

Forest
of the Pygmies



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Dedication

*For Brother Fernando de la Fuente,
missionary in Africa,
whose spirit animates this story*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Market Fortune-teller

AT AN ORDER FROM THE guide, Michael Mushaha, the elephant caravan came to a stop. The suffocating heat of midday was beginning, when the creatures of the vast nature preserve rested. Life paused for a few hours as the African earth became an inferno of burning lava, and even hyenas and vultures sought the shade. Alexander Cold and Nadia Santos were riding a willful bull elephant named Kobi. The animal had taken a liking to Nadia, because during their time together she had made an effort to learn the basics of the elephant's language in order to communicate with him. During their long treks, she had told him about her country, Brazil, a distant land that had no creature as large as he, other than some ancient, legendary beasts hidden deep in the heart of South America's mountains. Kobi appreciated Nadia as much as he detested Alexander, and he never lost an opportunity to demonstrate both sentiments.

Kobi's five tons of muscle and fat shivered to a halt in a small oasis beneath dusty trees kept alive by a pool of water the color of milky tea. Alexander had developed his own style of jumping to the ground from his nine-foot-high perch without mauling himself too badly, since in the five days of their safari he still had not gained the animal's cooperation. He was not aware that this time Kobi had positioned himself in such a way that when Alex jumped down, he landed in a puddle of water up to his knees. Borobá, Nadia's small black monkey, then jumped on top of him. As Alex struggled to pry the monkey off his head, he lost his balance and plopped down on his seat. He cursed to himself, shook off Borobá, and only with difficulty regained his footing because he couldn't see through his glasses, which were dripping filthy water. As he was looking for a clean corner of his T-shirt to wipe the lenses, the elephant thumped him on the back with his trunk, a blow that propelled him face first into the puddle. Kobi waited for Alex to pull himself up, then turned his monumental rear end and unleashed a Pantagruelian blast in his face. The other members of the safari greeted the prank with a chorus of guffaws.

Nadia was in no hurry to get down; she waited for Kobi to help her dismount in a more dignified manner. She stepped upon the knee he offered her, steadied herself on his trunk, and then leaped to the ground with the grace of a ballerina. The elephant was not that considerate with anyone else, not even Mushaha, for whom he had respect but not affection. Kobi was an elephant with clear principles. It was one thing to transport tourists on his back, a job like any other, for which he was rewarded with excellent food and mud baths. It was something entirely different to perform circus tricks for a handful of peanuts. He liked peanuts, he couldn't deny that, but he received much more pleasure from tormenting people like Alexander. Why did the American get under his skin? The animal wasn't sure it was a matter of chemistry. He didn't like the fact that Alex was always hanging around Nadia. There were thirteen elephants in the caravan, but he had to ride with the girl. It was very inconsiderate of Alex to get between Nadia and him that way. Didn't he realize that they needed privacy for their conversations? A good whack with the trunk and occasionally breaking wind in Alex's face were just what that young man deserved. Kobi trumpeted loudly once Nadia was down and had thanked him by planting a big kiss on his trunk. The girl had good manners; she would never humiliate him by offering him peanuts.

"That elephant is infatuated with Nadia," joked Alexander's grandmother, Kate Cold.

Borobá didn't like the turn Kobi's relationship with his mistress had taken. He had observed the with some worry. Nadia's interest in learning the language of the pachyderms could have dangerous consequences for him. She couldn't be thinking of getting a different pet, could she? Perhaps the moment had come for him to feign some illness in order to gain his mistress's total attention, but he was afraid she would leave him in camp and he would miss the wonderful outings around the preserve. This was his only chance to see the wild animals and, in addition, he wanted to keep a close eye on his rival. He installed himself on Nadia's shoulder, claiming that position as his right, and from there he shook his fist at the elephant.

"And this silly monkey is jealous," Kate added.

She was used to Borobá's shift of moods, because she had lived under the same roof with him for nearly two years. It was like having a freakish, furry little man in her apartment. And it had been that way from the beginning, because Nadia had agreed to come to New York to study and live with Kate only if she could bring Borobá. They were never apart. They were so inseparable that they had obtained special permission for the monkey to go to school with her. Borobá was the only monkey in the history of the city's education system to attend classes regularly. It wouldn't have surprised Kate to learn that the creature knew how to read. She had nightmares in which Borobá, sitting on the sofa wearing glasses and sipping a glass of brandy, was reading the financial section of the *Times*.

Kate had observed the strange trio formed of Alexander, Nadia, and Borobá for some time. The monkey, who was jealous of anyone who came too near his mistress, had at first accepted Alexander as an inevitable evil, but with time had become fond of the young man. Perhaps he realized that in this instance it was not a good idea for him to offer Nadia the ultimatum of "it's him or me," as he usually did. Who knows which of the two she would have chosen? Kate realized that both young people had changed a lot during the past year. Nadia would soon be fifteen and her grandson eighteen; they already had the physical appearance and seriousness of adults.

Nadia and Alexander were themselves aware of the changes. During their forced separation, they communicated by e-mail with demented persistence. They whiled their lives away in front of the computers, typing an endless dialogue in which they shared everything from the most boring details of their routines to philosophical questions regarding the torment of growing up. They frequently sent photographs, but that had not prepared them for the surprise they experienced when they saw each other in the flesh and verified how much they had grown. Alexander had shot up like a colt, and now he was as tall as his father. His features had become well defined, and during recent months he had had to shave every day. As for Nadia, she was no longer the thin little creature with parrot feathers tucked behind one ear whom Alexander had met in the Amazon some years before; he could glimpse the woman she would soon become.

So now the grandmother and the two young people were in the heart of Africa, on the first elephant safari ever conceived for tourists in this region. The idea of the safari was the brainchild of Michael Mushaha, an African naturalist who had graduated from a London university. It had occurred to him that elephants would be the best conveyance for humans who wanted to get as close as possible to the wildlife of the area. In his publicity brochure, he explained: "The elephants are part of the surroundings, and their presence does not drive away the other beasts; they do not need gasoline on the road, they do not pollute the air, and they do not attract attention."

Alexander and Nadia had been with Kate in Tunkhala, the capital of the Kingdom of the Golden Dragon, when she was commissioned to write an article on Mushaha's operation. They were there at the invitation of King Dil Bahadur and his wife, Pema, to celebrate the birth of their first son and to attend the inauguration of a new statue of the dragon. The original, which had been destroyed in a

explosion, had been replaced by an identical copy fashioned by a jeweler friend of Kate's.

