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ANIMAL KINGDOM

WELCOME TO THE BOTTOM OF THE FOOD CHAIN



IAIN ROB WRIGHT

Features bonus content by Iain Rob Wright and Eric S. Brown

ANIMAL KINGDOM

By Iain Rob Wright

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The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

- **Mohandas Gandhi**

Human beings are the only animals of which I am thoroughly and cravenly afraid.

- **George Bernard Shaw**

Chapter One

Joe pulled tight his jacket around him, the biting chill of the autumn air creeping into every crevice of his body and making him shiver. The cold grey of the sky seemed to drizzle down to Earth and color everything with its dullness to the point it seemed that colour no longer existed in the world. But the dreary weather was not enough to dampen Joe's spirits. Today was a good day. He was spending the day with his son.

Danny was standing nearby, peering through a set of bars into the zoo's famous silverback gorilla exhibit – but the leafy enclosure was empty, vacant of its illustrious inhabitant.

Must be getting fed, Joe thought as he watched his son's disappointed face. Danny loved animals and would be sad that such a rare and magnificent creature was not available for viewing. But, like most eight-year old boys, his attention span soon reset itself, and it wasn't long before he was running off in a separate direction entirely.

"Dad! That man over there is being attacked by a snake."

Joe stared down at his son, amazed, as always, that his watery-blue eyes could look so much like his own. "Don't be silly, Danny," he said, his warm breath turning to steam in the crisp October air around him. "That's just the zoo's snake handler. He's about to do a show, I think."

"I wanna go see!" Danny tugged at his father's arm, deceptively strong for such a slender child wearing a Bret 'The Hitman' Hart t-shirt and Velcro trainers. "Hurry, before we miss anything."

Joe allowed himself to be dragged toward a three-sided lean-to shelter erected beside the zoo's moss-covered WORLD OF VENOM building. It had been designed to look as if it were made of bamboo reeds. A uniformed man entered the structure from a rear access and began positioning plastic

crates onto a wooden table – all of them containing reptiles of various sizes and descriptions. The man's tanned-leather skin matched his khaki clothing and was weathered, brown and loose. He had a boa constrictor the length of a scaffold pole wrapped around his bony shoulders.

Danny jumped up and down excitedly. "Sweet! I bet that thing could squish him to death, real easy!"

Joe frowned at his son. "Don't be so morbid!"

"Sorry, Dad. I just think it's cool."

"It's okay. I just want you to think nice things. Come on, let's get closer." Joe took Danny's hand, half the size of his own – and pushed through the gathering crowd of adults and their children. It wasn't difficult to get to the front when you were as freakishly tall as Joe. People tended to get out of his way long before he had to ask them.

"Look at the size of that thing, Dad!" At the front of the growing audience – now close to a dozen people – Danny started jumping up and down again, his wispy, blond hair flopping around in the musky, smelling breeze. Childish glee oozed off him in ribbons.

The snake handler turned his attention to them both and Joe cringed, waiting for his son to get a reprimand. *A noisy nuisance.* Fortunately, the uniformed man smiled at them instead.

"Hey there, young un. You like snakes?"

Danny nodded. "Jake the Snake used to have one called Damien."

The snake handler wrinkled his forehead, readjusted the slithering reptile in his arms, and then said, "Isn't that a wrestler from years back?"

Danny nodded enthusiastically. "My dad has lots of old tapes and I watch 'em every weekend when I stay over. My bestest favourite is The Undertaker. Check it out!" He spun around to show the man the design on his backpack.

"Undertaker rip?" said the handler, confused.

Danny spun back around and giggled. "No, silly! *Rest in peace.* It's what The Undertaker says to everyone right before he beats them up with his tombstone." He rolled his eyes back into his head, and that only the whites were showing, and repeated the words in his best attempt at a gravelly, adult voice. "Rest...In...Peeeeaaace."

The crowd laughed. So did the snake handler, struggling with his giant brown reptile between each chuckle. He pulled the animal down, away from his face, and then smiled over at Joe. "Fine little lizard you have, sir."

Joe smiled back. "Thanks. He's a handful though. Just like your snake."

"You can say that again! She's really unsettled today. Won't keep still for a minute, bless her."

"Sounds just like my son."

Danny bopped him on the arm. "Hey! I'm nothing like a snake. I'm gonna tell Mom on you."

The crowd laughed again, this time giving a collective "Oooooooo!" Joe knew his son was just showing off, but it was nice to see him come out of his shell. After the last few years, with the divorce and everything else, it was good to see that Danny had any confidence at all.

Joe rustled Danny's hair, messing it up more than it already was. "We best be moving on, little dude, or we won't fit everything in. Say goodbye to the nice man and his snake."

Danny twisted his face into a frown, but did as he was told. His shoulders slumped as he spoke. "See ya, Mister. Thanks for letting...Hey Mister...are you okay?"

Joe was alerted by the tone of his son's voice before he actually saw anything was wrong. The snake handler was writhing around, struggling beneath the weight of this huge reptile. It coiled its way around his ribcage and was slithering up toward his neck.

“Step away, Danny.” Joe moved in front of his son, keeping him back from the wooden barrier that separated the crowd from the lean-to shelter. The slithering reptile had begun to form a noose around its keeper’s neck and was slowly tightening with each convulsion of its muscular body. The crowd started to murmur, the first gentle stages of panic taking hold.

The snake handler began to choke, throwing out his arms in wild desperation. Joe jumped the barrier, dashed toward the shelter just as the struggling man dropped to his knees on the plank-wood flooring. The fragile walls of the bamboo shelter shook beneath the impact.

“Stay calm,” Joe shouted in a voice that was the exact opposite. He reached out to grab the snake but recoiled immediately.

Whoa! Do I really wanna put my hands on this thing? Can it bite me? Joe allowed himself to hesitate only a moment longer then gave himself a mental shove. *Come on! There’s a man’s life at stake. Do something!*

He snatched at the thick reptile and pulled back hard, fighting away revulsion as his fingers made contact with the rough, quivering flesh – cold to the touch. Several seconds of yanking and tugging made no difference. The snake’s grip became even tighter. The desperate handler turned a deep purple as the pressure pushed his eyeballs a half-inch out of their sockets, making them bulge like a squid’s. Joe felt a roiling wave of sickness crash through his insides.

I can’t do anything. I can’t get this thing off of him and he’s going to die. I never watched a man die before...

Joe turned to the anxious crowd and checked that his son was nearby. “Don’t just stand there!” he shouted at them. “Someone go get help, now! Danny, you stay where you are and close your eyes. Everything is okay.” He could tell by his son’s fearful expression that he didn’t believe it. Moving back around, Joe saw that blood was now trickling from both of the snake handler’s nostrils. The boa wrapped around the man’s throat was glaring at Joe, malevolent eyes boring into his flesh. Its forked tongue flicked back and forth, tasting the air.

People in the crowd started backing away, as if somehow the snake handler’s peril was infectious. Some of them scattered immediately, crying out for help as they fled in all directions, while others retreated in silence, unable to take their eyes off the harrowing scene in front of them. Joe didn’t go with either group. He was rooted to the spot.

Locked in a death stare with a nine-foot Boa Constrictor.

“Dad!”

The sound of Danny’s voice allowed Joe to regain control of his senses. He turned around to find that his son had approached the wooden barrier and was about to crouch underneath it. Joe flung out an arm and shouted. “Stay there! I’ll handle th—”

From the corner of his eye, Joe sensed the movement of the snake, and turned just in time to see it strike. The adrenaline in his body pumped his reactions just enough that he was able to lunge aside from the attack, a mere split-second before the murderous reptile sliced its fangs through the air. The snake handler flopped face down on the floor, the boa constrictor slithering out from beneath the body. The man was dead.

“Dad, I’m scared!”

Joe sprang into action, exiting the shelter and vaulting the barrier. He scooped Danny up in his arms and chased after the fleeing crowd. Help still had not arrived, but it hardly mattered anymore now that the snake handler was dead.

