

SEBASTIAN

A NOVELLA

Written by

Hans Bauer

Craig Mitchell

Richard Stern

COPYRIGHT

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fiction.   
Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors.

©2024 Hans Bauer

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owners. Request for permission should be addressed to:

Hans Bauer

[hansbca@aol.com](mailto:hansbca@aol.com)

Table of Contents

[PROLOGUE 1](#_Toc185602442)

[CHAPTER ONE 9](#_Toc185602443)

[CHAPTER TWO 17](#_Toc185602444)

[CHAPTER THREE 23](#_Toc185602445)

[CHAPTER FOUR 29](#_Toc185602446)

[CHAPTER FIVE 35](#_Toc185602447)

[CHAPTER SIX 39](#_Toc185602448)

[CHAPTER SEVEN 45](#_Toc185602449)

[CHAPTER EIGHT 51](#_Toc185602450)

[CHAPTER NINE 57](#_Toc185602451)

[CHAPTER TEN 67](#_Toc185602452)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN 75](#_Toc185602453)

[CHAPTER TWELVE 83](#_Toc185602454)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN 89](#_Toc185602455)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN 93](#_Toc185602456)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN 101](#_Toc185602457)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN 105](#_Toc185602458)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN 113](#_Toc185602459)

### PROLOGUE

Spend time on the Dark Continent and the view will surely daze and amaze; not only the wonder inspired by the amount and diversity of wildlife in so vast a space, but also the nightmarish and unexpected; the carcass of a crocodile flung into a treetop by a disgruntled hippo; the intact skeleton of a giraffe, its head and neck wedged in the crook of an acacia tree, the panicked, gunshot animal there because it had galloped and galloped until the tree stood in its path; the mental picture formed by a dead of night campfire tale of twin Brit brothers on safari, the one, in his final throes being gored by a Cape Horn Buffalo, somehow getting off a shot, the barrel exploding, a shower of metal needles impaling the shooter’s face, lucky not to blind him, the bullet passing through the buffs neck and instantly killing the twin come to his rescue—a well-known tale in the lore of African safari’s gone wrong—but only a few knew the full story, its conclusion played out in an inexpensive seafood restaurant situated on a side street in Brooklyn, New York, where the expat Brit had lunched with his Congolese wife every day for the past twenty-two years. Halfway through the meal a single drop of blood from his nose plinked soundlessly into his bowl of chowder. Ninety seconds later he was dead, face down in the bowl, an inoperable sliver having wormed its way into his brain given the final say. At the scarcely attended wake his wife recounted the events of half a century past.

Such is Africa.

### CHAPTER ONE

Two hundred kilometers south of the equator, the largely treeless view from the low knoll of mounded boulders is *not* unusual. The inflated red balloon of the sun sits balanced on the thin chalk line of the horizon. In the foreground, a pride of sated lions snooze away the searing afternoon in the lower branches of a fireproof thorn tree. Beyond, a quarter million wildebeest, gazelle, and zebra graze on a plain so impossibly broad that it reveals the curvature of the earth. It is undeniably picturesque, but in no way remarkable, a fairly typical picture postcard representation of the African plains.

Atypical is the dull clatter of the black helo moving past the sun while bearing the silhouette of an elephant suspended in a sling.

Tanzania. A bone white moon hovered over the limitless savanna. A tear in a lofty chain link fence, wide enough to accommodate a passing vehicle, stretched away and was lost in the silvery dark. A rifle balanced across wide, muscled shoulders, a shirtless figure emerged from the gloom and stood momentarily posed, as if for an unseen photographer, the vanity of the stance inspired by a framed Steve McQueen movie poster, *Nevada Smith*, hanging in the poser’s Zanzibar City apartment. Bunny Bull, Irish, twenty-seven, studied the ground and raised an arm in signal. The name was not his own, but had been borrowed from yet another legend active during the golden age of African safaris. The scout not only idealized the man behind the legend, but was drawn to the soft/hard contrast of the two mismatched words—Bunny and Bull.

A trio of Land Rovers following in Bunny’s wake materialized from the dark, their headlamps dead. The lead Rover pulled alongside the tracker. A logo on the driver’s door—a diagonal bar crossing a circle containing an elephant silhouette—identified the men as members of an elite anti-poaching squad, on night patrol. A decade older than Bunny, co-captain Karl Erhardt, of Norwegian ancestry, who hailed from Pillager, Minnesota, sat behind the wheel. One cheek was deeply grooved from a lion attack. Beside him, an African still in his teens rode shotgun.

Erhardt, incessantly chewing gum and never without his enormous white Stetson, climbed out. Uncapping a canteen, he took a drink and passed it to Bunny.

Bunny drank, nodding to faint tire treads in the soil. The men’s eyes followed to where they passed through the fence and were swallowed by night.

Erhardt acknowledged, blew a pink gum bubble, and stepped aside to empty his bladder.

Bunny slipped through the fence and led the way.

His partner returned to the Rovers and they followed.

Bunny led on. The high-altitude temp had cooled, now in the mid-fifties, and a faint breeze had kicked up. On the move, he unknotted the khaki shirt wound round his waist and slipped it on. Three miles further he came upon the carcass of a rhino. A festering hole where the horn had been carved away, the meat left to rot, swarming with maggots, semaphored the grim aftermath of a poaching crew.

Erhardt again climbed from the lead Rover, the two men silent as they eyeballed the human prints and tire treads beside the kill. Bunny indicated with his fingers—they were trailing five, maybe six men.

Forty minutes later Bunny signaled another halt, and studied the moonlit savanna through his field glasses. A trio of pachyderms—massive bulls, eight-foot tusks, lords of their domain—grazed in heavy scrub along a reedy riverbank, the animals in a crescent, spaced about twenty yards apart. The tire tracks led into the surrounding scrub, but the poachers were nowhere in sight.

Bunny knelt, scooped up a handful of dry soil, and let it filter through his fingers. The breeze carried it toward the tuskers. They did not budge, were strangely unperturbed by the scent of men. Too late, Bunny had begun to suspect there was something dead wrong.

Now, again, the entirely unexpected—impossible to predict what happened next.

Erhardt, cool about it, drew the revolver from his holster, and fired point blank at the young African riding shotgun. Brain matter splattered the dirt outside the open window.

The single shot like a green light signal, intense bursts of orange muzzle fire erupted from the elephants—not from near or anywhere around, but directly from the animals, nothing about it making sense.

Bunny hugged the ground and returned fire, Erhardt standing his ground and not firing back.

Two more Africans in the second Rover, one being the father of the boy who was first to buy the farm, died in the crossfire. Twitching like marionettes, they grew still twelve seconds after the final shot. The remaining Rover wheeled about, attempting a breakaway, managed thirty yards, trundled aimlessly another ten, and came to the same end. Five men in the riddled vehicles, dead or dying, the ambush over and done in twenty-three seconds, Bunny Bull and Karl Erhardt the only two left alive.