For the first time, the people of this Himalayan kingdom had an opportunity to see the mysterious object of legend that in the past only the crowned monarch was privileged to view. Dil Bahadur had decided to exhibit the statue of gold and precious stones in a large hall in the royal palace, where people could file through to admire it and leave their offerings of flowers and incense. It was a magnificent spectacle. The dragon was mounted on a base of polychrome wood and lighted by hundreds of lamps. Guarding the statue were four soldiers outfitted in the dress uniform of past centuries: plumed leather hats and token lances. Dil Bahadur would not allow his people to be offended by a show of security measures.

The official unveiling of the statue had just ended when Kate was advised that there was a call for her from the United States. The telephone system of the kingdom was antiquated, and international communications were a nightmare, but after much shouting and repetition, the editor of *International Geographic* was successful in making the writer understand the nature of her next assignment. She was to leave immediately for Africa.

"I will have to take my grandson and his friend Nadia; they're here with me," she explained.

"The magazine is not paying their expenses, Kate!" the editor yelled.

"Then I'm not going!" she screamed in return.

And so it was that a few days later she arrived in Africa with Alexander and Nadia. There they were joined by the two photographers who always worked with her, the Englishman Timothy Bruce and the Latin American Joel González. The writer had promised herself never to travel again with her grandson and Nadia because they had caused her so much trouble on their two earlier trips. She felt sure, however, that a simple sojourn for tourists in Africa would not present any danger.

One of Mushaha's employees met the members of the group when they landed in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. He welcomed them and took them to a hotel to rest, because the trip had been a killer: They had taken four airplanes, crossed three continents, and flown thousands of miles.

The next morning they got up early in order to take a tour of the city and visit a museum and the market before setting off in the small airplane that would take them to the start of the safari.

The market was in a poor neighborhood surrounded by luxuriant vegetation. The narrow, unpaved streets were choked with people and vehicles: motorcycles carrying three and four people, broken-down buses, hand-pulled carts. A vast variety of the produce of earth and sea, and of human creativity, was for sale there, from rhinoceros horns and golden fish from the Nile to contraband weapons. The members of the group went different ways, after agreeing to meet one hour later at a predetermined street corner. That would be easier to say than do, because there was such tumult and uproar that it would be difficult to get their bearings. Fearing that Nadia would get lost or be run down, Alexander took her by the hand and they went off together.

The market was a showcase of African races and cultures: desert nomads; slender horsemen on elegantly outfitted steeds; Muslims with elaborate turbans and partially veiled faces; women with burning eyes and blue designs tattooed on their faces; naked shepherds, their bodies painted with red clay and white chalk. Hundreds of children raced barefoot among roaming packs of dogs. The women were spectacular. Some were wearing dazzling starched kerchiefs on their heads that from a distance resembled the sails of a ship; others' heads were shaved clean and bead collars covered their necks from shoulder to chin; some were enveloped in yards and yards of brilliantly patterned cloth, while still others were nearly naked. The air was filled with incessant jabbering in several languages, along with music, laughter, horns, and the cries of animals being slaughtered on the spot. Blood streamed

from the butchers' tables, soaking into the dusty ground, while black buzzards circled close overhead waiting to seize the discarded guts.

Alexander and Nadia wandered through that fiesta of color, marveling, pausing to bargain over the price of a glass bracelet, savor a corn cake, or snap a photo with the cheap camera they had bought the last moment in the airport. Suddenly they were nose to nose with an ostrich restrained by a rope around one foot, unknowingly awaiting its fate. The bird, much taller, stronger, and more aggressive than they could have imagined, observed them from on high with infinite disdain, and then, without warning, bent its long neck and pecked at Borobá, who was riding atop Alexander's head and clinging firmly to his ears. The monkey twisted away to avoid the lethal beak and began screeching as if he were crazed. The ostrich, beating its short wings, charged at them as far as the rope would allow. By chance, Joel happened along at that very moment and captured the frightened expressions of Alexander and the monkey as Nadia waved her arms to fend off the unexpected attacker.

"This photograph is going to make the cover of *International Geographic*!" Joel shouted.

Fleeing from the haughty ostrich, Nadia and Alexander rounded a corner and suddenly found themselves in a section of the market devoted to witchcraft. There were practitioners of good magic and bad magic—fortune-tellers, fetishists, healers, poison brewers, exorcists, voodoo priests—each offering their services to clients under squares of canvas stretched on four poles for protection from the sun. They came from many tribes and belonged to an assortment of cults. Never dropping each other's hands, the two friends wandered the alleyways, pausing before tiny animals in jars of alcohol, desiccated reptiles; amulets to protect against the evil eye and love sickness; medicinal herbs, lotions and balms to cure ills of body and soul; powders for dreams, for forgetting, for restoring life; live animals for sacrifices; necklaces to drive away envy and greed; inks made from blood for writing the dead; and, last but not least, an enormous array of exotic items to mitigate the terror of life.

Nadia had seen voodoo ceremonies in Brazil, and she was more or less familiar with their symbols, but for Alexander this area of the market was a fascinating world. They stopped before one stand different from the others: a conical straw roof that supported a circle of plastic curtains. Alexander bent down to see what was inside, and two powerful hands grabbed him and pulled him into the hut.

An enormous woman was seated on the ground beneath the straw ceiling, a mountain of flesh crowned by a voluminous turquoise kerchief. She was dressed in yellow and blue, and her bosom was covered with necklaces of many-colored beads. She introduced herself as a messenger between the world of the spirits and the material world, a seer and voodoo priestess. On the ground beside her was a cloth painted with designs in black and white. She was surrounded by various carved wood figures of gods and demons, some wet with the fresh blood of sacrificed animals, others studded with nails, and before them lay offerings of fruits, grains, flowers, and money. The woman was puffing on some black leaves rolled into a tight cylinder, and the thick smoke brought tears to the young people's eyes. Alexander tried to free himself from the hands that had immobilized him, but the woman fixed her bulging eyes on him and let out a deep roar. Alexander recognized the voice of his totemic animal, the voice he heard when he was in a trance and his body took on a different form.

"It's the black jaguar!" Nadia exclaimed at his side.

The priestess forced the American boy to sit before her. She pulled a worn leather sack from her bosom and emptied its contents onto the painted cloth: white shells, worn smooth with wear. She began to mutter something in her language, without relinquishing the cigar, which she held clamped between her teeth.

"*Anglais?* English?" Alexander queried.

“You come from a distant place, far away. What do you want of Má Bangesé?” she replied in a comprehensible mixture of African words and English.

Alexander shrugged his shoulders and smiled nervously, looking at Nadia out of the corner of his eye to see if she had any idea what was going on. She pulled a couple of bills from her pocket and put them in one of the gourds that held the offerings of money.

“Má Bangesé can read your heart,” said the gigantic woman, speaking to Alexander.

“And what is in my heart?”

“You are looking for medicines to cure a woman,” she said.