Someone still needs to grab that damn snake though.

And then destroy the fucking thing!

Joe kept his lanky strides fast yet steady, not wanting to trip and fall on the unforgiving pavement whilst carrying his son. Blood pounded in his eardrums as, all around him, people scattered in all directions. It was strange to see just how *many* people were panicking. There had been perhaps a dozen men and women at the snake handler's hut, along with a handful of children, but as Joe looked around now, he saw at least three times that many.

So what else is happening? Why are so many people in a hurry to get their asses out of here?

Joe slowed down and eventually stopped, turning to look back where he'd come from. The huge black constrictor was still inside the lean-to shelter, slithering over the lifeless body of its ex-handler. It was a good reason enough to panic, for sure, but Joe was certain that only those nearby would have noticed. He looked around the zoo, examining the multiple animal enclosures and exhibit buildings that lined the grass-edged pathways. A racket was coming from each of them, as if the caged specimens inside were being agitated by something. The hoots and howls from the monkey compounds were particularly loud and clear. Joe could see the various primates rattling their bars with unbridled fury. Joe could feel the vibrations of their movements in his teeth.

What the hell is happening?

He decided he wouldn't wait around and find out. He needed to make sure his son was safe (from *what* exactly, he did not know). Danny was rigid in his arms, making no sound other than the wet panting of his breath.

"Everything's going to be okay, Danny," he said soothingly. "Let me get you somewhere safe and we can sit down and have a Coke." Joe started moving again, a sense of urgency seizing his internal organs and pumping them like pistons. Some deep-buried instinct told him he needed to get away from the area as quickly as possible. Up ahead was the zoo's brand-new visitor's centre, RAVENCROFT ZOOLOGICAL CENTRE AND CONFERENCE SUITES. The lengthy, glass-fronted structure's recent grand opening was advertised all over the park and it looked like as good a place as any to find some authority.

Joe picked up speed, his worn trainers wearing even thinner against the harsh grey cement of the pathway. All around him people were panicking, scuttling in all directions like frenzied ants. It was still unclear what was causing all of the chaos, but Joe knew it was more than just a snake attack. Something else was happening.

Something bad.

The visitor's centre seemed to grow in size as Joe got closer and he could now make out the large glass doors of its entrance. Several people had already begun to move inside, but a vast majority were running past the building – likely heading towards the car park beyond. Joe wondered whether this idea was a good one.

I just want to get indoors. I don't know what's going on yet, but I know that a load of people panicking in their cars is gonna have a bad ending.

Joe broke off from the crowd and approached the visitor centre, hopping up a set of brick steps that had been joined with a landscaped patio at the front of the building. A middle-aged Black man with grey sideburns was standing amongst the potted trees and plants. He quickly moved aside when he saw Joe was in Joe's way. Joe nodded 'thank you' to the man before moving through the building's wide-open double-doors.

The fluorescent lights inside dazzled Joe as he left the bleak greyness of outside. The first thing his eyes finally managed to focus on was a large rectangular sign hanging from the ceiling. It declared the room to be THE EDUCATION HALL. The area was full of life-like exhibits of elephants, alligators, and many other creatures – each of them staring into the centre of the room with their soulless glass eyes.

eyes. There were several other people inside the hall with Joe. Each of them looked as concerned as he was. There was only a single zoo employee amongst them, given away by his bright green waist-jacket against a khaki-coloured uniform. He wore the tatty, round spectacles of an intellectual man, and his neatly-combed grey hair only added to that impression. He looked dumfounded as everyone else, but Joe still considered him the best person to speak to.

Nearby, several plush, cube-shaped chairs of varying colours were arranged in front of a wide plasma screen. Joe eased Danny down onto a purple one. "Just wait here one sec, little dude, okay?"

Danny nodded obediently and sat still.

Joe examined the boy for a few moments, saw how frightened he was, and then kissed his forehead. "I'm proud of you, Danny."

The zoo employee had moved over to the far wall of the hall and was fiddling with a bright yellow rubber-cased walkie-talkie. It didn't seem like the man was having any success in gaining information, and his wrinkled brow gave away his frustrations. Joe approached slowly, trying to seem calm rather than agitated, somehow feeling that rationality would be at a premium right now.

When he got close enough, the zoo keeper looked up from the radio. "Sir, may I help you?"

"Hello," Joe replied. "Do you know what's going on?"

The man shook his head and his spectacles jittered on the bridge of his long nose. He readjusted them before speaking. "Not the foggiest, I'm afraid. I can't reach any of the zoo keepers to find out. A couple of the visitors I've spoken to have mentioned animal attacks, but they were too distressed to provide details. Seems unlikely, though."

Joe thought about the snake attack. "You don't think an animal attack is possible?"

"Possible yes, but extremely unlikely. The enclosures are secure and the staff are dedicated and experienced professionals. There's never been an incident of such a kind in the seven years I've worked here."

"Sorry to disagree," Joe said, "but I just watched a large snake kill one of your staff about ten minutes ago, over by the World of Venom building – a boa constrictor, I think. It squeezed him to death in front of a dozen people."

The man's face dropped. "Terry? I pray that you are mistaken, sir, I truly do. Terry has been with us many years and loved Betsy a great deal."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Betsy?"

"Yes, Betsy. She is the zoo's Pearl Island Boa. She's always been extremely gentle. I can't believe she would ever attack anyone – least of all Terry. They had a...bond, for want of a better word."

Joe nodded. He didn't want to upset the man further, but thought he needed to wake up to whatever was happening. "Maybe he's okay," Joe supposed. "It did all happen suddenly."

The other man thought about things for a moment and his expression seemed to get grimmer with each passing second. Finally, he looked back up at Joe and said, "I believe you. It doesn't seem like you're lying, and I see no reason why you would. Something is obviously going on, but I just can't fathom the idea that any of our animals would attack their handlers. There are too many precautions."

"Look, I don't mean to be impatient, but you're the only representative of the zoo I could find. You need to do something."

"And what exactly would you have me do? I am a *curator*, not a crowd controller."

Joe sighed. "Nevertheless, you have a responsibility."

The man looked at Joe for several seconds before replying. "I suppose you're right. I should find out what's going on." He pushed Joe aside, headed for the front of the hall, and spoke over his shoulder as he went. "I still don't believe things are as bad as people are—"

Joe turned around to see why the curator had stopped mid-sentence. He could hardly believe his eyes as people started to scream. Four lions blocked the far entrance to the visitor's centre and were snarling at the people inside. Each of their fangs was the size of a tent peg and syrupy-thick blood dripped from their jaws.

Joe had a feeling that he was about to have a very bad day.

Chapter Two

"Lions!" Joe didn't know why he needed to state the obvious, but saying it out loud was the only way he could accept what was happening. "Those are goddamn Lions!"

The curator headed back toward Joe, away from the snarling beasts at the other end of the hall. "This is not possible," he said, voice trembling like lime-jelly. "The enclosures are too secure for anything to get loose."

Joe grabbed the man's collar and shook him. "Think about how they got loose later, okay! I need to get my son somewhere safe, right now."

The curator finally seemed to accept the situation. "We should...we should get everyone further inside the building."

Without further comment, Joe raced over to get Danny from the cube seats. The boy was frozen solid, eyes fixed on the quadrupedal menaces stalking the hall. Joe took his son into his arms and turned back towards the zoo's curator. "Where can we go—"

The sounds of fresh screams cut Joe off. Four lions, led by a heavily-maned male, were now full inside the building. Two females split off to corner a young brunette woman in the gap between two snack machines. The beasts toyed with her, swatting her back and forth, and blood formed on the woman's white blouse where a set of razor-sharp claws penetrated. Elsewhere, the remaining two lions pursued anyone unable to find a hiding space.

"We have to help these people," Joe said. "Take my son somewhere safe."

The curator quickly took Danny into his arms, then turned to Joe. "We'll be in the research wing through the red door in the far corner. I suggest you come with us now not later."