There followed a morbid silence.

Erhardt swiveled and trained his revolver on Bunny still on the ground.

“Do I have your full and undivided, Bun?” Hearing it spoken, the truncated name sounded effeminate, but these were men’s men.

“You’ve lost your mind,” said Bunny, looking up, the words lame even to his own ears.

Erhardt shrugged, like the massacre was a natural outcome, something to be expected. “It’s war. We’re outmanned. Outgunned. We’re losing. And we’ll keep on losing,” spoken like someone weary after being cheated by one life and ready to try his luck with another.

“What’s your point?” Bunny asked, again thinking the words sounded foolish.

“Something I’ve been trying to tell you,” Erhardt said. “You weren’t listening. Somewhere along the way I lost the point.” He spit out his gum, unwrapped another stick, and put it in his mouth. Turning to the trio of elephants he raised an arm and waved, as if maybe the gunfire hadn’t been enough to spook them, but the tuskers still hadn’t budged.

Instead, a hatch opened in each of the creature’s sides. Two armed men emerged from each of their empty bellies, the men and mock beasts conspirators in the deception.

Erhardt returned his attention to Bunny and laughed, a pirate’s laugh in the presence of treasure, and made a sweeping gesture, gathering up the whole of the continent in his arms. “Lord knows, I love this country. Everything here for the taking.”

The poachers approached, a patchwork team of diverse nationalities. Collecting weapons from the ambushed Rovers, they avoided stepping on “Bun,” but not all succeeded. Having shot out the tires not already flattened, and mangled the radios, they returned to the brush. Moments later, a jeep followed by a panel truck loaded with a small fortune in elephant ivory, rhino horn, and weapons, emerged and rolled away into the night.

Erhardt completed his thought. “From here on, I’m part of the taking,” wistfully, while peering off at the cloud-shrouded contours of blue and purplish mountains fifty miles away, silver clouds over neighboring Rwanda reflecting the moonlight.

A dying African groaned in one of the riddled Rovers. Erhardt kept his revolver trained on Bunny. “I’ll need your weapon. Without incident, if you please,” Erhardt saying it to Bunny, the two aware there were no easy choices, not then and there on the rolling plains of central East Africa. “Don’t make me help you help me.”

Bunny tossed his rifle.

Erhardt fired a shot into the dying African’s skull.

“Now he isn’t hurting anymore and we can hear each other talk.”

“What now?” asked Bunny.

His co-captain was looking off. Bunny followed his gaze from ground level, the men watching a cloud of dust swirling their way. Bunny, fast losing blood, dared to hope. Erhardt looked slightly annoyed, like he hadn’t planned on company. He relaxed when he realized it was only a dust devil. He turned back to Bunny. “I make sure you stay in one place,” nonchalant about it. He fired again.

Bunny took the slug above the knee, jackknifed, and writhed in the dirt. He’d somehow known it was coming and flinched even before the gun went off. The shot passed clean through the inside of his left thigh, nearly taking his balls with it, but missing the femur and critical arteries, a dull clang announcing that it had struck one of the dead Rovers.

Erhardt stepped away to pick up the discarded rifle, ejected the spent shells, and pocketed them. “Not to worry. I’m leaving you one. You’ll thank me later.” He was all business, nothing personal about it. Perfectly timed, call and response, the dull roar of a carnivore carried from somewhere across the plain. A taunt, he stood the empty shell upright on the hood of the nearest Rover. It fell over, clattered down the hood and lay beside a flattened tire. Hurling Bunny’s rifle, it landed thirty feet away. “Waste not, want not. Best of luck.”

He walked off, heading for the brush surrounding the ‘elephants.’ The last Bunny heard him say was something about a change of scenery, or maybe it was geography, and then something about gorillas.

Minutes later the concealed helo took off, a section of scrub still stuck to the landing skids. This time, however, there was no sling, and therefore, no ‘elephant.’

### CHAPTER TWO

Bleak dawn light revealed a flock of white-backed vultures roosting atop the riddled Rovers, heads resting on their backs, beaks nuzzled into filthy feathers. The dead Africans inside had been picked clean, their skeletons reduced to heaps of jumbled bones and scraps of red meat. One of the ugly birds flapped about, unable to remember how it got inside. Eyeless, a separated skull wobbled on the dash.

Of the trio of Trojan pachyderms, one had toppled on its side, its legs stiff and horizontal, as if rigor mortis had taken hold.

Bunny had disappeared.

The hatch slowly opened, just a sliver. Two eyes peered from the baking dark. It quickly slammed down again when a clawed mitt sized like a dinner platter slashed into view.

The cloudless, forever panorama broiled in the noonday sun. The thin papier-mâché and plaster hide, spray-painted a mousy shade of gray, now bore the signs of tooth and claw, but they were few, the meat eaters having quickly discovered they weren’t dealing with their usual fare of flesh and blood. Where there should have been maggots and flying insects (there *were* some fly’s, owing to the wounded man inside) gorging themselves on rancid decay, there were none. It had to be confusing, an elephant that didn’t smell or taste like one, but still had the aroma of something tasty, if only they could get inside. Even the vultures had become discouraged and revisited the Rovers, quarreling over any remaining scraps.

Sheltered inside the bogus carcass, where the temperature was twenty degrees greater than without, the reek of Bunny’s sweat was overpowering. Sour sweat stung his eyes and trickled from his lips. The stench of cooked urine caulked his nostrils. His last water had been taken nine hours before from his canteen.

The hatch opened again, just a sliver. This time a rifle barrel eased into view. Fresh air flowed in. The lions were sacked out in the only tree as far as the eye could see, three or four of the pride in the shade of the silent Rovers.

A quarter-mile away, a warthog wallowed on a mudflat. Bunny’s rifle cracked, the echo dispersing across the vista, and the hog toppled. One by one the startled felines descended from their perches and bounded a short distance to investigate. There they stopped, alert to the twitching of the dying hog.

Around mid-afternoon.

Given the absence of bullet holes in the hood, the nearest Rover’s motor was likely miraculously intact, but of the fleet’s fifteen tires, including three spares, eleven were flattened. With the luxury of time, he could switch them out and have a whole vehicle to carry him to the nearest hospital forty miles away. But there would never be time. The pride would see to it.

The crouching lions, faces stained with mud and gore, tore into the dead hog, unaware of the thing on two legs stealing from the belly of the beast. Bare-chested again, his shirt a makeshift tourniquet wrapped high and tight around his upper thigh, Bunny dragged his bad leg to the nearest vehicle. His pant leg below the crotch had turned the color of black parchment.

Torn between the human and the hog, the feeding cats stayed with the hog, but shared by an extended family of fourteen the modest meal would not last long.