“My mother isn’t sick any longer; her cancer is in remission . . .” Alexander murmured, frightened and not understanding how a witch in a market in Africa could know about Lisa Cold.

“At any rate, you fear for her,” said Má Bangesé. She shook the shells in one hand and tossed them like dice. “The life or death of that woman is not in your hands,” she added.

“Will she live?” Alexander asked anxiously.

“If you go back, she will live. If you do not, she will die of sadness, not illness.”

“Of course I’m going back home!” the youth protested.

“Nothing is sure. There is much danger, but you are strong of heart. You must use your courage, otherwise you will die and this girl will die with you,” she declared, pointing to Nadia.

“What does that mean?” Alexander asked.

“A person can do harm, and a person can do good. There is no reward for doing good, only satisfaction in your soul. There are times you must fight. You will have to decide.”

“What am I to do?”

“Má Bangesé sees the heart; she cannot show the way.”

And turning toward Nadia, who had sat down beside Alexander, she placed a finger on her forehead between her eyes.

“You are magic, and you have the vision of birds; you see from above, from afar. You can help him,” she said.

She closed her eyes and began to rock back and forth as sweat poured down her face and neck. The heat was unbearable. The smells of the market filled their nostrils: rotted fruit, garbage, blood, gasoline. Má Bangesé let forth a guttural sound that came from deep in her belly, a long, hoarse lament that rose in tone until the ground shook, as if it came from the depths of the earth. Dizzy and perspiring, Nadia and Alexander were afraid they were going to faint. The air in the tiny, smoke-filled space became unbreathable. More and more befuddled, they wanted to leave but they couldn’t move. They were shaken by the vibration of drums; they heard dogs howling, their mouths filled with bitter saliva, and before their incredulous eyes the enormous woman melted away, like a burst balloon, and in her place emerged a fabulous bird with splendid yellow and blue plumage and a turquoise-colored crest. This bird-of-paradise unfolded the rainbow of its wings, wrapped Nadia and Alex inside, and flew away with them.

Nadia and Alexander were launched into space. They could see themselves like two pinpoints of black ink lost in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors and undulating forms mutating at a terrifying speed. They were transformed into Roman candles, their bodies exploding into sparks. They lost any notion of being alive, or of time or fear. Then the sparks fused into an electric vortex, and again they saw themselves as two minute points caroming among the designs of the fantastic kaleidoscope. Now they were two astronauts, hand in hand, floating in starry space. They could not feel their bodies but they had a vague awareness of movement and of being connected. They clung to that contact, because it was the one manifestation of their humanity; as long as they were holding hands they were not total

lost.

Green, they were immersed in total greenness. They began to plunge earthward like arrows, and when impact seemed inevitable, the color diffused, and instead of crashing they floated down like feathers, sinking into surreal vegetation, into the warm, moist, cottony flora of another plane. Dissolving in the mists of that atmosphere, they metamorphosed into transparent medusas. In this gelatinous state, lacking bones to give them form, or strength to defend themselves, or voices to call out, they confronted the violent images passing in rapid succession before them—visions of death, blood, war, and a destroyed forest. A procession of ghosts in chains marched before them, dragging their feet among the carcasses of large animals. They saw baskets filled with human hands, and children and women in cages.

Suddenly they were once again themselves, in their familiar bodies, and then before them, emerging with the terrifying clarity of the worst nightmares, they saw a threatening three-headed ogre, a giant with the skin of a crocodile. The heads were different: One had four horns and the shaggy mane of a lion; the second had no eyes, was bald, and breathed fire through its nostrils; the third had the skull of a leopard, with bloody teeth and the blazing pupils of a demon. All three had gaping jaws and iguana tongues. The monster clumsily thrust its colossal paws at them, trying to claw them. Its hypnotic eyes bored into them, its three muzzles spewed a thick, poisonous saliva. Again and again Alexander and Nadia eluded the ferocious jabs, unable to flee, feeling as if they were mired in a swamp. They evaded the monster for a time that seemed infinite, until suddenly they found they held spears in their hands and they began blindly, desperately, to defend themselves. When they subdued one of the heads, the other two came at them, and if they succeeded in driving back those two, the first returned to the attack. Their weapons broke in the struggle. Then at the final instant, when they were sure to be devoured, they made a superhuman effort and turned into their totemic animals—Alexander into a jaguar and Nadia an eagle—but before that formidable enemy, the ferocity of the first and the wings of the second were impotent . . . Their cries were lost in the bellowing of the ogre.

“Nadia! Alexander!”

The voice of Kate Cold brought them back to the known world, and they found themselves sitting exactly as they had been when their hallucinatory voyage began: in the market in Africa, beneath the straw roof, facing an enormous woman dressed in yellow and blue.

“We heard you yelling. Who is this woman? What happened?” Alexander’s grandmother asked.

“It’s nothing, Kate. Nothing at all,” Alexander managed to get out, his head reeling.

He didn’t know how to explain to his grandmother what he had just experienced. Má Bangesé’s deep voice seemed to reach them from the dimension of their dreams.

“Stay on your guard,” the seer warned them.

“What happened to you?” Kate repeated.

“We saw a monster with three heads. It was invincible . . .” Nadia murmured, still dazed.

“Stay close to each other. Together you can save yourselves; separated you will die,” said Má Bangesé.

The next morning the *International Geographic* group flew in a small plane to the vast natural preserve where Michael Mushaha and his elephant safari awaited them. Alexander and Nadia were still feeling the impact of their experience in the market. Alexander concluded that the rolled leaves the sorceress was smoking contained a drug, but that did not explain the fact that Nadia and he had had identical visions. Nadia did not try to rationalize what had happened; for her that terrible voyage was a source of information, a way of learning, as one learns from dreams. The images were sharp in her

memory; she was sure that at some moment she would have to call upon them.

The plane was piloted by its owner, Angie Ninderera, an adventuresome woman overflowing with contagious energy, who expanded on their flight plan to make a couple of detours and show them the majestic beauty of the landscape. One hour later they landed in an open field a couple of miles from Mushaha's camp.

Kate was disenchanted with the modern facilities of the safari; she had expected something more rustic. Several pleasant and efficient African guides wearing khaki uniforms and carrying walking talkies attended the tourists and looked after the elephants. There were several tents, as large as hotel suites, and a pair of light wood constructions that housed the common areas and kitchens. The beds were hung with white mosquito netting, the furniture was bamboo, and zebra and antelope skins served as rugs. The bathhouses had chemical latrines and ingenious warm-water showers. The camp had an electric generator that operated from seven to ten at night; the rest of the time they managed with candles and oil lamps. The food, prepared by two cooks, was so tasty that even Alexander, who on principle rejected any dish whose name he couldn't spell, devoured it. As a whole, the camp was much more elegant than most of the places Kate had stayed during her years as a professional travel agent and writer. She decided that such luxuries detracted from the safari; she would not forget to criticize them in her article.