Joe nodded, "Be right behind you," then headed towards the brunette woman. He came to a sudden stop when he encountered the male lion ripping out the throat of an elderly gentleman. The big cat's jaws cut off the old man's screams, left him gargling blood. Joe swallowed back the burger and fries he'd eaten that morning, while battling to fight away the dizziness that erupted from the base of his stomach.

How the fuck did this happen? People aren't supposed to get eaten alive by lions in the middle of England. Or anywhere for that matter. This isn't Jumanji!

More screaming. People being ripped to shreds. Torn apart. Somehow the young brunette was managing to fend off the two lionesses, kicking out at them each time they attacked. It was working for now – but wouldn't be long before her timing was off. Then she would be done for.

Joe grabbed one of the coloured cube-seats and hoisted it up to his chest. It was heavy – too heavy. Joe sucked in a deep breath and heaved with all his might, just about managing to get the cube up above his head. Then, like a circus strongman, he waddled across the hall towards the two attacking lionesses. The male lion was nearby too, ripping apart another victim. This time a young girl.

I must be insane. The first weekend I've had with Danny in a month and it ends with me taking on a pride of lions with a chair from IKEA.

Without allowing himself to think anymore – or back out altogether – Joe flung the cube as hard as he could. Through some stroke of fortune the heavy piece of furniture barrelled into both of the lions, like a bowling ball hitting a pair of skittles. The lionesses sprawled onto their sides, their attack on the young woman ceasing temporarily.

“Come on!” Joe shouted, holding out his hand.

The woman looked at him, quaking with fear against one of the snack machines. The shock in her round, hazel-brown eyes made her seem more like a cartoon character than a human being.

“Come on!” Joe shouted again, louder.

Finally, the woman started to move, edging toward him slowly.

Get yourself moving, woman! I don't fancy dying today.

One lioness back on her feet. Coiled up. Ready to pounce. The woman saw this and stopped. She looked at Joe pleadingly.

There was only one thing on Joe's mind and he expressed it earnestly. “RUN!”

Thankfully, she did as directed and the two of them bolted. Up ahead, people screamed hysterically. Rational thought blocked by sheer terror and incomprehension. Joe wanted to help them. He stopped and shouted as loudly as he could. “Get in to the next room. Everyone, follow me, now!”

Joe's words were almost pointless. One or two people responded, joining him and the young woman in their sprint toward the back of the room, but a majority continued screaming aimlessly. There was nothing Joe could do for these people. They wouldn't even help themselves.

Up ahead on the left was a wooden, red-painted door that read STAFF ONLY. Joe was sure it led to what the curator had called “The Research Wing.”

Roaring – from behind Joe – so loud it made his fillings ache. Without looking, he knew that the lions were giving chase, their instincts unable to resist the sight of fleeing prey. He could almost feel their rancid, blood-soaked breath on the back of his neck and expected to feel their thick claws slicing through the sinewy fibres of his thighs any second. Joe picked up as much speed as he could muster.

He just prayed it was enough.

Enough to outrun a lion...

When he and a handful of others reached the thick red door, Joe slammed right into it, unable to slow down in time to stop. It was then that he noticed the entrance was locked, an ominous steel number pad set beside it on the wall. He bashed at it with his fists, hammering until his skin cracked but it would not swing open. Behind Joe, the others gathered frantically. Behind them, all four lions approached, led by the male with the thick, blood-soaked mane.

“What do we do?” asked the young brunette woman.

Joe shook his head. “I don't know.”

To his surprise, she laughed. “Fabulous!”

The lions were upon them fast. The assembled group shoved one another to get to the back where it was safer. Those at the front began screaming and one man, dressed in a grubby chef's uniform, was knocked forwards onto his knees by the people behind.

The lions were on him in seconds.

As a single unit, the muscled predators pounced, pinning the chef to the floor with their huge round paws. The male lion was the first to draw blood, tearing off a chunk of stringy flesh from the chef's neck with its powerful jaws. A torrent of steaming blood arced high into the air and splattered his grubby white tunic.

At least Danny will be safe, Joe thought to himself through the growing haziness of his fear-soaked mind. Even if his father gets eaten by a lion. Little bit of therapy and he'll be fine.

Joe swallowed.

~~He watched the ensuing chaos and finally lost all feeling – from each of his fingertips to all ten~~ his toes. He could no longer think in a straight line, the adrenaline dissipating through his body sending him into a dazed void of inaction. One-by-one, the members of the group were taken down by the lions, bitten and mauled like ragdolls. It would not be long until Joe's turn was next, the three or four people in front of him his only protection. He stared the male lion in its amber-flecked eyes and was met with a rumbling growl from its gore-encrusted mouth.

The people in front of Joe fell quickly, kicking out and fighting with every ounce of spirit they had left, but dying anyway, right at his feet. He stood motionless and unable to help them – a helpless voyeur of their human tragedy.

One by one, people screamed and then went silent.

Eventually, Joe's turn to join them arrived. The lions snarled. The lions pounced.

Unseen hands pulled Joe backwards. He fell hard onto his side, the impact stealing his breath away. It was a full moment later, when the vision-stars cleared, that he found himself lying in a cramped corridor. Other people piled in through a nearby door, pushing and heaving through the narrow gap while further beyond there came cries of agony from those unlucky enough not to make it through.

A hand grabbed Joe around the shoulder. When he looked up, he saw that it belonged to the grey-haired curator. Joe got to his feet with difficulty, still struggling for breath. "Where's...my...son?"

"Over there." The curator pointed to a bench against the wall. Danny sat there, safe, yet clearly scared if the sickly pallor of his usually rosy cheeks was anything to go by. Joe's lungs deflated as the stress and terror finally fled the rigid fibres of his body. His son was unharmed. He could relax.

"We have to get that door locked back up," the curator asserted. "I'm sorry I didn't realise it locked behind me while you were out there."

"Forget about it," Joe said. "There're people still out there though. We have to help them."

"We cannot. You've already helped as many as you can, and if we don't get that door secured, right now, then none of us will be safe."

Joe knew the logic was correct, but it didn't make the decision any easier. He thought about Danny's safety and made up his mind. "Okay. Let's get it closed."

Joe and the curator rushed over to the thick wooden door and pushed against it, shoving back the half-score of desperate people behind it. There were agonised pleas for help, begging that the door not be closed, but there was no hope in saving them all – or any of them now. In fact, most were already half torn apart, limb hanging from limb, leaving ragged stumps behind. Even those still mobile were bleeding and shocked, wandering around like shell-shocked teenagers on the beaches of Omaha. Except for one man further back who was still managing to put up a fight.

The guy from earlier, Joe noticed. The one from the patio.

The Black man with the grey sideburns had blocked Joe's way earlier. Now he was trying his best to fight the lions and help those under attack. The man wielded a fire extinguisher and was spraying foam into the faces of the lions, forcing them to back away, disorientated.

"He's trying to save everyone," said Joe, and for a moment he thought the man might just do it.

But then the male lion took him down, blindsiding him as he concentrated on one of the lionesses. Joe heard the man cry out as he hit the deck hard. If it wasn't for the extinguisher in his hand blocking the lethal bite of the lion, the guy would already be dead. Joe looked around and noticed the three lionesses were still disorientated, pawing at their faces as they tried to clear the foam from their airways.

Just the male left. I can help this guy.

Joe stopped thinking. He forced his rubbery legs to take him away from the safety of the corridor and back into the hell of the hall. Exertion made his knees feel like hot coals. The struggling man was still unharmed, fending off several attacks by using the extinguisher as a shield.

Joe picked up pace.

Reaching the lion, he swung his leg into the hardest kick he could muster. His foot connected with the side of the lion's head, and a sharp, white-hot jolt of electric pain shot through his toes. The blow had almost no effect on its target, however. The lion flinched, but seemed more irritated than injured.

Shit balls!

The lion let out an almighty roar. It was at that point the Black man readjusted the fire extinguisher's nozzle and pulled back the handle. Gloopy jets of foam shot into the male lion's mouth, cutting off its ear-splitting roar and reducing it to a confused whimper. The big-cat leapt back, choking, hacking, and rubbing its maw against the floor.

