professional hunters to be more dangerous than lions. There were river birds, seemingly in the millions, scattering from the dry marshes at the sound of our plane. The first humans we saw were a couple of African fishermen in a hand-cut dugout. Who needs the Discovery Channel? I thought.

“This is it,” Abe said a few minutes later, his voice cracking over my headphones. We lowered our speed and altitude as we banked down toward some thatched roofs beside the faint white scar of an airstrip. I was expecting the landing to be as bumpy as the takeoff, so I was surprised when Abe laid the Piper down as smooth as silk. I pulled off my headphones, and in the wake of the noise, the silence was almost ghostly. My ears rang a bit.

“That is funny,” Abe said as we climbed out of the plane and into the heat. “Not funny ha-ha.”

“What?” I said.

“The staff—when they see a plane landing, they are usually waiting here, clapping, singing their silly folk songs and holding a stiff drink and a hot towel. I do not see or hear anything. Do you? Not even any animals.”

He was right. The only sound was the thrumming drone of insects under the glaring sky. The thatch-roofed buildings in the distance, which we could see at the end of a dusty path lined with brittle brown reeds and papyrus, all seemed empty, deserted. A silvery band of light shimmered on the horizon, vague, shaking with heat.

Abe whistled and the two sleek red dogs broke into a
trot, scouting ahead, heads scanning, their sense of smell going into overdrive. The camp we followed them into was as bustling as a graveyard. We searched all six platform tents, along with the dining area. We found clothes, luggage, safari gear, tourist stuff—pith helmets and khaki utility vests—open portmanteaus spewing socks and underwear onto unmade beds. But no tourists and no staff.

There was what looked like a shipping container—a giant red box of corrugated metal—behind the kitchen. Alongside it we found a Land Rover with two extra rows of raised seats to accommodate wildlife watchers.

Abe half coughed and half cursed in a language I didn't recognize. He spat a jet of shit-brown tobacco juice into the grass and wiped his mouth with his shirt.

“Two of the trucks are missing. Besides the guides, there are another half dozen maids and cooks. This is very strange, Oz. Where the devil is everyone? Where’s my little brother? I have a bad feeling.”

Abe put his fingers to his lips and pierced the air with a whistle, and the dogs came running. He hopped into the Rover, found the keys, and started the engine. After we drove back to the plane and retrieved his rifles, we drove north from the camp over a badly rutted car path. Pebbles popped and crunched under the tires, and the car rattled and shuddered over the washboard-like waves in the road. When the car path petered out, we hit an even bumpier field of tall dry grass. Around a stand of ebony trees, some baby hyenas were wading in the shallow river water, fat gloves of reeking mud on their paws. I couldn't help but gawk as though I were on safari, but if Abe noticed them or the family of giraffes
drinking in the shallows a hundred feet south of them downriver, he didn’t say anything.

We were steering around a stand of fig trees when we finally saw people. A group of Africans stood milling around by a dock at the river’s edge. It was two men and a pudgy boy, all in chef’s whites, and they were preparing to get into some dugouts. Abe pulled hard on the wheel, piloted the Rover over to the men, and brought it to a jerky stop. He shouted something quick at them in Setswana. The men yelled something back. They seemed to be arguing. The conversation took a few minutes. At the end of it, the three kitchen workers reluctantly got out of the canoe and climbed into the back of the car. I turned around and looked at them. Their faces were stolid and blank, hard to read. They didn’t acknowledge me.

“What’s the story?” I said to Abe as we pulled away. Abe tucked another pinch of tobacco into his cheek.

“It’s worse than I thought, man. Two groups went out day before yesterday—twenty people, including my brother. Haven’t heard from them since. Not only that, they said lions were actually in the camp last night. Roaming around like stray kittens, picking at scraps. These bozos back there hid themselves in the shipping container. When they woke up, the radio transmitter had been broken, smashed somehow. Just now, they were going to try to go downstream to get help.”