In order to take advantage of the coolest hours of the day, the wake-up bell rang at 5:45 A.M., though earlier, with the first ray of sun, they had awakened to the unmistakable sound of colonies of bees returning after flying the entire night. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee was already on the air. The visitors opened their tents and stepped out to stretch their limbs as the incomparable African sun, a magnificent circle of fire that spanned the horizon, began to rise. The landscape shimmered in the dawn light; it seemed that at any moment the earth, enveloped in a rosy mist, would fade and disappear like a mirage.

Soon the camp was boiling with activity. The cooks called the party to the table, and Mushaha issued his first instructions. After breakfast they would meet for a brief lecture about the animals, birds, and vegetation they would be seeing that day. Timothy and Joel readied their cameras and the employees brought the elephants, which were accompanied by a two-year-old calf that trotted happily alongside its mother. Occasionally the baby needed to be retrieved because it had stopped to puff at butterflies or roll in the mud near waterholes and rivers.

From atop the elephants, the panorama was magnificent. The great beasts moved silently, blending into the landscape. They advanced effortlessly and with massive calm; they also covered many miles in very little time. None of them, other than the calf, had been born in captivity; they were wild animals, and as such unpredictable. Mushaha warned his party that they must follow his directions closely, or he would not be able to guarantee their safety. The only person who tended to violate the rule was Nadia, who from the first day established such a special relationship with the elephants that the director of the safari simply decided to look the other way.

The visitors spent the morning roaming around the preserve. They communicated with gestures, never speaking, so they would not be detected by other animals. Mushaha took the lead, riding the oldest bull of the herd; behind him came Kate and the photographers on females, one of them the mother of the calf; then Alexander, Nadia, and Borobá on Kobi. A pair of safari employees riding young males brought up the rear, carrying provisions: canopies for the siesta, and some of the photographic equipment. They also carried a powerful tranquilizer they could shoot in case they came face-to-face with an aggressive beast.

The pachyderms occasionally stopped to eat leaves from trees where only a few moments before

family of lions had been resting. Other times they passed so near rhinoceroses that Alexander and Nadia could see themselves reflected in a round eye studying them suspiciously from below. The herds of buffaloes and impalas were not spooked by their passing; they may have picked up the odor of the humans, but the powerful presence of the elephants disoriented them. The party was able to amble among timid zebras, photograph at close range a pack of hyenas quarreling over the corpse of an antelope, and stroke the neck of a giraffe as it licked their hands and gazed at them with princely eyes.

“In a few years,” Mushaha lamented, “there will be no wild animals in Africa; you will see animals only in parks and reserves.”

At noon they stopped beneath protective trees, lunched from the contents of some baskets, and rested in the shade until four or five in the evening. At the hour of siesta, even wild animals lay down to rest, and the broad plain of the preserve lay motionless beneath the burning rays. Mushaha knew the terrain, and he was expert in calculating time and distance, so just as the enormous disk of the sun began to sink below the horizon, they sighted smoke from their camp. Sometimes at night they went out again to watch the animals that came to the river to drink.

CHAPTER TWO

Elephant Safari

ON THE EVENING OF THE third day they had to use the tranquilizers to subdue a group of drunk bandits. Mushaha and his guests were heading back to camp when they received a call that there was an emergency. Shortly afterward a staff member came rolling up in a Land Rover to take them back, leaving the elephants in the care of their keepers. At the camp they found a startling scene. In the absence a band of a half dozen mandrills had been busy demolishing the encampment. Tents lay on the ground and flour, manioc, rice, beans, and canned preserves were strewn everywhere; shredded sleeping bags hung from tree limbs, and chairs and broken tables were piled in the courtyard. The effect was that of a camp swept by a typhoon. The mandrills, headed by one more aggressive than the others, had grabbed pots and pans and were using them as weapons to club one another and to attack anyone who attempted to approach them.

“What’s got into them?” exclaimed Mushaha.

“I’m afraid they’re a little drunk,” suggested one of the guards.

The baboons always hung around the camp, ready to steal anything they could stuff into their mouths. At night they dug through the garbage, and if provisions were not secured, they stole them. They won no points for charm—typically they showed their teeth and growled—but they had respect for humans and kept a prudent distance. This assault was out of the ordinary.

Given the impossibility of overcoming them, Mushaha gave the order to get the tranquilizer gun, but hitting the target was not easy because the mandrills were running and leaping as if possessed. Finally, one by one, the tranquilizer darts hit their marks and the baboons dropped in their tracks. Alexander and Timothy helped pick them up by ankles and wrists and haul them two hundred yards away from the camp, where they snored unmolested until the effects of the drug passed. Their hair and foul-smelling bodies weighed much more than one would have expected from their size. Alexander, Timothy, and the employees who touched them had to shower, wash their clothing, and dust themselves with insecticide to get rid of the fleas.

As the personnel of the safari labored to restore some order to the chaos, Mushaha discovered the source of the trouble. Through carelessness on the part of the staff, the mandrills had got into Kate and Nadia’s tent and found the former’s stash of vodka. They had smelled the alcohol from a distance, even though the bottles were sealed. The lead baboon stole a bottle, broke the neck, and shared the contents with its buddies. With the second swallow they were intoxicated, and with the third they feasted on the camp like a horde of pirates.

“I need the vodka to ease my bones,” Kate complained, realizing that she would have to guard the few bottles she had like gold.

“Doesn’t aspirin help?” queried Mushaha.

“Pills are poison! I use nothing but natural products,” the writer exclaimed.

Once the mandrills had been quieted and the camp reorganized, someone noticed that Timothy had blood on his T-shirt. With his traditional indifference, the Englishman admitted that he had been bitten.

“It seems that one of those fellows was not completely out,” he said in way of explanation.

“Let me see it,” Mushaha demanded.

Timothy lifted his left eyebrow. That was the only gesture ever seen on his horse face, and he used it to express any of the three emotions he was capable of feeling: surprise, doubt, and annoyance. In this instance it was the last; he detested any kind of bother, but Mushaha insisted, and he had no choice but to roll up his sleeve. The bite wasn't bleeding any longer, and there were dried scabs at the points where teeth had perforated the skin, but his forearm was swollen.

"These monkeys carry a number of diseases. I am going to give you an antibiotic, but it will be better if you see a doctor," Mushaha announced.

Timothy's left eyebrow rose halfway up his forehead: definitely too much bother.