Joe pulled the man up and the two of them staggered back towards the corridor as quickly as their battered bodies would allow them. All around, fierce lions lay mewling like wounded kittens. The whole fucked-up situation was surreal – *like Alice in Wonderland on crack*.

The two men passed through the door into the corridor. The waiting curator slammed it shut behind them, the automatic bolt closing with an echoing *clack!* Joe slumped back against the door and took a deep breath. It felt like the first in a long time and it stabbed at his lungs as if he were breathing carpet tacks. His heart was threatening to rip right through his chest. But at least Danny was still safe, still sitting on the bench against the wall. The young brunette woman was looking after him. Joe's heartbeat slowed down a little, but he couldn't help shake the feeling that things were not yet over.

In fact, he had a feeling they were going to get worse.

Chapter Three

"Time I learned your name, sir."

"It's Joe."

The curator shook his hand. "My name is Mason. I am the head curator at the zoo and I thank you for all your help. I don't think I could have taken charge like that."

"Just wish so many people hadn't gotten hurt. How many made it?"

"There's seven of us, including you and your son, but even more people would have been injured if it wasn't for you, Joe. You're a hero and people owe their lives-"

A short and fat, pudgy man with neatly-combed, oil-black hair wedged himself between the two of them. He glared at Mason. "Perhaps you two could stop flirting for one moment and tell me what the hell is going on! I can tell you right now that this wretched place will never again open its doors to the public after I'm through with it."

Mason's expression did not change. "And who might you be, sir?"

The pudgy man seemed furious, his piggish features scrunched up in disapproval. "Who am I? Who am I? I am Christopher-bloody-Randall! That's who I am."

Mason shook his head. "I'm sorry?"

"From Stote Investments Limited. It was my company that paid for this very building you're standing in right now. Show me a little more respect, because I have a good mind to demand my investment right back. This is not what I expected when I came here for a simple business meeting this morning. It's a fiasco."

Again, without any discernible expression, Mason shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't invol"

myself with the zoo's finances. That would be the concern of the park administrators and I'm afraid they don't work weekends. I apologise for any inconvenience to you, Mr Randall, but I think you can clearly see that we are all equally affected by the day's events."

The angry little man went bright red now and began to wheeze. Spittle formed at the corners of his bulbous lips. "Now you listen here. I own this building, which means I own you. I need to get out here immediately, do you hear me? My business here is finished and I have a very important meeting to get--"

Joe had heard enough. "Look, mate, I don't know what mental illness you're currently taking medication for, but people are dead and lots more are injured. Don't think anyone gives two shits if you have a business meeting with the Queen. Unless you intend to be helpful, please just do us all a favour and fuck off!"

The investor spun to face Joe, toe to toe, but seemed to lose some of his spirit when he realised the difference in size and height. Joe probably weighed four-stone more than the man and towered over him like a bronze statue.

The man still hadn't lost his attitude completely. "How dare you speak to me like that. Do you know who I--"

"You're Lord Randall of Asshole-land. Thanks, got it, don't care. Just sit down while Mason and I actually try to do something constructive."

Randall shook with anger, glaring at Joe as if he were excrement on his Ralph Lauren loafer. Fortunately, it seemed he had finally run out of patience though and stormed off down the corridor. Joe took the opportunity to glance over at Danny, wondering if he should go and check on him. He had seen his son had lain himself down across the brunette woman's lap and was nearly asleep. Joe decided to leave him alone for a few minutes more.

He turned back to Mason. "That guy was a jackass."

Mason nodded. "Investors always are. Still, he has a right to be angry after what has happened today. No doubt he is correct about the zoo's future being rather bleak."

"How could this happen, Mason?"

"I really can't say. Nothing like this has ever happened before. All of the dangerous animals are kept inside high-security enclosures. The only way in or out is through twin-layer fences. You enter one, close it, and then open the second. There's no way an animal can escape."

Joe nodded. "I understand the type of thing you mean, but, whether it's plausible or not, the lions got out somehow."

"Indeed they did."

Joe waited for further comment, but it appeared that the curator had none to make, so he spoke instead. "Okay, just keep trying to reach someone on your radio. I'm going to go check on my son."

Mason nodded and Joe left him alone under the bright lights of the corridor. Over on the bench, Danny was still lying on the brunette woman's lap – the one that had been trapped between the two snack machines only minutes before. Now that she was sitting in the harshly-lit corridor, Joe could see that her wounds from the attack were shallow and already healing. She'd been lucky. "Hey," Joe said to her as he approached. "Thanks for looking after him."

She smiled at Joe, and it was then that he saw she was in fact just a girl and not a woman. Dark bags beneath each of her eyes gave the impression that she was older, but her smooth white skin betrayed her real youth.

About twenty, maybe?

"Least I can do after you saved my life," she said to him.

Joe blushed. "Wouldn't go that far."

"I would." The girl offered out her hand. It was slender and recently manicured, but many of the painted-pink nails were chipped and broken. "I'm Grace."

Joe also noticed a recently-healed scar that lined the back of her wrist, along with several older faded ones. He didn't want to be rude by staring, and averted his eyes. "Pleased to meet you, Grace." The two shook hands. "I'm Joe and this is—"

"Danny. Yeah, I know. He told me before taking a nap. He was worried about you out there. You shouldn't be such a hero."

Joe acknowledged his selfishness. If he'd been hurt then Danny would be all alone in this fucked-up situation. What the hell was he thinking, running around out there like Joe-the-lion-tamer? He couldn't risk leaving Danny alone again.

I won't.

"Mind if I wake him?" he asked.

Grace laughed. The sound was delicate and fragile. "He's *your* son. Be my guest."

Joe knelt beside Danny and gently shook one of his tiny legs. "Hey, little dude! You awake?"

Danny opened his eyes slowly, pupils widening gradually like ink stains on cloth.

"Everything is okay now," said Joe. "Daddy's back."

Danny smiled and closed his eyes again as if wanting to get back to some wonderful dream. He muttered under his breath, "Can I stay here with Grace?"

Joe raised an eyebrow. It wasn't like Danny to form bonds so quickly – not since the divorce – but he supposed it couldn't hurt. Joe looked up at Grace. "That okay?"

Grace nodded. "Sure. Could kind of do with a rest myself."

"There's a quiet-room on the right," said Mason, approaching from down the corridor with walkie-talkie still in hand. "It's where we put visitors when they're not feeling well. There's a sofa-bed inside."

"Excellent!" said Grace, her face lighting up like a beacon. "Come on, Danny."

Joe watched the girl lead his son to the room on the opposite side of the corridor before disappearing inside. For some reason, he trusted her, and relaxed knowing that Danny was in her care. Maybe it was the feeling of having a women's support that made him feel that way.

Mason placed a hand on Joe's shoulder. "I couldn't reach anyone."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "No one at all?"

Mason's stiff expression gave nothing away about his feelings, but Joe had a feeling the man was beginning to crack. Slender creases at the corners of his eyes seemed to widen as he spoke. "There are a dozen zoo keepers here today and they all carry walkie talkies – just like this one. Not one of them picking up however. I can't imagine what that means."

"I can," said Joe, "and it's not a nice thing to think about. You tried phoning anyone outside the zoo?"

Mason shook his head. "That was what I was going to do next. There are phones in the office upstairs. I should be able to call right through to the administration building at the rear entrance. Office staff don't generally work the weekends, but there's usually one or two people there on Saturday. Mr Randall said he was here this morning for a meeting, so perhaps the members of the board are around too. They may be able to shed some light on the current situation."

"Good," said Joe, scratching the stubble on his chin. It seemed to have grown inches in just the last hour. "What about the building we're in? Can we get out any other way than the door we came through?"

“There’s a fire exit at the end of this corridor and we can also enter the cafeteria, which has several more exits. I don’t know if it would be wise to try to leave, however.”