Each of the Rovers came equipped with a first aid kit. Bunny rummaged and found what he was seeking. Ramming a syringe in his thigh he depressed the plunger. The dose of amoxicillin, a derivative of penicillin, coursed through his veins.

Hefting the sledge taken from a toolbox, he bashed the winch bolted to the grill until it tore free and thunked to the ground.

Occupied, the cats glanced over and appeared still not to give a shit. Only two lazily rose and started in his direction, then padded back to the kill at hand. They would return to the human who made great noises later.

Unspooling the cable, Bunny dragged it back to the ‘elephant.’ There, he looped and cinched the cable tight around the bull’s neck. He guessed the distance to the river at about thirty yards. Thirty. He might not make ten. He’d crossed half that distance, entered the reeds, when the pride finally took notice and came bounding his way. A startled kingfisher took flight and grazed his temple. Bunny strained, screamed in pain, pulled harder, entered the shallows warm as bathwater, and launched his one-way ticket out of an unmarked grave.

The lions arrived too late. Prowling the riverbank, they followed its course for nearly a mile. Bunny had hoisted himself through the hatch of the makeshift vessel and disappeared from view. A rare black-maned male and his paired wives entered the water, gingerly tested its depth, and began to swim. Something caused them to change their minds, and they turned back. Experience had taught that attacking prey in deep water was unlikely to meet with success.

Sometimes, when it rains, it pours, and Sean Flanagan, better known to everyone but his Irish immigrant mother as Bunny Bull, still had more on his plate than he could chew. His supremely fucked up day in northern Tanzania had only just begun.

Nineteen miles and two hours later, downstream, he attracted more unwanted attention. The raft had taken a beating in a brief stretch of rapids, but was still more or less intact.

A rogue croc saw a free meal floating past. Gliding to mid-river to investigate, it moved in for the kill. The reptile’s snout slammed through the wire mesh framework. Bunny, caught off guard, kicked with his good leg to avoid an unscheduled amputation. He still had his rifle. It would have been thoughtful of Erhardt to leave him two bullets instead of one, but he hadn’t been that generous. Slamming the stock between the creature’s eyes, it backed off to reconsider. Circling twice, then deciding it was worth the effort, the croc came in for a second try. Its trademark death roll, clamping prey in its jaws and spinning like a dervish, would finish the job, but during a long day of horrors, something finally turned in Bunny’s favor. The current suddenly picked up speed, snatching the man-meal out of reach.

It was dark when what remained of the craft, by this time reduced to a soggy wreckage of cheap timber and mangled wire mesh, swept into view from behind a broad bend in the river. The waterway narrowed to a funnel, a precarious trestle bridge spanning it.

Ten minutes later, the tangled mess of the once make-believe beast abutted the wooden beams and snagged there. It would not have survived another mile. Three-quarters drowned, Bunny emerged and hauled himself up the rough beams, each foot of the ascent an agony. Reaching the top, he hauled himself over the rail, crawled to the approximate center, and collapsed there.

Three hours later, twin pinpricks of light approached, ripened into low wattage lanterns, and blossomed into blinding globes. The vehicle swerved hard to avoid hitting the figure lying motionless in the road, and somehow managed it.

Bunny heard the driver’s door open, felt the tremor of footsteps approaching on the surface planks, and smelled the faint taint of whiskey as someone rolled him over and peered into his open eyes.

His next to last thought before losing consciousness was puzzling out whether Erhardt hadn’t been on to something, whether it wasn’t too late to switch sides. The last to pass through his mind was something his used-to-be partner, and lately, attempted murderer, had said about gorillas.

### CHAPTER THREE

To the untrained eye, the knuckle print found on the emerald slope of one of the five funnel peaks that comprised Volcanoes National Park in northwest Rwanda bore an uncanny resemblance to both a human hand and human foot, but the Irishman knew better. Buried deep in volcanic soil, the print was undeniably that of a gorilla.

Cloaked in camo-fatigues and matching face paint, the poaching party made slow, deliberate movements, hacking their way through the damp, nearly impenetrable, always ascending cloud forest. Contrary to popular belief, not all gorillas inhabit sweltering tropical jungles; some spend their lives in the cold, shrouded forests of subalpine regions. Below, the men could make out the shimmering expanse of Lake Kivu, one of the African Great Lakes. They were in search of mountain gorillas, their spirits elevated because they were getting close. Around mid-afternoon, shortly after having bathed in one of the several hot springs that dotted the mountainside, steam like smoke visible above the treetops as they ascended, they had come upon a ground nest of flattened leaves. Now it was nearly dusk, the sun low on the horizon.

The work was not terribly difficult, but neither was it without considerable risk. An infant gorilla commanded a considerable sum, up to sixty thousand dollars, U.S., making the job well worth the effort, but each outing was a-multi phase venture wrought with thorny possibilities: avoiding surveillance and contact with park rangers, location of prey, capture, and return with the catch. The first, the avoidance of rangers, could be managed, usually. The second, the matter of location, was fairly reliable. The gorillas, though they were hidden, had no real place to hide. The third, capture, was always uncertain. The tables might be turned and a man attacked, resulting in the loss of life or limb.

The final phase, the actual smuggling of protected contraband across international borders, was the most difficult. Only the month before, a lowland gorilla, an infant female, had been rescued by park rangers as poachers attempted to smuggle her out of Uganda. She had been bound for a sheik’s private zoo in the Middle East. Likely, her parents had been killed, though even poachers were generally loath to admit they had gone to extremes to eliminate the threat of homicidal adults. The men could shoot to kill, or let live, depending on their mood and his, referring to the dominant male silverback protecting the troop. There were, of course, expenses. If everything went well and all was said and done, a successful job might net one ten grand, but the market was small and there were only so many of the apes to be culled from the wild.

Team leader Bunny Bull signaled a halt and sniffed the air. Twenty-two months had passed since surviving forged elephants, cut-throat lions, and croc-infested water, months during which the former protector of wildlife had himself turned smuggler, a word he much preferred over the stigma of poacher, the former better lending a flair of romance to his outlawed profession. The clamminess of the cloud mountain only slightly impaired his gait, reminding him of the old wound, but otherwise, he had kept his youthful appearance. In his short time on earth, he had lived great stories, and thought it a shame that, smuggler or poacher, there were few with whom he could share them.

“*Ngyulla*,” he whispered.

The others—two whites and a small company of Congolese—hunkered low and peered through the understory.

Cocooned in a glade behind a screen of vegetation were nine adult females and their young. Having recently torn apart a wild banana tree, the group was busy sharing the bounty.

“All bitches and brats,” the American from Boston murmured.

“Where’re the males?” the one from Tallahassee asked.

“Nine of them. Nine of us,” Bunny answered, perhaps not hearing the question. “Let’s dance.” He gestured for the stalkers to encircle the apes.