Mushaha contacted Angie Ninderera by radio and explained the situation. The young pilot replied that she couldn't fly at night, but that she would be there early the next day to pick up Timothy and fly him to Nairobi. The director of the safari could not help but smile: The mandrill's bite would give him an unexpected opportunity to see Angie, for whom he harbored an unconfessed weakness.

Soon Timothy was shivering with fever. Mushaha wasn't sure whether it was because of the wound or a sudden attack of malaria, but in either case he was worried, since the well-being of the tourists was his responsibility.

A group of Masai nomads who often crossed through the preserve had arrived in camp, driving a herd of cattle with long horns. The people were very tall, slim, handsome, and arrogant. They bedecked themselves with intricate bead necklaces and headbands; the cloth of their skirts was fastened at their waists, and they had spears in their hands. They believed they were the chosen people of God; the land and all it contained belonged to them by divine grace. That gave them the right to appropriate any livestock they saw, a habit that was not well received among the other tribes. Since Mushaha had no cattle, there was nothing to steal from him. His agreement with them was clear: He offered them hospitality when they passed through the park and in return they never touched a hair of the wild animals.

As always, Mushaha offered them food and invited them to stay. The tribe wasn't pleased with the company of the foreigners, but they accepted because one of their children was ill. They were waiting for a healer, who was on her way there to treat the boy. The woman was famous throughout the region; she traveled miles and miles to heal her patients with herbs and the strength of faith. The tribe had no way to communicate with her by modern means, but somehow they had learned that she would come that night, which was why they were willing to stay in Mushaha's domain. And precisely as they had predicted, when the sun was about to set they heard the distant tinkling of the healer's little bells and amulets.

A wretched, barefoot figure emerged from the red dust of early evening. She was wearing nothing but a short skirt of rags, and her paraphernalia consisted of gourds, medicines, pouches of amulets, and two magical sticks topped with feathers. Her hair, which had never been cut, was divided into long dreadlocks coated with red mud. She looked ancient—her skin hung from her bones in folds—but she stood erect, and her arms and legs were strong. The patient's treatment was carried out only a few yards away from the camp.

"The healer says that the spirit of an offended ancestor has entered the child. She must identify it and send it back to the other world, where it belongs," Mushaha explained.

Joel laughed; he found the idea that something like that could happen in the twenty-first century very amusing.

"Don't laugh, fellow. In eighty percent of the cases, the patient gets well," Mushaha told him.

He added that on one occasion he had seen two people writhing on the ground, biting, foaming at the mouth, groaning, and barking. According to what their families said, they had been possessed by

hyenas. This same healer had cured them.

“That’s called hysteria,” Joel alleged.

Mushaha smiled. “Call it what you want, the fact is that after the ceremony they got well. Western medicine, with all its drugs and electric shocks, rarely gets results that good and that fast.”

“Come on, Michael! You’re a scientist educated in London, don’t tell me that—”

“First of all I’m African,” the naturalist interrupted. “In Africa, physicians have realized that instead of ridiculing healers, they should try to work with them. Sometimes the magic gives better results than imported methods. People believe in it, and that’s why it works. Suggestion can work miracles. Don’t sell our witches short.”

Kate got out her pad to make notes on the ceremony, and Joel, ashamed that he had laughed, readied his camera to photograph it.

They placed the naked boy on a blanket on the ground, surrounded by the many members of his family. The old woman began to beat her magic sticks and shake her gourds, dancing in circles and chanting, and soon the tribe joined in. After a while she fell into a trance; her body shook and her eyes rolled back. As that happened, the child on the ground grew rigid; his back arched until only his head and heels supported his body.

The energy of the ceremony shot through Nadia like an electric current, and without thinking propelled by an unfamiliar emotion, she joined the nomads’ chanting and frenetic dancing. The healing lasted several hours, during which, as Mushaha explained, the aged witch absorbed into her own body the evil spirit that had taken possession of the boy. Finally the small patient’s rigidity relaxed and he began to cry, which everyone interpreted as a sign of health. His mother took him in her arms and began to rock and kiss him, to the joy of all present.

After about twenty minutes, the healer herself emerged from her trance and announced that the patient was purged of evil and from that very night would be able to eat normally; however, his parents must fast for three days in order to placate the expelled spirit. As her only food and reward the old woman accepted a gourd containing a mixture of sour milk and fresh blood, which the Masai herdsmen had obtained by making a small cut in the neck of one of the cattle. Then she retired to rest before undertaking the second phase of her labor: drawing out the spirit, which now was inside her and speeding it to the Great Beyond, where it belonged. The tribe, grateful, moved on farther to spend the night.

“If the system is so effective, we should ask that woman to treat Timothy,” Alexander suggested.

“It doesn’t work unless you believe,” Mushaha replied. “And besides, the healer is exhausted; she has to build up her strength before she can help another patient.”

So the English photographer continued to shiver with fever for the rest of the night, while under the stars the little African boy enjoyed his first meal in a week.

Angie Ninderera showed up the next day as she had promised Mushaha in her radio communication. When they saw her plane in the air, they set off in the Land Rover to the landing field to pick her up. Joel wanted to accompany his friend Timothy to the hospital, but Kate reminded him that someone had to take the photographs for the magazine article.

As Mushaha’s employees were gassing up the plane and looking after the patient and his luggage, Angie sat down under a tent to rest and enjoy a cup of coffee. She was a brown-skinned African woman, healthy, tall, strong, and always laughing. Her age was anyone’s guess; she could be anywhere between twenty-five and forty. Her easy laugh and fresh beauty captivated people from the first moment they saw her. She told them that she was born in Botswana and had learned to pilot planes

Cuba, while she was there on a fellowship. Shortly before he died, her father had sold his ranch and cattle in order to provide her with a dowry, but instead of using the capital to snag a respectable husband as her father wished, she had used it to buy her first airplane. Angie was an uncaged bird that had never built a nest anywhere. Her work took her all over; one day she flew vaccines to Zaire, the next she carried actors and technicians making an action film on the highlands of the Serengeti, then she ferried a group of daring mountain climbers to the foot of the legendary Mt. Kilimanjaro. She boasted that she was strong as a buffalo, and to prove it she armwrestled any man willing to accept her challenge and ante up his bet. She had been born with a star-shaped birthmark on her back—according to Angie, a sure sign of good luck. Thanks to that star, she had survived a number of adventures. Once she was on the verge of being stoned to death by a mob in the Sudan; another time she had wandered in a desert in Ethiopia for five days, lost, alone, on foot, with no food and only one bottle of water. But nothing compared to the time that she'd had to parachute from her plane and landed in a crocodile-infested river.

"That was before I had my Cessna Caravan," she hastened to clarify when she told that story to her *International Geographic* clients. "It never fails."

"And how did you get out of that alive?" asked Alexander.