Joe looked up and down the corridor, taking in the images of the frightened strangers. In addition to the rude investor, Mr Randall, there was also an elderly woman with grey hair sitting next to a heavily tattooed, bald man. It was a strange sight to see such opposites placed side-by-side.

“I think I agree,” Joe said after some consideration. “My son and I are going nowhere until the lions are dealt with.”

Mason adjusted his spectacles. “We should get everyone assembled and come up with a plan, even if it’s only to sit and wait for rescue.”

“Agreed,” said Joe. “Is there somewhere more comfortable we can all go? I don’t think people will be able to calm themselves down in this corridor.”

Mason took Joe’s arms and led him a little down the corridor. “There’s a staffroom in this part of the building. It’s a large area with enough places to sit and a few refreshments. I’d say it would be best to reconvene there for now. We can always move upstairs later if we need to. The building is pretty much empty, today being the weekend. They’ll be plenty of room. In fact, I think we’re the only ones here.”

“Let’s get going then.”

Mason clapped his hands together and got the attention of the other shell-shocked survivors. “Okay everyone, can I have your attention.”

Silence from everyone. Glazed expressions and teary cheeks. From the other side of the exit door the wet smacking sounds of lions feeding on corpses could be heard in vivid detail. Mason continued despite the lack of audience response. “We are going to follow this corridor down to its end and enter a staffroom beyond. It is comfortable there, warm and safe. We should gather whilst we wait to learn more about this...situation.”

“And what *is* the situation?” asked the Black man with the grey sideburns. He was still carrying his dented fire extinguisher.

“We don’t know,” Mason answered. “Obviously there has been a breach in the lion exhibit enclosure, but as to how that happened, I do not know. I will try to contact the administration building shortly – and the emergency services of course – but first we need to get ourselves situated.”

“Who are you to give orders?” It was the investor, Randall, again. The man’s mood had obviously not improved.

“I am no one to give orders,” Mason calmly told him, “but as the only one offering practical advice, I see no harm in having people do as I say for the time being.”

“If you hadn’t allowed this to happen in the first place then I would have a little more trust to afford to you, my friend.”

“Mr Randall, if you feel better blaming me personally I am happy for you to do so, but my advice is that we group together somewhere more comfortable. If you or anybody else does not wish to follow that advice then you are free to do as you like. Those that do wish to follow my suggestion may come with myself and Joe, who may I remind you was the one that helped a majority of you in the first place.”

“If that’s your advice,” said the Black man. “Then that’s what I’ll do. I don’t see the point in all this negativity and arguing.” The last comment was directed at Randall who seemed less than impressed at being called out.

“Let’s go then,” said Joe. “I’ll get Grace and my son and we’ll be off in five.”

A heavy thud rattled the thick red door behind them on its hinges. The lions were trying to break

through into the corridor.

Joe's eyes widened. "Or maybe we should get going right now."

Chapter Four

Randall could not believe he was running down a corridor to get away from lions. It was the biggest screw-up he had ever known, and when it was all over this dump of a zoo would pay for it. To think he had actually provided obscene amounts of cash to improve the facilities here. *Positive publicity*, his marketers had claimed. *What a load of rubbish*. He'd be claiming back every penny now and more. The place could rot for all he cared.

"This is ridiculous," said Randall – wheezing heavily – to a bald, tattooed man running alongside him. "Don't they have...guns here...or...something in place to control animals when they...get loose?"

"Tell me about it!" The man replied in a thick Scottish accent. The word *about* sounded like *a-bout* from the man's uncouth mouth. "They must be running the place with a bunch of wee ten-year-olds. Someone is gonna be knee-deep in bother when this is over, mark me words."

Randall sniggered. "You can say that again, my friend."

The shambling group of survivors slowed down at the end of the corridor and the idiot-curator turned to face them all. "Okay everyone, once we get inside we should barricade the doors right away. I don't think I need to tell you why." The man paused so that they could all listen to the banging coming from the door down the corridor behind them. Randall didn't appreciate the dramatics, but kept his silence as the man continued. "Once that is done, we can all do our best to relax while I try to contact the authorities."

No one spoke and Randall didn't blame them. What was there to say in a ridiculous situation like this? And to take orders from one of the men responsible for it made things all the more worse.

The curator pushed open the door at the end of the corridor and stood aside whilst people filed in to the room ahead. Randall listened to the erratic thudding, getting louder behind them, and was confused. Could lions really behave like this? Smashing through doors to get at people when they had devoured several bodies already? *It can't be hunger*, he thought.

The tattooed man beside Randall patted him on the back. "They best have a kettle in there, pal. We could kill a brew."

Randall took exception to being touched by the rough-looking man, and also to being called "pal". He didn't acknowledge his disapproval, however, because he was next in line to enter the staffroom ahead. Randall stepped through and entered a large blue-carpeted room that featured several sets of brand-new tables and chairs, several vending machines, two pool tables, and a modest kitchenette. The room was backed by a long, horizontal window that ran the entire length of the wall.

Is this what my money paid for? Somewhere for staff to laze about? Maybe they should have spent the money on better security for the animal enclosures. Then I wouldn't be suing them into bankruptcy.

Randall found a seat and placed himself down while the rest of the group seated themselves. It felt good to take the weight off his feet, and gave him a chance to use his inhaler to get his asthma under control. It would not do to wait around idle for too long however. He had somewhere important to be. The head of one of the China's biggest tire manufacturers would be waiting on him to discuss a investment in their UK strategy. It was just one more industry that the Chinks were planning to monopolise, and Randall decided it was better to get into bed with them than to resist. It could cost

Randall millions if he missed the meeting. There was a long line of other investors eager to make the deal if he didn't. Lions or no lions, Randall had to get out of there.

I'll spare ten more minutes, then enough is enough.

The curator stepped into the room along with his giant blond accomplice that had been rude to Randall earlier. A young brunette girl and a small boy with a tatty backpack also accompanied them. He was pretty sure that the boy belonged to the blond man.

The curator pushed closed the door, turned the lock, and faced the group. "This door is not especially heavy," he said, "so I think it would be wise to slide one of the pool tables in front of it. Do I have any volunteers?"

Yeah right! Randall scoffed. *Don't expect me to start lugging furniture around for you.*

There were a few volunteers but Randall paid them no mind. The only concern he had right now were the ticking hands on his Omega watch. Each second could be costing him money.

Several minutes passed, the aimless fools just managing to push one of the pool tables up against the door. Unbelievably, they had started playing a game on the other one.

What do they think this is? Break Time?

"Right!" The curator cleared his throat and addressed everyone again. "Now that we have secured our safety, I should introduce myself. My name is Mason and I work here at the zoo. Unfortunately, I have no more knowledge of the current events than anybody else. I will, however, be going upstairs shortly to use one of the office phones to try and contact somebody. Before that, might I ask if anyone here has a cell phone?"

The group looked around themselves, but no one answered. Randall could have said 'yes', but he wasn't about to offer up his possessions to anyone.

Mason raised an eyebrow above his spectacles. "Really? No one has one? I thought the whole world had mobile phones these days?"

"Yeah," added a Black man with grey sideburns who looked like Bill Cosby. He was holding up a piece of shattered plastic with various wires hanging out of it. "But mine got pretty bashed up during the attack, as you can see. I tried making a call, but the thing won't even switch on anymore."

The young girl spoke. "I had one in my bag. My bag is outside. I think we all just ran for our lives without really thinking about our belongings."

Not me. Randall smirked. *Too bad the rest of you are unorganised idiots. I made sure to keep a hold of my possessions.*

Mason nodded thoughtfully and then shrugged. "A shame, but not much we can do about it now. Okay, I'll go try to find some answers for everyone."

"Make sure you find them in the next five minutes," said Randall, using the commanding tone that he had perfected throughout years of boardroom conflicts.