“Why were you arguing?”

Abe took off his straw hat and wiped sweat off his sunburned brow. Abe perspired like a leaky faucet.

“I told them to come with us to help find the tourists
and guides, but, like my trackers, they’re terrified. They said something is wrong with the lions. The same superstitious boogie shit. The gods are angry. There’s black magic about. Ooga booga booga!”

Behind us, the cooks started singing some sort of chant. “Ah, here they go,” said Abe, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at them. “Ooh, ee, ooh ah ah, ting, tang, walla walla bing-bang!”

Abe stomped the brake and brought the Rover to a sudden stop. He hopped out, went into his bag in the back, and took out one of the hunting rifles. It was a Winchester Model 70 bored for a massive .458 cartridge. He loaded a magazine with the huge brass shells and slapped it home with a clack. He climbed up into the back, maneuvering around the men, bags, and dogs, and strapped it into the truck’s gun rack.

“You bozos want black magic? I’ll show you some black magic,” he called back at them as he revved the engine and threw the truck into gear.
Chapter 16

A LITTLE LESS than a mile northeast of the safari camp’s river dock, two massive male lions lounge on the highest rocks in their pride area. They lie on their stomachs, still as golden rugs, panting, catching the breeze. Their impassive amber eyes lazily scan the horizon.

Like dogs, but unlike humans, lions are unable to sweat through their skin. Their only effective means of thermoregulation is panting. The heavy breathing they are doing now, though, isn’t from the heat, or even from exertion.

It is from eating.

Beneath them, scattered throughout the thorny scrub of the forest glen, swarms of fat, shiny flies hover above the meat that lies rotting under the sun’s steady blaze. They tickle across the bones, collectively making a wavy droning noise like a cello holding a note in sustained vibrato. Human
bodies—or, rather, human body parts—are strewn in the bloody grass. Rib cages and hip bones shine white as aspirin under the blinding sun.

The rest of the pride is arranged in a large, loose circle around the bones. Vultures hop around in the mess, their wings like shrugging shoulders, their necks like little worms, yanking rubber-snap strings of meat off the skeletons with their beaks. The lionesses and the cubs have eaten their fill, and are happily active now, tumbling around in the grass.

The two males are massive as golden hills. They are brothers, twins, almost identical, except now the older one is missing an eye, recently lost while taking over the pride. The brothers, having killed two of the former alpha males and driven off the third, have further established their dominance by devouring all their rivals’ cubs, four young females.

But the swell of power and dominance they felt when they took over was a feeble feeling compared to the killing of the two human groups.

A new feeling has overtaken the lions, a new understanding. One that changed their perception of humans from fellow predators—irritating, inconsequential animals to be ignored, mostly—into prey.

They saw them coming. Two of the smaller, swifter lionesses had climbed into a sausage tree above the tire trail and lain in wait. When the cars passed, the lionesses dropped in from above on the open metal boxes full of the pathetically weak mammals. Once those big naked monkeys were on their slow, idiotic feet, it had been a quick rout.

It wasn’t because the lions were particularly hungry. The humans had been nothing compared to the eighteen-
hundred-pound Cape buffalo, the pride’s more typical prey. The cars had been like boxes full of snacks.

The two males slip off the rock, first one, then the other. They amble through the pride, heads held high, ears perked up, mouths closed, tails swishing from side to side. After a moment, the females begin to follow, heads held low.

As the two lions approach, a vulture standing on a woman’s face shrugs its shoulders and takes flight, flapping, awkward and sloppy as a big pigeon. The one-eyed lion nudges the meat with his paw. He holds it down and takes a bite, his jaw making a popping sound as his carnassial teeth efficiently peel meat off the bone.

After a moment’s chewing, he looks up and turns his remaining eye to the east. His ears swivel, his nostrils dilate. His sense of hearing is only slightly above average, but the sebaceous glands around his chin, lips, cheeks, and whiskers give him a powerful sense of smell.