"The crocodiles were kept busy snapping at the chute, and that gave me time to swim to shore and get myself out of there. I made it that time, but sooner or later I'm going to be eaten by crocodiles. It's my destiny."

"How do you know?" Nadia inquired.

"Because that's what I was told by a fortune-teller who could read the future. Má Bangesé has a reputation for never being wrong," Angie replied.

"Má Bangesé? The fat woman who has a stand in the market?" interrupted Alexander.

"That's the one. And she isn't fat, she's . . . robust," clarified Angie, who was sensitive on the matter of weight.

Alexander and Nadia looked at each other, surprised at the strange coincidence.

Despite her considerable girth and her rather brusque manner, Angie was very coquettish. She wore flowered tunics and draped herself in heavy ethnic jewelry she bought at craft fairs, and her lips were always painted bright pink. Her hair was combed into elaborate cornrows studded with colored beads. She said that her line of work was lethal to a woman's hands, and she wasn't about to let hers look like a mechanic's. Her fingernails were long and brightly painted, and to protect her skin she rubbed on turtle fat, which she considered miraculous. The fact that turtles are pretty wrinkled did not diminish her confidence in the product.

"I know several men who're in love with Angie," commented Mushaha, but he refrained from adding that he was one of them.

Angie winked and explained that she would never marry because she had a broken heart. She had fallen in love only once in her life, and that was with a Masai warrior who had five wives and nineteen children.

"He had long bones and amber-colored eyes," she said.

"And what happened?" Nadia and Alexander asked in unison.

"He didn't want to marry me," she concluded with a tragic sigh.

Mushaha laughed. "What a stupid man!"

"I was ten years older and thirty pounds heavier than he was," Angie explained.

The pilot finished her coffee and got ready to leave. All his friends made their farewells to Timothy, whom the previous night's fever had so weakened that he could not even find the strength to lift his

left eyebrow.

The last days of the safari raced by very quickly amid the pleasure of the elephant excursions. They ran into the small nomadic tribe again and saw for themselves that the young boy was cured. At the same time, they learned by radio that Timothy was being kept in the hospital with a combination of malaria and an infected mandrill bite that was resistant to antibiotics.

Three days after taking Timothy, Angie returned for them; she stayed that night in the camp so they could leave early the next morning. From the moment they met, she and Kate had struck up a strong friendship: Both were hearty drinkers—beer for Angie and vodka for Kate—and both had a well-stocked arsenal of rip-roaring stories to enthrall their audiences. That night when the group was sitting in a circle around a bonfire, feasting on roast antelope and other delicacies the cooks had prepared, the two women held a verbal tourney to see who was the best at bedazzling listeners with her adventures. Even Borobá was listening to their tales with interest. The little monkey had been dividing his time between hanging around with the humans, whose company he was accustomed to, watching Kobi, and playing with a family of three pygmy chimpanzees Mushaha had adopted.

“They’re twenty percent smaller and much more peaceful than normal chimps,” Mushaha explained. “The females take the lead in that society. Which means that the pygmy chimps have a better life; there’s less competition and more cooperation; they eat and sleep well in their communities, and the babies are protected . . . In short, they live a carefree life. Not like other groups of monkeys, which the males form gangs and do nothing but fight all the time.”

“I wish that’s how it was with humans!” Kate sighed.

“Those little creatures are a lot like us: We share most of our genetic material with them; even the brain is similar to ours. We obviously have a common ancestor,” said Mushaha.

“Then there’s hope that someday we may evolve like them,” added Kate.

Angie smoked cigarettes that according to her were her only luxury, and she took pride in the fact that her plane smelled of smoke. “Anyone who doesn’t like the odor of tobacco can walk,” she always told clients who complained. As a reformed smoker, Kate followed the hand of her new friend with avid eyes. She had stopped smoking over a year ago, but the desire was still there, and as she watched the cigarette moving back and forth to Angie’s lips, she wanted to weep. She pulled out her empty pipe, which she always had in her pocket for such desperate moments, and chewed on it sadly. She had to admit that the tubercular cough that had made it so hard for her to breathe had gone away. She attributed that to her vodka-spiked tea and the powders that Walimai, Nadia’s shaman friend in the Amazon, had given her. Her grandson, Alexander, gave credit for the miracle to an amulet of petrified dragon excrement that had been a gift from Dil Bahadur, who was now king of the Kingdom of the Golden Dragon; he was convinced of its magical properties.

Kate didn’t know what to think of her grandson, who once had been extremely rational but now was given to fantasies. His friendship with Nadia had changed him. Alex had such confidence in that fossil that he had finely ground a few grams to powder, dissolved that in rice liquor, and insisted that his mother drink the potion to fight her cancer. Lisa, his mother, also had worn what was left of the fossil around her neck for months, and now it was around Alexander’s, who didn’t take it off even to shower.

“It can cure broken bones and lots of other things, Kate, and it wards off arrows, knives, and bullets,” her grandson had assured her.

“In your place I wouldn’t have put it to the test,” she replied dryly, but she had allowed him to rub her chest and back with the artifact, growling all the time that they were both losing their minds.

That last night around the campfire, Kate and the others of her party felt sad that it was time to say goodbye to their new friends and to the paradise where they had spent an unforgettable week.

"It's just as well we're leaving; I'm eager to see Timothy," Joel said to console himself.

"We leave at about nine tomorrow," Angie instructed, tossing down half a can of beer and inhaling a cigarette.

"You look tired, Angie," Mushaha remarked.

"These last days have been hairy. I had to fly some food supplies across the border. People are desperate there; it's horrible to see hunger right in front of your eyes," she said.

"That tribe comes from a very noble race. They used to live a dignified life; they fished and hunted and planted a few crops, but colonization and war and disease have reduced them to misery. They live off charity now. If it weren't for those food packages they receive, they'd all be dead by now. Half the people of Africa live below the subsistence level," Michael explained.

"What does that mean?" asked Nadia.

"That they don't have enough to live on."

With that statement the guide put an end to the after-dinner conversation, which had already lasted well past midnight, and announced that it was time to go to the tents. An hour later peace reigned over the camp.

During the night only one guard was assigned to keep watch and feed the bonfires, but soon he, too, drifted off to sleep. As the camp rested, life seethed around them: Beneath the magnificent starry sky roamed hundreds of animal species that came out by night to hunt for food and water. The African night was a true concert of voices: the occasional trumpeting of elephants, hyenas barking in the distance, the screams of mandrills frightened by a leopard, croaking frogs, and the incessant song of the cicadas.