Mason sighed. "Mr Randall, I do not wish to do battle with you again. Please try to see--"

"No, *you* try to see how much this zoo has caused us all an inconvenience. None of us should be sitting here right now, in danger. You need to remedy this situation immediately – and I mean *immediately.*"

"Yeah!" The agreement came from the bald tattooed man. "This has gone way beyond a bloodbath joke, pal!"

Mason sighed once more and Randall was sure the man was defeated. "I implore you to be patient and in return I will do my utmost to get this situation resolved as quickly as possible. I can only do my best to make sense of things. For now the only place we know that is safe is here, inside this building. I'll go now and try to make contact with someone in authority."

Randall relaxed back in his chair and smiled like a fox after dinner. “See that you do, my friend.” Despite the curator’s obvious skill in keeping a straight face, Randall could see tiny rivulets of irritation soaking into the man’s expression. It pleased Randall.

“Afterwards,” Randall added, “I would request that everyone give me their contact details. I will be taking this establishment to court and anyone that wishes to join me in that pursuit will be most welcome.”

“I’m with ya, pal,” the tattooed man replied.

“As am I,” said a middle-aged woman with wispy grey hair and bifocals that Randall had not noticed before. “Someone has to be punished.”

Randall couldn’t help but grin. *Splendid. Looks like I have a nice foundation for my case already. The more angry voices in a courtroom the better.*

“Why you gotta be such a dick, man?” It was the Black man, standing by the pool table, cue in hand. “Can’t you see the trouble we’re in? People are dead and all you can think about is your damn self.”

Who the hell does he think he is to question me?

“I live in a world where people are held accountable for their actions,” said Randall. “Sorry if the notions of right and wrong are beyond someone like you.”

The Black man scrunched up his face and stepped away from the pool table. “The hell the hell is supposed to mean?”

Randall sighed. “Work it out, Cosby.”

Before Randall got a reply, the large blond man entered the conversation. “Let’s not pick at each other, okay? Mason has gone upstairs to try to make a phone call and shed some light on the situation. The rest of us should just keep ourselves occupied. Look,” the man pointed one of his giant arms across the room, “there’s a television in the corner.”

He was right, Randall noted. Perched on a pair of wall brackets at the far corner of the room was a brand new LCD TV.

Another extravagance I paid for. Jesus wept!

“Okay,” Randall conceded. “Television sounds like a good idea, but let’s just put the news on. Not that of that daytime talk show drivel.”

“Fine,” the big man replied, bounding off towards the television set on legs that seemed unnatural for him. It was far away from where Randall was sitting, but big enough that he would still be able to see. When the blond man managed to find the remote and switch it on, it showed only a blue screen at first, but after a couple of moments, pressing buttons and flipping through several channels of empty stations, a grainy picture finally appeared.

“The reception is really bad,” said the blond man, “but I think it’s the news. It’s certainly not about Jeremy Kyle.”

“Yeah, it’s a news report alright,” Cosby added needlessly. “I recognise the journalist, Jarrod Hamilton.”

Everyone sat quietly as the news updates flashed various images from around the UK. It seemed that it wasn’t just the zoo that was having troubles.

“Holy shit!” Cosby cried out. “I can’t believe it.”

If Randall was honest, he couldn’t quite believe it either. “Interesting,” he said out loud, wondering what it all could mean. “Very interesting.”

Chapter Five

Joe couldn't believe what he was seeing. The flickering news report showed animal attacks from all over the country – images of Hyde Park overrun by snarling dogs of numerous breeds, and, even more bizarrely, a pack of crazed squirrels attacking a baby in its pram outside Manchester's Trafford Centre. Next came scenes from the countryside – of farm animals ripping a man to shreds as he failed to reach the safety of his dust-covered Range Rover. Sheep, cows, and even pigs were roaming the fields and roadsides like Nazi-death-squads, with what looked like morsels of human flesh hanging from their jaws. Every scene was different, but they all had one thing in common – animals were attacking people. It didn't matter how big or how small, anything with fur, claws, or fangs was seemingly possessed by a malevolent rage directed solely at the human race. Dogs, cats, and mice, sheep, cows, and pigs – all were united in their quest to kill. Whatever was going on right now, wasn't just isolated to the zoo.

“This can't be happening,” said Joe, as the television switched to similar scenes from various locations in Europe. Helsinki was currently under siege from a band of rampaging bears, while Paris was fighting off a plague of rats emerging from its vast sewers. “God help us.”

“I don't think God is watching,” said Grace, who had picked Danny up into her arms to keep him from looking at the images.

Joe shook his head, unable to take his eyes away from the screen. “I don't understand any of this.”

“Me either.” The Black man came up beside them. “It's a mad house.”

Joe somehow managed a smile. “What's your name? I'm assuming it's not *Cosby*?”

“Name's William, but my friends call me Bill. Your name's Joe, right?”

Joe nodded. “Pleased to meet you, Bill. You make sense of any of this?”

Bill shook his head. “Just about the craziest goddamn thing I've ever seen. Don't know what could be to blame. Maybe it's the end of the world.”

“Terrorists, if you ask me.” Coming to join them was the grey-haired woman that had spoken in support of Randall earlier, wanting to join his legal battle. She was smiling now and seemed quite pleasant. “Godless monsters are always coming up with new ways to destroy the world. Looks like they finally came up with a good one – airborne rabies. Name's Shirley.”

“Hi, Shirley,” Joe greeted her. “You really think terrorists?”

“Have a better suggestion?”

Joe shook his head. He didn't. If it was a terrorist act, he wondered what that could mean, and what it would mean for his son. “What do we do?”

“How should I know?” Shirley shrugged. “Whatever happens, things will work out however God wants them too. Maybe the world will finally face up to its sin now that deliverance is upon us.”

Bill huffed beside Joe. “Speak for yourself, lady. People are responsible for their own actions. I don't believe there's some man in the sky playing us all like puppets, weighing up our mistakes against us. That's crazy!”

Shirley smirked, but the expression contained a dose of venom. “Believe what you will, but when your day of reckoning arrives you will see the error of your ways. Now is not the time to be heathen.” The woman strolled away; apparently satisfied that she had said her piece.

Bill turned to Joe. “She for real?”

“Don't know,” said Grace, “but that was a bit of an intense introduction.”

Joe laughed. “Strange times call for strange people. But it doesn't matter *who* or *what* is responsible at the end of the day. What matters to me is keeping my son safe. You think things will

work themselves out if we just stay put?”

Bill shrugged. “~~The police must be doing something. Hell, the army too! It’s just a bunch of animals. They should be able to handle a few rabid Labradors and Tabby cats.~~”

“What about lions?” Grace asked.

“Lions are a little more difficult, but that’s only because we had the misfortune to be at the motherfuckin’ zoo. I mean, *damn*, you couldn’t make this shit up.”

“So what’s the plan?” Grace looked at Joe, shifting Danny’s weight onto her opposite shoulder. “Do we just stay here?”

Joe had no answers. He scratched at his forehead on the off-chance that he would knock loose a good idea, but found nothing hiding. “I guess we just settle in and wait for help to come. It’ll probably take some time for the authorities to get a handle on things.”

Just then a nearby door swung open, startling everybody. When it turned out to be Mason, they all relaxed. The zoo’s curator ambled over with a look of grave concern on his face.

Joe nodded at him. “Everything okay?”

Mason shook his head and looked down at the floor. When he looked back up his expression seemed even grimmer. “I tried contacting the admin building, but got nothing. The phones just rang out. So then I called the police.”

Joe cleared his throat, not sure he wanted to hear what Mason had to say. “And?”

“No answer.”

Grace laughed; a nervous sound. “What? No answer? They have to answer, don’t they?”

Mason bit at his lip. “One would certainly think so, but I’m getting the impression that they may be inundated with calls at the moment.”

Joe knew where this was going and didn’t want to beat around the bush. “We saw the news. It’s going on everywhere.”

“Yes,” said Mason. “I suspected as much. Every number I tried was unanswered. But what really disturbs me is what I saw when I looked out of the upper-floor windows.”