He smells something. He glances at his brother, who is looking in the same direction now.

Humans, the two convey to each other with a glance, a growl. More humans.

The two males turn to the pride, changing their expressions and postures. They go through a repertoire of vocalizations, varying intensity and pitch, telling everyone what to do.
A CHATTERING FLOCK of storks burst from a treetop as we drove through a field some three miles or so north of the camp. They were marabou storks, distinguished by their wiry white hair, featherless pink necks, and tuxedo plumage—carrion eaters often found with vultures around carcasses. Undertaker birds, they’re called. Abe grimaced up at them. He was projecting a cool facade, but I could tell he was worried, which made me worried.

Actually, I had already been worried.

Since we’d landed at the deserted camp, I’d found myself thinking about my first trip to Africa. It was a grad-school field trip to the famous rock beds of the Karoo desert region in South Africa, which showed one of the world’s clearest geological snapshots of the history of life.

What I kept thinking about was a layer of sediment from
two hundred and fifty million years ago that was completely empty of fossils. The lack of fossils in the rock was evidence of the Permian–Triassic extinction event—P–Tr, in geology shorthand. P–Tr, or the Great Dying, was the biggest and baddest of Earth's major extinction events. Ninety percent of all species on the planet rapidly perished. It took many millions of years for the earth's biodiversity to recover. There have been five such major extinction events; statistically, we're about due for one.

The K–T event, the one that killed the dinosaurs, was almost certainly caused by an asteroid impact. But we're still not sure about P–Tr. Some theorize that the P–Tr extinction was caused by volcanic activity. Or maybe an asteroid, or cosmic radiation. But no one really knows exactly why almost all the animals, vegetation, and insects in the world suddenly died.

It was the mysterious nature of that ancient total global ecosystem collapse that made the present HAC activity so unsettling. An animal's behavior is the result of millions of years of evolution, thousands upon thousands of generations of adaptation. This evolution happens in response to changes in the environment. The environment changes, and some animals adapt to it, some don't. To suddenly observe such anomalous behavior in wildly different species of animals all over the world wasn't just alarming, it was unprecedented.

I opened my camera case and began to ready my video camera. I clipped in the battery, polished the lens, strapped on the shoulder mount.

As we rolled deeper into the Okavango Delta in search
of the missing tourists, I was suspecting more strongly that some kind of macro-level environmental disturbance was underway.

I’d clacked in a new mini DV tape and was switching on my pricey-ass Sony image stabilizer when there was a commotion behind me. Abe’s two Rhodesian ridgebacks started barking like hell. Then, in an instant, my camera was no longer in my hands and something hard and cold was pressed against my throat and collarbone.

One of the men in the back was holding something against my neck, which I guessed was a machete, as that was what the other man had against Abe’s neck.

Abe brought the truck to a careful stop and began speaking in Setswana to the man holding the machete to his throat. Abe’s negotiation skills seemed to be all that stood between me and a severed jugular. My heart was going like a jackhammer. I could feel every hair on my arms standing straight up. The man holding the machete to Abe’s throat kept shaking his head and gesturing back in the direction behind us. Abe kept talking. The man shook his head.

“No-no-no-no-no-no-no,” he said. “No, mon.”

The man lowered the machete in order to hop out of the car. He held the machete pointed at Abe, but was only half paying attention as he worked with the other hand to liberate the Winchester from the gun rack. Abe reached into the inner lining of his utility jacket and his hand came out holding a nasty little snub-nosed .38 Special. Abe put the pistol barrel between the man’s eyes: they crossed just as Curly’s do when Moe pokes him in the nose. The man took his hands off the rifle and lowered the machete.
Then the guy behind me removed the machete from my neck. The men and the teenager exchanged glances, shrugged as though they’d just lost a bet fair and square, and hopped out of the truck. Without another word to us, they started walking away, back in the direction we’d come from. The dogs growled and barked after them, but Abe whistled them silent. Abe was red-faced and shaking. At first I thought it was from fear, and then I realized it was mostly anger.