Shortly before dawn Kate suddenly woke with alarm; she thought she had heard some noise very close by. "I must have dreamed it," she murmured, turning over on her cot. She tried to calculate how long she had slept. Her bones creaked, her muscles ached, and her legs were cramping. She felt every one of her sixty-seven hard-lived years; her frame was battered from her adventures. "I'm too old for this kind of life," the writer mused, but almost immediately retracted that thought, convinced that another life was not worth living. She suffered more lying in bed than from the fatigue of the day. The hours in the tent passed at a paralyzing pace. Then again she heard the sound that had waked her. She couldn't identify it, but it sounded like a scraping or scratching.

The last mists of sleep dissipated completely and Kate sat straight up on her cot, her throat dry and her heart pounding. No doubt about it; something was out there, just on the other side of the cloth tent. Very carefully, trying not to make any noise, she felt in the darkness for her flashlight, which she always kept nearby. When she held it in her hand, she realized she was sweating with fear; her fingers were too moist to switch it on. She kept trying, but was diverted when she heard the voice of Nadia, with whom she shared the tent.

"Shhh, Kate! Don't turn on the light," the girl whispered.

"What is it?"

"Lions. Don't be afraid," Nadia answered.

The flashlight dropped from the writer's hand. She felt her bones turn to mush, and a scream from her gut lodged in her throat. A single slash of a lion's claws would rip the thin nylon tent and the camp would be on them. It wouldn't be the first time that a tourist had died that way on safari. During the treks they had seen lions so close that they could count their teeth; she had decided that she didn't care

to meet them in the flesh. An image flashed through her mind: early Christians in the Roman coliseum, condemned to be eaten alive by the beasts. Sweat ran down her face as she groped on the ground for the flashlight, by now entangled in the mosquito netting that hung around her cot. She heard the purring of a great cat and new scratchings.

This time the tent shook, as if a tree had dropped on it. Terrified, Kate dimly realized that Nadia was purring back. Finally she found the flashlight and with wet, trembling fingers she switched it on. She saw Nadia crouching down, her face against the cloth of the tent, enthralled, engaged in an exchange of deep purrs with the beast on the other side. The scream that had been stuck inside Kate escaped as a terrible howl that took Nadia by surprise, literally knocking her off her feet. Kate swung up the girl in one arm and began trying to pull her. New screams, this time accompanied by the chilling roars of the lions, shattered the quiet of the camp.

Within a few seconds, staff and visitors were outside, despite the specific instructions of Mushaha who had warned them a hundred times of the dangers of leaving their tents at night. Kate was still tugging at Nadia, dragging her outside as the girl kicked and struggled, trying to get free. Half the tent collapsed in the tug of war, and one of the nettings broke loose and fell over them, enveloping them completely. They looked like two larvae trying to break out of a cocoon. Alexander, the first to arrive, ran to them and tried to untangle them from the netting. Once she was free, Nadia pushed him away, furious because her conversation with the lions had been interrupted in such an uncivilized fashion.

As that was going on, Mushaha fired his pistol into the air, and the roars of the lions faded into the distance. The guards lighted torches, sheathed their weapons, and set off to explore the area around the camp. By then the elephants were in an uproar, and their keepers were trying to calm them before they escaped their corrals and stampeded through the camp. Crazed by the smell of the lions, the three pygmy chimps were chattering and clinging to the first person who came by. Borobá had leaped on Alexander, who was ineffectually trying to pull him off his head by tugging his tail. In all the confusion, no one had any idea what had happened.

Joel had run outside yelling, his heart in his mouth.

“Snakes! A python!”

“Lions,” Kate corrected.

Joel stopped short, bewildered.

“It’s not snakes?” He hesitated.

“No, only lions,” Kate repeated.

“And you woke me up for that?” sputtered the photographer.

“For God’s sake, man, cover your privates!” joked Angie, who had appeared in her pajamas.

Only then did Joel realize that he was stark naked; he backed off toward his tent, covering himself with both hands.

Michael Mushaha returned shortly afterward with the news that they had found the tracks of several lions around the compound, and that Kate and Nadia’s tent had been ripped.

“This is the first time anything like this has happened in the camp. Those animals have never attacked before,” he commented, worried.

“They weren’t attacking us!” Nadia interrupted.

“Oh. So it was only a courtesy call,” said Kate, indignant.

“They came to say hello! If you hadn’t started shrieking, Kate, we would still be talking!”

Nadia turned and took refuge in her tent, which she had to crawl into since only two poles were left standing.

“Pay no attention to her, it’s just adolescence. It will pass, everyone gets over it,” was the opinion

of Joel, who had reappeared wrapped in a towel.

~~The others stood around talking, and no one went back to sleep. They stirred up the fires and left the torches lighted. Borobá and the three pygmy chimps, all four stiff with fright, took cover as far away from Nadia's tent as possible, where they could still smell the scent of the beasts. Shortly after, they heard the winging bats announcing the dawn, then the cooks beginning to brew coffee and fry bacon and eggs for breakfast.~~

"I've never seen you so nervous. You're getting soft in your old age, Grandmother," said Alexander, handing the first cup of coffee to Kate.

"Do not call me Grandmother, Alexander."

"I won't, if you won't call me Alexander. My name is Jaguar, at least to my family and friends."

"Aggh. Don't be such a pest," she replied, burning her lips with the first sip of the steaming beverage.

CHAPTER THREE

The Missionary

THE SAFARI STAFF LOADED THE equipment into Land Rovers and then by elephant accompanied the *International Geographic* party to where Angie's plane waited in an open area, two miles from the camp. For the visitors it was their last ride. The haughty Kobi, who had carried Nadia all that week sensed the parting and seemed downcast, as were all the guests. Borobá, too, was dejected; he was leaving behind the three chimps that had become good friends; for the first time in his life, he had to admit that there were monkeys almost as clever as he was.

As they approached the Cessna Caravan, they could see the signs of its years of use and the many miles it had flown. A logo on the side announced its arrogant name: *Super Hawk*. Angie had painted the head, eyes, beak, and claws of a bird of prey on the plane, but over time the paint had flaked and in the shimmering morning light the vehicle much more closely resembled a pathetic molting hen. The travelers shivered at the thought that it was their only means of transportation—all except Nadia—because compared to the ancient, rusty little plane her father flew around the Amazon, Angie's *Super Hawk* looked super indeed. The same band of ill-behaved mandrills that had drunk Kate's vodka were squatting on the wings of the metal bird busily grooming each other, picking off lice with great concentration, the way humans often do. In many places in the world, Kate had seen the same loving ritual of delousing that united families and created bonds among friends. Sometimes children got in a line, ranging from the smallest to the largest, to inspect one another's heads. She smiled, thinking how in the United States the mere word "lice" evoked shudders of horror. Angie began lobbing rocks and insults at the baboons, to which they responded with Olympian scorn, refusing to budge an inch until the elephants were practically on top of them.