Joe took a deep breath which seemed to lead Bill and Grace to do the same. *Maybe anxiety is infectious?* He raised an eyebrow at Mason. “What did you see?”

Mason didn’t answer at first and seemed to drift off into thought, eyes flickering behind his spectacles as though they were playing back a movie in his mind. When he finally answered, his voice was weak and lacked his usual composure. “The entire zoo has been overrun. The animals are all out of their cages, and there are...” Mason took a moment to gather himself. “There are...bodies everywhere. I watched for ten minutes whilst a pack of our African Wild Dogs ate the very flesh from a group of dead children. Blood every—”

Joe cut him off and pointed to his son. Danny didn’t need to hear any of this.

Mason understood and changed direction. “Yes, well, perhaps it is best to think forward now that the events have already transpired. I believe we are safe for now, but I have no idea how long we should prepare to be here. If I tell the group what has happened, and that we all must remain inside, I think they may kick up a fuss.”

Bill laughed. “That’s an understatement. Biggest problem is gonna be that jackass banker or businessman – whatever he is.”

“Randall.” Joe sniffed. “His name is Randall.”

Mason looked weary and seemed to have aged over the last hour. “We’ll just have to do our best to calm him. I’m sure he’s a reasonable man underneath.”

They all looked at each other for a minute. Joe didn’t think anybody believed that Randall would

anything other than a grade-A prick.

“Should we get to it then?” Mason asked them all finally.

Everyone nodded. No time like the present to serve shit sandwiches to a bunch of scared people. Joe just had to keep reminding himself that they were lucky to even be alive right now. They had to be thankful.

Led by Mason, they moved over to the centre of the room. Most people were still glued to the ongoing news reports, but, when they noticed the zoo’s curator, they all turned their attention to him.

Mason clapped his hands together. It was a needless action since all eyes were already on him, but it seemed like an appropriate way to punctuate the start of a speech. “I’m sure everyone is eager to gain more knowledge about the current events and I do indeed have some for you. I ask that you remain calm as I say this, but I regret to inform you that the animal attacks we have witnessed here today are not localised to this zoo. In fact, from my estimation, they are happening throughout the nation. Perhaps the world.”

“Thank you for telling us what we already know.” Randall spoke from the back of the room. The way he lazed casually in the chair made it obvious that his ego wasn’t yet ready to take a rest.

Joe eyeballed the piggish little man. *Can you please be constructive for one minute? Anyone would think that being a pain in the ass was your hobby.*

“We already know it’s happening everywhere,” Randall continued. “It’s on the news.”

“Okay,” Mason replied, stuttering slightly. “Then I hope you all understand the gravity of the situation. What you may not be aware of, however, is the danger that presents itself outside this very building.”

Randall shrugged. “The lions?”

“I wish that were the depth of it, but I am afraid it is far worse. From what I have witnessed, even an animal in the park has broken free. They have attacked and killed anyone unfortunate enough to be outside.”

Randall leapt from his chair, quicker than one would have imagined for a man of his girth. For a moment Joe wondered if someone had lit a fire under his ass. “How the *hell* have you let this happen?” Spit flew from his mouth as he spoke. His cheeks turned red like cherry tomatoes. “How does a modern-day zoo let its entire inventory get loose? It begs belief that anyone could be so incompetent.”

Mason only managed to respond with a series of splutters.

Randall continued his tirade. “Do you know how much trouble you are in? I ought to throw you out there with the lions. You ridiculous, negligent—”

“Enough,” Joe cut in. “There will be a time for blame, but this is not it. Right now we are in a predicament beyond anything we can yet understand. I think it’s safe to assume that whatever is happening at this zoo is a *symptom* of whatever has affected the animals nationwide, not the *cause*.”

Randall glared at Joe. “I don’t know who you are, my friend, but I am getting rather tired of you coming to this fool’s aid. If you continue to speak in his defence then I can only assume that you are complicit in this fiasco.”

Joe threw back his head and twisted the kinks from his neck. Every conversation with Randall left him exhausted. “Look,” he said finally, “my name is Joe, and I just came here today because my son loves animals and has never been to a zoo.” He pointed at Danny who was still asleep in Grace’s arms. “Truth be told, I don’t get to see my son very often and this day was important to me. Real important. So don’t assume, Mr. Randall, that I’m not as put out as you are. But there are people outside the zoo who never even made it long enough to be stuck in this situation. They’re dead.” A silence filled the room and Joe hoped that things were finally sinking in. “We’re in a bad situation, people, and if we don’t

get along then it will get even worse. It would be better if we introduce ourselves and try to get through this together. Is that too much to ask?"

More silence filled the room, along with anxious expressions. No one wanted to talk. No one wanted to get along. To do so would be to admit that things were as bad as they all feared.

"My name is Grace. I'm twenty-three and I came here today for a job interview. I don't think I'm going to get it."

Joe smiled at her, appreciating her effort. "Anybody else?"

Shirley stood up from a chair behind Randall. "My name is Shirley. I'm a retired nurse and I come to the zoo often. It's only right that we appreciate God's creatures and enjoy the beauty of his creation."

The next person stood up – a wiry-muscled bald man, covered in red and green tattoos that covered his sleeveless arms. The one on his right bicep read, HIGHLANDER. "Name's Victor. I were on a date. The wee gal I was courting died outside, I think."

Joe was surprised that the man didn't seem particularly bothered by this, but told himself that all people grieved in different ways. "I'm sorry to hear that, Victor. What has happened today is a tragedy."

"Ay, a tragedy." Victor repeated. "Woman had a damn fine backside."

The comment may have been a joke, but it elicited only a brief moment of awkward silence until the next person stood up.

"Hi, everyone. You can call me Bill. I'm a self-employed accountant. Came here today with my partner, Gary. He's...dead too, I guess. I tried to help him, but..."

Suddenly, Victor threw his hands up in the air, letting them fall down and slap against his thighs. "Oh great, we're stuck in here with a fucking fairy!"

Bill waved an arm at him dismissively. "Oh great, we're stuck in here with a closed-minded bigot."

"What you say to me, faggot?"

"Sorry," Bill said. "Were you not intending to come across as a bigot? I kind of got the impression that you were."

Victor stomped towards Bill. His muscles bunched up, ready for a fight. "You don't get to call me anything, you hear me, faggot?"

Joe got between the two men, towering above them both. "Pack it in! We don't have to like one another, but at least act like adults."

"Dad?"

Joe turned to see that Grace had put Danny down and that his son was now walking towards him in a fuzzy, half-asleep daze. "Hey, sleepy head," said Joe. "Everything is okay. The adults are just talking."

Danny rubbed at his eyes. "Why are you shouting?"

Joe picked his son up into his arms. "I'm not shouting, little dude. I was just excited about something."

"About the monkeys?"

Joe frowned. "What monkeys?"

Danny rubbed at his eyes once more, before pointing over his father's shoulder. Joe turned around to see what his son was looking at. The others in the room turned at the same time.

"Shit pickles," said Grace beside him. "That's not good, is it?"

Joe shook his head. "Not good at all."

Lined up against the long horizontal window of the far wall was row upon row of monkeys. Dozens

of human-like faces pressed up against the glass, side by side. They looked almost comical in a way but a wild spark of sinister intent glistened in their eyes. Joe knew what it was.

It was murder.

Chapter Six

“What do we do,” Grace cried out, frantic, pulling her hair. “What do we do?”

Joe put a hand on her shoulder whilst simultaneously pulling Danny against his hip. “Just calm down. I don’t think they can get in at us.” As if to question his assertion, one of the monkeys smashed a fisted paw against the glass. Joe flinched and studied the area where the animal had hit. It was cracked, a delicate spiderweb of fractures snaking through the glass where the impact had struck. Joe swallowed. “Actually, maybe you should go ahead and panic.”

“We need to move upstairs, right now.” Mason rushed across the room, clapping his hands above his head to get everyone’s focus. A door stood at the side of the room and he punched in a code on a square pad beside it. “Everyone, in here, quickly.”