“Cowards!” Abe yelled back at them between his cupped hands. “Boogie shite-asses! Scoundrels!”

He spat brown juice out the window, wiped his face on his sleeve, cursed under his breath, and released the clutch.

“Superstitious traitorous idiot boogie sons of bitches,” he muttered, half to me and half to himself, maybe half to the dogs. “It’s just us now, gents.”

I leaned back in my seat and wiped sweat off my face as I closed my eyes. My pulse was still hammering when I turned and lifted the camera off the seat behind me.

Maybe Natalie had been right about my coming here to Africa, I thought. A cubicle in an air-conditioned office building wasn’t looking quite so terrible to me right about now.
A COUPLE OF miles farther north, we came upon some salt flats forked by a river delta. The scenery beyond them was breathtaking. An endless patchwork of more grassland and salt flats ran as far as the eye could see. I could understand why rich European and American tourists came to the Okavango Delta for safaris. The landscape was spectacular.

The trail we’d been following passed through a ford in one of the river deltas.

“Jesus, are you sure—” was all I could get out before Abe impassively stomped the accelerator and plowed us headlong into swirling water the color of chocolate milk. The water came up to the truck’s door handles. I was expecting the motor to quit at any moment. I mentally prepared myself to go swimming. We got wet.

“You New Yorkers,” Abe said, pushing us through the
flood with his hand on the clutch and his foot on the gas, getting us through it with a mix of horsepower and will. He jerked his hat brim at the snorkel on the side of the truck. “Got it handled, man. Leave it to Beaver.”

We slogged through to the other side and up the steep, muddy bank onto a plain of tall, light green grass, maybe about three or four acres wide. A path of tire tracks cut straight across it toward a lagoon that sparkled like silver, where a herd of seventy or so Cape buffalo were shouldering each other in a shallows.

“Look sharp,” Abe said, pointing to the herd. “We’re getting close now. Those are the buffalo the lions hunt.”

I almost dropped the video camera when Abe stomped the brake and brought us to an abrupt stop halfway to the lagoon. At the other end of the tall glade of faded grass, an open Land Rover exactly like ours, with the name of the safari company on the side, was parked by a sausage tree.

Abe took a pair of binoculars from one of his kit bags and stood up on his seat. He slowly swept the glasses over the grassy plain. Then he lowered the binoculars, draped the strap over his neck, sat back down, and drove cautiously across the clearing toward the empty truck.

We stopped beside the vehicle and got out. Something shiny caught Abe’s eye. He bent down to the ground and lifted something from the grass. I zoomed in on it with the camera.

It was a woman’s gold Cartier tank watch. It looked as out of place here in the African veldt as a shrunken head would have on a plate at the Four Seasons. The alligator strap was encrusted with blood.
We got back in the truck and kept bucking and rocking over the grass. We weren't talking. There were clothes littering the ground around the empty truck and the trunk of the sausage tree, scattered among the grass and dwarf savanna shrubs. Blood-stiffened scraps of shirts, pants, a woman's sneaker, a fanny pack. Bits of fabric blew across the fields. There was a piece of what looked like a Hawaiian shirt stuck in the tree, fluttering on a branch like a flag.

Abe looked up into the canopy of trees and then over at the Land Rover.

“Look, man,” he said, pointing. “See the rifle? It’s not even out of the rack. The safari guides who go out with the guests, they’re no superstitious pussies like our dear kooky friends back there. They’re professionals. This all must have happened in seconds. Too fast for them to get their guns.”

“Male lions will protect their pride from humans, but this looks like some sort of ambush,” I offered, trying to be helpful.

“And what did they do with the bodies?” Abe said. “Lions usually feed where they kill. I’ve never seen anything like this.”
The story continues!

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