Silent as a tomb, backpacks were unshouldered. Nets of thick rope unbundled. The team moved into position, phantoms stealing through the twilight gloom. Sensing a presence, Bunny slowly turned. One by one, the rest took note and followed suit. Behind, a cast of adult males rose from cover and began to hoot. The men quickly shouldered their rifles, searching for targets.

What happened next was without precedent: a sequence of booby traps sprang into action, tripwires of concealed vines launching showers of sharpened bamboo spears. Thorn studded palm logs crashed from on high and mowed down the greenery. Bunny had heard of such things because his father had served in Viet Nam (also about concealed pits containing pit vipers, nicknamed “three step snakes” because three steps was all you got before their venom killed you, but here there were no pits), but he was on a cloud mountain in Africa, nowhere near Nam.

The men dove and ducked. Some lost their footing. All scrambled back down the mountain the way they’d come, fleeing for their lives. They knew it was useless to run from an adult gorilla, which were far faster and would always catch you, but any such discipline was immediately abandoned when the traps began to spring. From behind came the crackle and pop of snapping branches, punctuated by the shrieks of the pursuing primates.

It was Bunny’s misfortune that the largest of the apes, a silver giant, had singled him out, the hulking shape pursuing ape-like on powerful arms.

Bunny stumbled and struck the ground. His shotgun slid from his grasp and landed in thick ground cover. Finally, it had come to this, he thought. He had played both sides of the game, each time with the same result for his trouble, and what were the odds of that happening in a single lifetime? Having already once cheated death, his luck had finally run out. He shut his eyes, expecting the worst.

Twenty yards up the slope, framed in a tunnel of bamboo, the hunted, now become hunter, loomed in the jungle fastness. Brandishing what appeared to be a club, the great silverback rose to his full height and began to thump his chest—*Po*k*, Pok*, *Pok*.

Bunny opened his eyes and waited. He was still fearful, but no longer overly impressed. The primate’s threats were only meant to intimidate. Once this point had been reached, the apes rarely followed through on their bravado.

Bunny crawled away to claim his shotgun. When he pumped the weapon and sighted the animal, he could not believe his eyes.

The ape had brought the club to his shoulder, also sighting it, like a firearm. The confused moment spent puzzling what he was seeing gave the ape the upper hand. The muzzle of the 12-gauge flashed and spoke! Then instinct took over. Bunny lost his smirk and tried to roll. Too late, a hail of hot pellets honeycombed his twisted leg, the one already scarred by the Norwegian’s bullet. He hadn’t actually felt the shot, more like being punched, followed by wetness as blood began to flow. He screamed, curled, covered his head, and braced for the end. This time it would happen.

Nothing more happened.

After what seemed an eternity, he peeked from under his arm.

The great ape was gone.

### CHAPTER FOUR

It was a wonder that in their stumbling stampede two of his companions had bothered to bring him down the mountain rather than leave him to die (another day alone on the dead volcano and he *would* have died), a harrowing trek of three days while borne on a bamboo litter. Such loyalty was unexpected from men with bandit blood.

Having reached the grassy plains below, they’d placed him in the care of a tribe of impoverished Hutus. There, the three had parted company, every man for himself.

It was some of the Hutu who took him to the clinic, another abysmal, bone-jarring trek.

That the clinic existed at all was a miracle. No more than a collection of low ramshackle buildings, a former colonial plantation gone to waste amidst a pineapple grove, it once served as a stopgap measure in response to a tidal wave of horror during which, a decade earlier, nearly a million local natives had been butchered, the culmination of longstanding ethnic rivalry. The ghosts of mutilated men, women and children still stalked the now empty whitewashed brick corridors.

He was one of seven patients: five suffered from lingering tuberculosis, one from a venomous snakebite. But Bunny Bull was alone: segregated in a separate wing, his stark iron bed sheltered behind a partition of acceptably clean, but threadbare, muslin sheets, his damaged leg levitated in makeshift traction, a jerry-rigged contraption of rusty wheels and wires that squeaked with every slight shift of his limbs, like some medieval torture device intended to elicit confessions (and Bunny had much to confess). He had been told it was likely he would walk again, but never without the aid of a cane, and that day would be a long time coming. At best, one leg would always be two inches shorter than the other. After leaving the clinic there would be months of physical therapy. What Karl Erhardt had failed to accomplish in Tanzania, a mountain gorilla had finished in neighboring Rwanda. Bunny Bull’s mountaineering days were now behind.

He had turned the surreal circumstance that brought him there over and over in his mind. Given the vagaries of his occupation, it was not unheard of that a man might trip over a vine, or lose his balance while crossing a turgid stream, or suffer some other mishap, causing him to discharge his weapon, at worst losing a finger or a foot, but whether by accident or done with single minded purpose, which, unless he had dreamt it, was surely the later, one simply did not expect to be fired upon by a gorilla, the weapon fired with extreme and calculated prejudice.

Shortly after his arrival the Polish wife of the Swiss doctor who operated the clinic had asked was there someone who should be contacted, perhaps his parents, some siblings, a wife, or a sweetheart? Bunny passed on the offer. There was only his mother and what would be the point, would she catch the first flight to a backwater African clinic, hysterically rushing to his beside toting back issues of *Fido*, *Cat Fancy*, and *National Wildlife* (simply because she knew that as a young boy he liked animals and kept a small menagerie in a shed behind the house, but had no clue what he currently did for a living) and a box of chocolates? Better that he hobble his way back to Kalamazoo and step through her door announced, claiming that he was there to stay, and even then wondered if he would be able to keep his promise. And how long it would take her to recognize him?

There being no magazines, books, television, even a month-old newspaper to while away the monotony, he came to depend upon the sound of children’s laughter from the courtyard enclosed by the clinic, and so correctly assumed the clinic also served as a school, or what might pass for one nestled in a primeval forest at the end of the earth. It was *not* the end of the earth, of course, no one place is, but to Bunny it surely felt that way. Quite often a face, boy or girl, it was hard to tell them apart, appeared at one of the small, high-set windows opposite the row of otherwise empty beds and ogled him. They came in pairs, the owner of the first standing on the bent back of a schoolmate, then changing places to give the second a turn. There must have also been a church, attested by the peal of morning, noon, and evening bells.

The skin around the healing wound, encased in plaster, itched enough to cause him nearly lose his mind. When the stringy nurse who came daily to bring his meals, empty his bedpan, and take away his urine in a plastic jug that once contained orange juice, and sometimes administer a sponge bath, and had heard enough of his complaining, she brought him a wooden ruler with which to relieve himself, but the effort of navigating the skintight sheath was hardly worth the effort and only added to his misery.