Mushaha handed Angie a vial of animal tranquilizer.

"This is the last one I have. Can you bring me a box on your next trip?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Take this one as a sample; there are several different brands, and you might get the wrong one. This is the one I need."

"No problem," said Angie, putting the vial in the plane's emergency kit for safekeeping.

They had finished stowing the luggage in the plane when a man no one had ever seen before burst out of the nearby undergrowth. He was wearing blue jeans, worn midcalf boots, and a filthy cotton shirt. On his head was a cloth hat, and on his back a knapsack onto which he had tied a clay pot black with soot and a machete. He was a short man, thin and bony and bald. His skin was very pale, his eyebrows dark and bushy, and the lenses of his eyeglasses were thick as bottle glass.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen," he said in Spanish, and immediately repeated the greeting in English and French.

He introduced himself: "I am Brother Fernando, a Catholic missionary," first shaking Mushaha's hand and then the others'.

"How did you get here?" Mushaha asked.

"With the help of some truck drivers, but most of the way walking."

"On foot? From where? There are no villages for miles around."

“The roads are long, but they all lead to God,” the man replied.

He explained that he was Spanish, born in Galicia, although it had been many years since he had visited his homeland. Almost as soon as he left the seminary, he had been sent to Africa, and he had been there for more than thirty years, carrying out his ministry in a number of different countries. His most recent assignment had been a village in Rwanda, where he worked with other missionaries and three nuns in a small compound. It was a region that had been devastated by the cruelest war the continent had witnessed. Refugees swarmed from one end of the country to the other, escaping the violence, but it always caught up with them. The ground was covered with ashes and blood; no crops had been planted for years; people who escaped the bullets and knives fell victim to hunger and illness; starving widows and orphans wandered roads straight out of hell, many of them wounded and mutilated.

“Death is having a ball in those parts,” the missionary concluded.

“I’ve seen it, too,” Angie added. “More than a million people have died, the slaughter continues, and the rest of the world doesn’t seem to care.”

“Here in Africa is where human life started. We all descended from Adam and Eve, whom scientists say were African. This is the earthly paradise mentioned in the Bible. God wanted this to be a garden where his creatures would live in peace and abundance, but you see what hatred and human stupidity have made of it,” the missionary added with a preacher’s zeal.

“And you were escaping from the war?” Kate asked.

“My fellow workers and I received orders to evacuate the mission after the rebels burned our school, but I am not another refugee. No, the truth is that I have a task to fulfill. I must locate two missionaries who have disappeared.”

“In Rwanda?” asked Mushaha.

“No, they are in a village called Ngoubé. Here, look.”

Brother Fernando unfolded a map and spread it on the ground to show them the point where his companions had disappeared. Everyone grouped around him.

“This is the most inaccessible, the hottest, and least hospitable area of equatorial Africa. Civilization has not as yet reached here. There is no way to get around other than by canoe on the river, and there are no telephones or radios,” the missionary explained.

“Then how is it possible to communicate with the missionaries?” Alexander asked.

“Letters take months, but my brothers were able to send us news from time to time. Life there is hard, and very dangerous. The region is controlled by one Maurice Mbembelé. He is a psychopath, a madman, a brute who has been accused of acts as horrific as cannibalism. We have heard nothing of our brothers for several months. We’re very worried.”

Alexander studied Brother Fernando’s map, which still lay on the ground. That piece of paper could not give even a vague idea of the immensity of the continent, with its multitude of countries and six hundred million people. During that weeklong safari with Michael Mushaha, Alexander had learned a lot, but he nevertheless felt lost before the complexity of Africa, with its diverse climates, geographical features, cultures, beliefs, races, and languages. The place the missionary’s finger was pointing to meant nothing to him; he understood only that Ngoubé was in another country.

“I have to go there,” said Brother Fernando.

“How?” Angie asked.

“You must be Angie Ninderera, the owner of this plane, right? I have heard a lot about you. The missionary told me that you can fly anywhere—”

“Hey! Don’t even think of asking me to take you there, man!” exclaimed Angie, holding up both hands in a defensive gesture.

“Why not? This is an emergency.”

“Because,” Angie replied, “where you mean to go is a swampy region covered with trees; there’s no place to land. Because no one with an ounce of sense goes anywhere near there. Because I have been hired by *International Geographic* magazine to bring these journalists back to the capital safe and sound. Because I have other things to do. And, finally, because I don’t, somehow, see you paying me for my trouble.”

“God will repay you, I have no doubt,” said the missionary.

“Listen, it seems to me that your God already has a lot of unpaid debts.”

As they were arguing, Alexander took his grandmother by the arm and led her aside.

“We have to help this man, Kate,” he said.

“What are you thinking, Alex . . . I mean, Jaguar?”

“That we could ask Angie to take us to Ngoubé.”

“And who’s going to pay for it?” Kate queried.

“The magazine, Kate. Just imagine the cool article you can write if we find the missing missionaries.”

“And if we don’t?”

“It’s still news. Don’t you see? You won’t get another opportunity like this,” her grandson pleaded.

“I’ll have to check with Joel,” replied Kate, in whose eyes Alex immediately recognized the first glint of awakened curiosity.

It didn’t seem like a bad idea to Joel, who couldn’t go back home to London anyway because Timothy was still in the hospital.

“Are there snakes there, Kate?”

“More than anywhere in the world, Joel.”

“But there are gorillas, too,” Alex said to tempt him. “Maybe you can photograph one up close. It would make a great cover for *International Geographic*.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll go along,” Joel decided.

Angie was finally convinced by the roll of bills Kate thrust in her face and the idea of a very difficult flight, a challenge she could not resist. The pilot snagged the money with one fist, lighted the first cigarette of the day, and gave the order to toss some of the baggage into the cabin while she checked the plane’s weight distribution and made sure *Super Hawk* was in top operating form.

“This machine is safe, right?” asked Joel, for whom the worst part of his job was snakes and the second-worst part was flying in small planes.

As her only answer, Angie spat some tobacco shreds at his feet. Alex nudged Joel with his elbow. He shared the photographer’s feeling that this conveyance did not seem altogether safe, especially considering that it was piloted by an eccentric woman with a case of beer at her feet, who also kept a lighted cigarette clamped between her teeth only a few feet away from the drums of gasoline carried for refueling.

Twenty minutes later the Cessna was loaded and the passengers were in place. There weren’t enough seats for everyone, so Alex and Nadia wiggled into a niche among the bundles in the tail; no one used a seat belt because Angie thought it an unnecessary precaution.

“In case there’s an accident, the belts wouldn’t do anything but keep the bodies from spilling out of the plane,” she said.

She started the motors; the sound evoked the smile it always did—one of immeasurable tenderness.

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