Without argument everyone raced to the door, passing through into the corridor beyond. Joe and Danny went in last, slamming closed the door behind them, hearing it lock automatically.

Mason was waiting for them. “We need to move to the second floor before they get in.”

Joe’s palms were sweaty and he wiped them against his jeans. “Will we be safe up there?”

Mason was already moving again. “Something tells me that we’re not going to be safe *anywhere* soon.”

Joe peered down at Danny, who was looking right back at him. Worry was etched across his delicate face and it made Joe’s heart twist in his chest. He tousled his son’s blond hair and picked him up onto his hip.

Mason shouted back and told them to hurry.

“Okay,” Joe said. The sound of breaking glass from the staffroom urged him to get moving and he did so quickly, re-joining the fleeing group just as they reached a staircase at the end of the corridor. The steps echoed as Joe took them, two at a time, and more than once he almost lost his balance. Danny’s limp weight in his arms did not help.

At the top of the stairs was another lengthy corridor, carpeted in a cheap navy-blue pile and lined by numerous doors on both sides. Mason was leading everyone into the nearest door on the left. A bronze plaque on the wall beside it read: ZOOLOGICAL LIBRARY AND SEMINAR ROOM.

Joe stepped in beside Mason to find a plush room, full of soft furnishings, chairs and wooden tables, all facing forward toward a lectern at the back of the room near a large ceiling-to-floor window. The other three walls were interspersed with overfilled bookshelves and recently-used whiteboards. The musty smell of old, inked pages filled the air.

“We need to barricade the door downstairs,” said Mason, “make sure that nothing gets through into the corridor.”

Joe swallowed a lump in his throat. “I don’t quite fancy going back down there. It sounded like they were about to break through the window just before I went up the stairs.”

The tattooed man, Victor, approached them. “I’ll go. A bunch of wee monkeys don’t scare me none.”

“That’s very brave of you,” Joe admitted.

“Aye, well it’s not your fault you’re a pussy.”

Joe cleared his throat. “Excuse me? I have a son to look after first and foremost. I’ve already risked

my life enough times today.”

Victor sniggered and sauntered away, towards one of the room’s many desks. “Keep telling y’s that, pal.”

Joe shook his head and put his son down on one of the cushion-backed chairs, then took the seat next to him. *I’m not a pussy. I just have other priorities right now. Although, if someone doesn’t go down and barricade that door then we’ll all be in trouble. Maybe I should go...*

Victor dragged a table over to the doorway and the scraping sound against the thin carpet broke Joe away from his thoughts. He sat and watched the man grab a second table and upend it on top of the first, then shove them both into the corridor outside.

“Can this situation become any more farcical?” said Randall, complaining again and as upbeat as ever. “A total disaster!”

“Think I’d have to agree with you there,” said Bill, rummaging through one of the bookshelves. “Things keep going from bad to worse.”

“We should be okay for now though,” said Mason. “Victor is barricading the door as we speak, and there’s no other way to reach this section of the building apart from the staircase we ascended earlier.”

“Shouldn’t someone be helping Victor?” Shirley asked.

“He can handle himself,” said Randall, and Joe was glad to hear it from someone else. “I’d be more concerned about your own hide and the situation we’re in, my dear.”

Bill returned a thick text book to its space on the shelf and turned around. “And what situation are we in exactly? I still don’t know.”

Grace offered an explanation. “I think things are...bad. I mean, *really* bad. If this is happening everywhere then we could be in some serious trouble. There might not be anyone coming for a long time.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Randall.

“I don’t think so,” said Joe. “I’m sure everything will work out eventually, but I don’t see anyone coming by to help for a while. If animals are attacking everywhere then the whole country is going to be in chaos. I didn’t want to admit it at first, but I think we’re all stuck here.”

Mason nodded. “We need to start thinking about settling in, planning for a couple of days here.”

Randall slapped his hands down on one of the tables, startling everyone. “Unacceptable!”

Bill put a hand to his forehead. “Seriously, man, you gotta wake up. This shit is bad and it’s time to forget about business appointments and brunch in the city.”

“I need to get out of here. I am far too important to be missing in action. There are people who rely on me.”

“Those people are probably dead,” said Grace.

The suggestion seemed to hit home to Randall and he stood there silently, swaying back and forth slightly as his mouth moved in speechless quivers.

“I’m sorry,” said Joe, “but that’s most likely true. I think we’re alone for now. We should just count ourselves lucky that we’re alive.”

“Count *yourself* lucky,” Randall spat. “I don’t see it that way.”

Joe put his hands up. “Fine, but can you at least accept the situation we’re in?”

Randall moved away from the group and sat down. That was fine by Joe. The further away the piggish little man was the better. He leant back in his chair and looked at his son. “You’ve been a really good boy today, Danny. Very quiet and well behaved.”

“The animals are after us, aren’t they? They don’t want to be in cages no more.”

Joe thought about lying to the frightened boy, but didn’t. “Something has made them really mad

us,” he admitted, “but I’m going to look after you.”

“Promise?”

Joe smiled and said, “Ohhhh yeahhhhh!”

Danny laughed hard. “Macho Man!”

“That’s right. Anything that tries to hurt you will get the big elbow drop.”

Bill and Grace joined Joe and Danny at the table, attracted by the noise. “Everything okay here?” Grace asked.

“I was just telling Danny what a good boy he’s been.”

“You’re telling me!” She patted Danny on the arm. “Not a peep out of this brave warrior.”

Danny smiled. “Ultimate Warrior.”

Grace looked at Joe, confused.

“One thing to know about my son is that he’s obsessed with wrestlers from the eighties and nineties.”

“Where did he get that from?”

Joe’s cheeks flushed red. “Me.”

Grace giggled. “Nothing wrong with that. Better than being football-obsessed like most the guys I’ve met. I’m surprised you never ended up being a wrestler yourself, size you are.”

Joe looked at himself and nodded. “I think that’s why I liked it as a kid. I was bigger than everyone else and I felt like a bit of a freak, but every week I would watch these giants on TV being worshipped by millions and I wouldn’t feel so bad anymore.”

“Maybe that’s why I used to like Culture Club,” said Bill, and they all laughed.

Until the noise cut them off.

A ruckus somewhere in the building. The crashing sounds of a violent struggle. It wasn’t until they heard the shrill shrieking of monkeys that it became obvious what was happening.

“Victor,” said Joe. “The monkeys must have broken in before he had chance to secure the doors.”

Bill leapt up. “We need to get that door closed.”

Joe sprang up too. “Grace, look after Danny. Danny, I’ll be right back. Be good.”

Joe and Bill swung open the door and ran into the corridor. The chaotic noise became louder as it echoed off the walls on their approach to the stairs. They could hear Victor screaming out insults.

“Take that, yer wee bastards! I’ll break yer frickin’ necks.”

Joe took the steps downwards, twice as fast as he’d gone up them – four at a time – the impact on every stair rattling the bones in his ankles. Despite his haste, it still felt like an eternity to reach the bottom. When he did, Bill hurtling into the back of him, Joe wished he hadn’t.

The monkeys were inside.

Victor noticed Joe and Bill’s presence and spun around to face them, his back against the door. Thick scratches and ragged bite-marks covered his body. “Give me a bloody hand!” he shouted.

Joe and Bill rushed forward down the corridor, gripping the edge of one of the tables that Victor had abandoned half way down. It was heavy, and Joe wondered how on Earth the Scotsman had manoeuvred two at once. They slid the table towards the far door, which was now being forced open by two-dozen sets of razor-tipped paws. Victor was pushing back as hard as he could, trying to force the door shut, but there were four monkeys already inside the entranceway and they were all lunging for him. They bit and clawed at his tattooed arms and legs, shrieking in ecstasy as they drew fresh blood from his wounds. Victor fought to ignore the pain as he concentrated on keeping the door closed.

Joe’s eyes stretched wide. The situation would not quite compute in his brain, but he knew that he needed to act right now, before Victor’s body gave out to the relentless mauling by the three monkey

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