He had been there five days, or was it six? It was not night, but it seemed so. A low shelf of lavender clouds darkened the land. Glimpsed through the window, lightening flickered and briefly illuminated the contours of the grouped volcanoes thirty miles away. Dim thunder roiled. A door at the far end of the corridor opened and a figure entered. He knew from the fall of unfamiliar footsteps that they belonged to neither the doctor, nor his wife, nor to one of the few nurses. He had no expectation of visitors—certainly none of his bandit disciples would be dropping by to check on him. Slightly stooped and appearing to cradle something that could well be a shotgun, the shadowy shape approached Bunny’s cube, slid a chair across the rough concrete floor, and sat on the other side of the partition.

Bunny’s mind took wing in a flight of panic, wondering whether the armed gorilla had somehow tracked him down the mountain, just as he had tracked it on the way up.

He was about to cry out when the silhouette spoke.

“About your leg. I’m sorry.”

“Who—What are you?”

“May I?”

A hand reached through the partition and pinched a cigarette from a crumpled pack beside a book of matches on the bedside table. Water dripped from his sleeve. Bunny lay transfixed by the arm and hand—black with mud, callused, but apparently quite human, the appendage of a white man. The hand withdrew.

“I don’t smoke. But I like the smell of tobacco. It reminds me of people. As does the smell of gasoline,” said the silhouette.

“Are you—*ngyulla*?” asked Bunny knowing it was ridiculous, but still half-believing he was.

“Aren’t we all *ngyulla*? Didn’t we all begin as apes swinging through the trees?”

The shadowy shape struck a match, lit the cigarette, and appeared to savor its smoke without putting it in his mouth.

“I have not had a talk in well over a year. With a man.”

Bunny asked if he was dying.

“You are having a conversation.”

“Then why am I afraid?”

“Would it help to hear more about me? Would it help to calm you?”

The captive audience shifted nervously causing the bedsprings to squeak. Had he been able, he would have fled, or perhaps grabbed for the shotgun, demanding answers instead of this casual exchange of give and take. The speaker had, after all, put a bullet through his leg. Why this failed assassin had been allowed a visit was beyond him.

“When did you first come to the Africa?” asked the shadow.

“As a boy, with my father.”

“Was he a poacher?”

“No,” Bunny answered quickly, defensively. “An adventurer.”

“There were many more *ngyulla* then. They shared a mountain paradise.” The shadow paused. “There was a man named Erhardt? Karl Erhardt? A Norwegian. Did you know him?”

Bunny, of course, knew the name, knew it well, but was suspicious, and saw no reason to mention it.

The shadow spoke again.

### CHAPTER FIVE

The infant gorilla studied his reflection in the shallow jungle pool. A prankster, he scooped rainwater into his palm and splashed a second ape, also an infant, snoozing nearby in a bed of leaves. Jolted awake, the doused ape took his half-brother down in a mischievous wrestle. They rolled and rolled, playfully nipping each other, but causing no real harm. They were inseparable—the same father, different mothers. There are no words to describe the impulse that bonds young apes. These two animals were one thing.

They did not have names, but soon would.

Sebastian and Lex.

Pok, Pok, Pok—an adult female told them play was over. The infants teased and poked each other as they pushed through the sunlit clearing to join the small group that comprised their troop. They numbered eighteen: four adult males over twelve years of age—silverbacks, so named due to the silvery sheen of their coats; two adult males under twelve—blackbacks; who had not yet attained their silvery sheen; five adult females—graybacks, two adolescents, three juveniles, and the two infants. The group was, by necessity, a single organism. Their survival depended on a closeness humans cannot even begin to imagine.

Sebastian leapt into his mother’s arms.

Lex leapt into his mother’s arms.

The pair nursed at their mother’s teats.

Now, approaching up the mountain, a strange sort of sudden summer storm, unaccompanied by ominous clouds or rain, only the dull roar of wind, closer and closer, forest palms shuddering in the gale.

Then—a sharp CRACK audible above the gusting wind.

Sebastian’s mother staggered and collapsed.

A heartbeat later, a second CRACK, nearer than the first.

Lex’s mother collapsed.

The shrieking, stomping infants clamored over their fallen mommy’s.

There followed something equally horrifying—a deafening clatter of rotor blades. The plague that followed was over and done in a scatter of shots, the clearing littered with the dead and dying.

The half-brothers looked to the circle of blue sky visible above the clearing.

Whock, Whock, Whock! A god was descending.

A helicopter.

Karl Erhardt, sporting his iconic white Stetson, leaned from the open hatch, a high-powered rifle pressed to his shoulder. The rotor draft swept his hat away. It swooped and settled on Sebastian like a bird of prey. The infant rolled into a ball and cowered beneath it.

The poacher gestured for his team to show themselves.

The trio of African trackers materialized from behind forest walls. The young apes were quickly ensnared in tattered nets of thick rope and dropped into a lightweight carrying cage.

The chopper descended. Trees bent and bristled as if in a tropical storm. The blades grew still. The trees no longer swayed.

The man Erhardt climbed down and strolled over.

“How many?”

“Two little ones,” the African named Lumumba answered.

Then—something not entirely unexpected. The troop’s dominant silverback knuckled-bounded from the brush, yellowy-orange canines bared, open fists violently pounding his chest—Pok, Pok, Pok.

Erhardt reacted with practiced precision. He deftly pivoted, stopped chewing, and shot the gorilla dead in his tracks. The poacher calmly blew a gum bubble and scooped up his hat. Handed a machete, he strolled off for a final bit of business—the severing of limbs and heads collected into a burlap sack to satisfy a booming traffic in primate ashtrays and such, an offshoot trade so disgusting that even the Congolese refused to take part in. They waited smoking highly prized American Marlboro’s while he went about it.

Afterward, Erhardt returned to the caged orphans. The quivering infants eyed the butcher as he bent close. “You apes got lucky,” the human said, unpeeling a fresh stick of gum. “You’re going to America.”

### CHAPTER SIX

An architectural marvel, the glass and chrome structure situated amid six hundred forested acres outside the port city of Duluth, Minnesota could easily be mistaken for a private hospital or a modern art museum, but was, in fact, the chief administrative building of a state-of-the-art research institute. Though little known to the general public, the Leland J. Massey Primate Center provided facilities and expertise for researchers using non-human primates; gorillas, chimpanzees, and orangutans for biomedical research, including, but not limited to, invasive brain, pharmaceutical, vaccine, and military application experiments. Scattered throughout the property, isolated pockets housed discreetly situated labs, classrooms, and animal compounds, the most sensitive areas enclosed by additional security gates. A private lake connected to Lake Superior.

Dr. Gordon Obler, late thirties, bearing the pale complexion and ruffled appearance of a workaholic, stood behind a podium facing a small auditorium. The looming monitor behind him showed an optical fiber view of a human throat.

“Human babies change enormously during their first eighteen months,” he was saying. “By the time a child is a year and a half old, his pharynx has become flexible enough to shape the sounds that rise from the larynx into words. In contrast, the ape’s nasal passages never change.

The auditorium was packed with colleagues, the best and brightest in their field, uniformly sporty and smug. The spindly, gaunt featured Dr. Leland Massey (to Gordon, Leland bore a remarkable resemblance to the British actor Christopher Plummer), the center’s administrator and Gordon’s boss, and nearly twice his age, observed from the shadows at the rear.

The monitor switched to an anatomical view of a primate’s voice box. “The primate larynx remains too narrow and rigid to produce the sharp sounds required for speech,” Gordon went on. “Applying recent advancements made in reconstructive surgery and rehab therapy, we’re now to the point where we, I, feel this shortcoming can be corrected.”

“Doctor Dolittle,” someone in the first row tittered.

“I can talk to the animals,” another colleague said in a singsong whisper.

Gordon overheard them, adjusted his spectacles, and peered into the dark. “Pardon?”

“No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he’ll never be able to tell us that his parents were poor but honest,” a peer in the first row quipped.

Gordon’s colleagues erupted in restrained laughter.

“Go on. Please,” said Gordon.

“Apes lack the neural organization necessary to generate or comprehend language. It’s beyond their sequence learning abilities,” someone in the second row opined.

“Thank you,” said Gordon. “Now may I continue?”

The two colleagues shrugged.

“On our side is a ninety-nine percent genetic overlap, far greater than that between the horse and zebra, or the chimpanzee and monkey. I have more in common with this animal than any other non-human, including, perhaps, at least two of my colleagues.”

More titters, some undisguised laughter.

Karl Erhardt, who always wore fatigues and hadn’t bothered to remove his Stetson, entered through a rear door and stood beside Leland.

“The creature soon to be in our midst will be the missing link between the guinea pig and man, the most sophisticated lab animal in all of neuro-surgical research,” Gordon continued, with absolute assurance. “Gentlemen, ladies, the animal will talk.”

If the doctor expected even a smattering of applause, there was only silence.

Leland moved down the center aisle and made his presence known. “We’ll know soon enough,” he said.

Gordon shot Leland a questioning look. The octogenarian turned and nodded to Erhardt who stepped into view and gave a little salute.

Leland turned back to Gordon. “Mission accomplished. They’re here.”

Sebastian pressed a wary eye to the bars and peered around the bright room where the overhead fluorescents flickered and buzzed. The orphaned infants were still in their cage, mired in their filth and fluids, and had been since their capture five days earlier. The young ape’s darting eyes fixed on the human, Leland.

“Any trouble?” asked Leland.

Erhardt shook his head. “No worries. I told their mum’s I was taking their boys to summer camp. Not sure they believed me though.”

“Yes, well, I’d prefer not to hear about it,” said Leland whose only interest was in results, never the means taken to achieve them.

“I’ve got some souvenirs in the Rover,” said Erhardt, pretending not to hear. “Did you know their feet make great ashtrays? I may have one in the car.”

Leland ignored the remark and turned to Gordon. “There are two of them, doctor. Your choice.” He nodded to Teddy, the glorified custodian whose duties included feeding the prisoners and cleaning out their cages, and hated every second of it.

Sebastian observed the pale, pudgy Teddy as he approached the cage. Terrified, the half-brothers withdrew and cuddled each other. Selecting a key from the great ring that always dangled from his belt, Teddy unlocked the lid, pried the apes apart, and attempted to yank Lex out. Defiant, Sebastian bit his wrist, a superficial wound that drew not even a thimbleful of blood, but enough to enrage the already ill-tempered Teddy, and in the instant Lex bounded free. Before Teddy could slam shut the lid, Sebastian, too, was out like a shot, the shrieking apes scampering over and under desks and equipment. Teddy, not one to be bested by a pair of unruly toddlers, raised a gas powered tranq gun taken from a holster, fired, and missed. The needle-tipped syringe struck a wall and snapped in two.

Erhardt snatched the gun away, loaded another syringe, and calmly aimed. “I’ll do the shooting. You can keep the kewpie doll,” he said, seldom perturbed by small glitches upsetting the general plan. The dart plugged Lex in the haunch. The infant ape yelped and hobbled to a corner where the barbiturate coursing through his bloodstream quickly took effect. Sebastian ambled over to his half-brother who collapsed in his arms, convulsed, and grew still. He poked the comatose sibling, trying to revive him.

“Jesus, you really think I just killed a sixty-thousand-dollar animal?” said Erhardt. He snatched Sebastian by the scruff of his neck, tossed him back in the cage, and slammed the lid shut. “Trust me, he’s got plenty of miles left. Doesn’t he, doc?”

Gordon stepped forward, pressed his face to the cage, and blinked. “This one,” he said.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

A hard rain fell as Teddy, draped in a rain slicker, a gauze bandage bound round his wrist, drove a forklift bearing Sebastian’s cage.

“Whether he talks or not means diddly to me,” Teddy grumbled to himself. “Now, toilet training, that’s something I could get behind.” He wove through the sprawling, immaculately maintained, park-like grounds—cobbled walkways, cascading fountains, topiary sculptures of mythical creatures, and a vast lake amid stands of dense forest. Away in the distance, a domed structure reflecting the dull light perched atop a hillock overlooking the Center grounds. The custodian navigated the ascending path winding around its contours, finally arriving at a towering, gumdrop shaped enclosure of tightly spaced steel bars. Teddy lowered the cage to the ground and dragged it through a thick door of reinforced steel. He made sure to lock the door behind him.

Rain drummed the glass dome as he wheeled the cart along a narrow path circling mounded boulders, jumbled stumps, and dead trunks of trees, forming an escarpment within the habitat. From high above, a man-made waterfall spilled from between massed boulders into the semblance of a jungle pool. It was, altogether, a great ape paradise.

Sebastian peered through the bars, taking in his new surroundings. His eyes widened as they settled on something from a fairytale—an ornate gazebo of reduced scale door and windows, a cave of sorts, nestled in the shelter of a deadfall at the base of the faux mountain.

Gordon Obler stood waiting outside the gazebo. “Sebastian—? This is your new home, your jungle, your paradise,” he said. “And inside—” he gestured to the makeshift hut of trees and branches sheltering a bed of fresh, green palm fronds, “that’s your nest.”

A smallish, ginger-haired girl, Gordon’s eleven-year-old daughter, her hair in a ponytail, poked her head out of the gazebo. She appeared comical dwarfed by an adult’s white lab coat.

“And this young lady—well, this is Coral, my daughter. Your new sister, I suppose we could say.”

“Hello,” said Coral timidly, her slightly parted lips revealing the empty space where she had recently shed the last of her baby teeth.

“Careful, he bites,” Teddy warned.

Unlocking the cage, he gave it a solid kick. Sebastian reacted like a Jack-in-a-Box and scampered behind a clump of ferns, from behind which he observed the girl. Coral crouched and spoke softly, signing in Ameslan, the universal language of the deaf, a skill her father had suggested she learn in anticipation of the gorilla’s arrival, one he had also mastered.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m just a little kid, like you,” her voice musical and girlish, as it should be. “I’m not one of *them*,” she said, gesturing to the adults. She then had a notion and removed her lab coat. “Father makes me put my hair up when I visit.” Unfastening a brass hair clip, her ginger locks cascaded to her shoulders, making no visible impression on Sebastian, at least not in the way she intended. Rather than calm the little one, it had the opposite effect—he began to shriek and twirl in circles, a gorilla tantrum. And then, a miracle—the clouds overhead suddenly parted and light filled the habitat, but more importantly, the drumming stopped. A ray of sunlight stabbed through the dome, highlighting Coral’s hair, a haloed Pre-Raphaelite angel. Awed, Sebastian froze, mouth agape. After a moment, he gave the girl a deferential nod, not unlike a bow.

“Sebastian, do you think *I* did that?” Coral puzzled out. Then she remembered to sign. “Do you think I stopped the rain? What a strange creature I must be to you.”

Sebastian watched her hand movements and hesitated before cautiously poking her, as if expecting some kind of shock. When nothing of the sort happened, he timidly took her hand in his own. Before leaving, she gifted the young ape a child-sized blanket.

Outside his office, a double-wide trailer nestled among a copse of conifers a short distance from the habitat, Gordon escorted his daughter to a waiting taxi. Although the doctor often spent nights in his office, he kept an apartment in the city. It was not unusual that after her frequent visits she was sent home alone. Coral had long grown accustomed to being a latchkey kid. It had been that way since her mother’s untimely death in an automobile accident eighteen months before. Most days when she awoke, her father had already left for his teaching and research position at the Center. On school days, a live-in nanny prepared her evening meal and saw to it that she minded her homework. It was the trusted nanny who the previous night had acted the role of tooth fairy, placing a roll of quarters and a card (“Hey, I heard you lost another tooth. Congratulations!”), written by her father, but signed “the tooth fairy,” under her pillow while she slept, to be found that morning when she arose, by which time her father was typically gone.

“Why is his name Sebastian?”

“A very good question, and I’m glad you asked. It means the most amazing being ever, or let’s pretend it does.”

“That must mean he’s the G.O.A.T.” She thought for a moment. “What does Coral mean?”

“Your mother chose it. Google it, or haven’t you already done that thirty times? Would you have preferred Dimple? Or Pebble? Or Jingle-Bells?” Once, when Coral was six, her parents on a lark had allowed her to change her name. She chose Stephanie. By the end of the day, during which her classmates teased her as “Step-On-Me,” she had gone back to Coral.

“What’s wrong with Jingle-Bells?”

“I was being silly.”

There passed a moment of silence.

“What about *his* mother?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think he remembers her?”

“Of course he does.”

“I think I’m starting to forget.”

“I’ll help you not to.” Bending to her, Gordon cupped his daughter’s chin in his hands and tilted her face to his. This next was important. “I was proud of you today, Coral. Sebastian’s a long way from his home and he’s going to need a friend. I’d like it very much if that could be you. So, how do you feel about that?”

Coral beamed and nodded.

“I’m glad. And it’s a way for us to spend more time together.”

“Can’t you come home tonight, Daddy?”

Gordon shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I have too much to do before morning.”

“What happens then?”

“Surgery.”

It was nearly dark when Teddy drew down the cyclone fencing encasing the gazebo, sealing Sebastian inside for the night. “Around here, they’ve got heaven and hell reversed,” he said to the young ape. “Down here, this is heaven. And up there,” he gestured across the grounds to a circular granite monolith looming above the treetops, “—well, that would be hell.” Teddy was someone who enjoyed being the bearer of bad news. He secured a padlock to the fencing. Sebastian gave the lock a cautious sniff “So don’t fuck up,” he advised, giving the ape a light rap on the head with the iron pipe always at his side. Sebastian whimpered and hid beneath his blanket. Exiting the habitat, Teddy again locked the habitat door. He also enjoyed locking and unlocking things; it gave him a sense of power missing in his otherwise powerless life. Mounting the forklift, mumbling to himself, he drove away with the empty cage.

Somewhere, a hidden timer clicked, casting the habitat under simulated moonlight. Clutching the blanket, Sebastian peered off through the exterior bars. Wanting a better look, he mounted the hut, or cave, whatever you prefer. The woodlands surrounding the hillock sloped away on all sides, the treetops presenting an unbroken, uniform surface where, here and there, ribbons of road connected clearings where the scattered structures that comprised the Center basked in *true* moonlight, among them the towering granite monolith indicated by the custodian. Sebastian studied the grim edifice, the uppermost floor, the sixth to be exact, where light flickered in a tiny window, a beacon in the night. Hearing a faint but unmistakable animal scream, he quickly shimmied down and cowered in the shadows.

Now, something caught his eye. It lay at arm’s length on the ground just beyond the wire mesh. Sebastian reached through and drew it toward him. Glittering in the faux light, it was the little girl’s hair clip.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Half a world away the narrow iron bed in the remote jungle clinic squealed as Bunny adjusted his weight.

“Surgery—eighteen procedures in the first year alone,” said the silhouette behind the partition. “Twelve more in the year after that.” The voice paused, allowing himself a single puff on his cigarette. “Fourteen in the year after.”

Gordon stood beside an operating table where Sebastian lay strapped, insensate. A medical instrument, a pharyngoscope, its spaghetti-like lens inserted in his nostril, produced an image of Sebastian’s throat on a monitor. The doctor adjusted the eyepiece at the other end and peered down the tube.

At Gordon’s signal, two assistants unstrapped the ape, and then tucked their hands under his arms and legs. “One—two—on three,” said Gordon as they lifted and positioned him for X-rays. Some minutes later he tugged the gorilla’s tongue a few times, then checked the tracheal tube.

“Everything’s good,” said Gordon. He sat beside the ape to monitor his emergence from sedation. Soon, the ape’s toes and fingers began to twitch. Gordon gently removed the tube from his throat.

Away in Africa, the specter behind the partition had fallen silent.

Bunny waited.

A nightjar twittered somewhere in the surrounding jungle, then grew still.

He wondered whether he had drifted off to sleep and awakened to discover the speaker had left the ward. He was still not wholly convinced that the visitation had been no more than a mirage born of jungle fever.

The silhouette shifted. Wafting smoke from behind the partition confirmed that the visitor, even if only a hallucination, was still present.

“How much do you know about our primate brothers?”

Bunny returned a blank look, the simple answer being that he knew enough. He fancied himself an expert trapper—some might say a poacher of the vilest sort, and he could live with that, it was a good living—but beyond the threat of claws, fangs, or horns, the particulars of the prey were of little interest. But these things he did not say.

“They share 98% of their genes with us,” said the silhouette.

Another silence, then—“Between surgeries, the doctor attempted to teach Sebastian to speak. He picked up sign language almost effortlessly.”

In the gazebo, Gordon examined the ape’s open mouth with a penlight while Sebastian’s tutor cuddled him in her lap. She spoke after Gordon had finished. “Muh—Muh—Muh—as in mother, as in money, and also, as in man. Sebastian?”

Sebastian watched her lips move, but didn’t speak. Instead, he signed. The tutor shook her head. “No, Sebastian. I know you can sign it. Fuh—Fuh—Fuh—as in father, as in family, as in fire. Sebastian. Fire.”

Sebastian signed, then flipped her the finger. The tutor shook her head. “Where in the world did he learn that?” she asked.

Gordon shrugged but suspected the obscene gesture had likely been picked up from Teddy.

“Throughout this period, Sebastian, of course, had no knowledge of the wretched life allotted to his half-brother Lex, that of a lab animal and all that implied. Had Sebastian known where to look, he would have found him enduring all manner of indignities, often accompanied by considerable pain. While Sebastian cavorted in his habitat, gorging himself on delicious fruits and vegetables and ice cream for desert and basked in the affection of his new family, Lex might well be caged in a brightly lit room somewhere in the bowels of that grim monolith, sitting before a toy piano, electrodes affixed to his shaved skull, fingers eerily twitching as they tapped out a rough approximation of the *Moonlight Sonata* while graphs and monitors recorded the performance.

All this the specter behind the partition shared with Bunny, who still wondered whether the disembodied voice was speaking to him in a dream.

Coral, in a bathing suit, clung tight to Sebastian’s back. They were ascending the shimmering escarpment, the central feature of Sebastian’s habitat. Gordon had explained that the boulders contained feldspar, a kind of crystal that sparkled in the sun. She had begun to call it her Big Rock Candy Mountain. Her father had taken to calling it Shangri-La, a word he said was used to describe a place of great harmony.

“What’s harmony?” she’d asked.

“Peace and happiness.”

Sebastian climbed effortlessly, using both hands and feet, intoxicated in his element. He cut loose with the gorilla version of a laugh—a sort of guttural snort. Coral also laughed. She, too, sounded like a gorilla. Having reached the highest point beside the waterfall, she somersaulted into the refreshing pool far below.

“Come on, big baby!” she dared the reluctant gorilla.

Sebastian hesitated, placed an arm over his eyes, and followed her lead.

Such were their weekends, holidays and summers.

When not frolicking in Sebastian’s habitat, he and Coral enjoyed the freedom of roaming the park-like grounds, climbing their favorite trees, swimming in the nearby lake, picnicking in a summer meadow, or whiling away their afternoons on a tire swing suspended from a solitary elm. In winters they tobogganed on the white clad slopes, Sebastian insisting they do it again and again, Coral’s laughter carrying to Gordon ensconced in the trailer. One year, on the day called Halloween, Coral transformed herself into a fairy princess, Sebastian into someone she called “Batman,” though even her considerable skill at signing in no way helped to convey the lore behind the rubber mask and cape. The day of Sebastian’s arrival at the Center was declared his birthday, the private party for three always sure to include cake and ice cream, paper horns, hats, and balloons. Turning three, Sebastian’s presents included a sock monkey Coral named Fifi, and the following year, a tee shirt displaying the words ‘Monkey Business,’ and the next, a toy concertina. Throughout this time, Coral saved a portion of her allowance and made an annual donation to the Jane Goodall Institute, an irony considering the circumstances under with the primate had entered their lives. Rainy afternoons were spent in Gordon’s trailer office, likely as not a Tarzan movie in the CD player, *Tarzan and the Amazons* being their favorite. Cheetah and Weissmuller never failed to daze, amaze, and amuse. For her thirteenth birthday, Coral asked that she be allowed to spend an entire night in the habitat. After some consideration, Gordon allowed it, the girl and the gorilla nestled side by side, she in a sleeping bag, he beneath the blanket she had early on gifted him, while Lex, less than a mile distant, suffered the slings and arrows of sheer ill luck.

### CHAPTER NINE

Seven years had passed and Gordon was now a changed man. The strain and pressure of producing viable results had taken their toll. Most of his hair was gone, and what was left had turned to silver gray. He stood before Leland Massey and a dozen colleagues seated around a conference table. Behind Gordon, a light wall was covered with X-rays.

“At the age of seven, Sebastian is now fully grown, the equivalent of a sixteen-or-seventeen-year-old young man. He stands just over five feet tall and weighs almost four hundred pounds.” Gordon pointed to an X-ray. “We’ve been chasing our tails keeping up with the changes in the size of his larynx cartilage, thyroid, and glottis. At long last, after more than fifty procedures, his voice organs are—human.”

Gordon observed his fellow researchers and saw them stifle yawns. A few were checking their watches.

He cleared his throat. “Sebastian now has a vocabulary of over six hundred words. EEGs show a pronounced increase in language center activity.”

Someone coughed and got up to leave. Two others quickly stood and followed.

“I feel his signing skills are stimulating his intelligence,” Gordon continued. “Language feeds and may even create the mind. We need to talk to ourselves to learn. Apparently, this is what Sebastian is doing. His IQ has doubled with every one hundred words and there is good evidence it is accelerating, while around me, I see that things are just the opposite.”

Gordon saw that Leland was now the only one left.

“We could quietly move him upstairs and that will be the end of it,” said Leland.

Gordon turned away and began to shake. It took a moment for Leland to realize he was laughing.

“What? What, Gordon?”

“I was thinking of the myth of the Fall. When man was banished from the Garden, he lost, among other things, his ability to speak with the animals.”

“Yes—?”

“Hundreds of thousands of years later and I’m the guy getting the blame.”

“You must admit, you make an easy target,” said Leland, as he rose and started out. “From now on, we keep the work between us. Until we have something, until we’re absolutely sure. Frankly, Gordon, it pains me to say you’re becoming a bit of an embarrassment.” Leland stopped and turned. “Have you heard the latest?”

“Can’t wait.”

“Where does a four-hundred-pound gorilla defecate?”

Gordon waited for the punchline.

“Why, on Gordon Obler’s career, of course.”

Leland took his leave. Left alone, Gordon began removing X-rays and shuffling papers.

Burdened by a dozen files and the weight of Leland Massey’s dire pronouncement, Gordon emerged from the conference room and slouched down the empty corridor. Passing the door leading to one of the Center’s several operating theaters, he heard laughter coming from within. He peeked through the small square window in the door.

A colleague stood before the full theater giving a lecture. Lex, who too was now fully grown, hunkered beside him, the ape’s shaved head connected to a profusion of multi-colored wires. The colleague manipulated Lex’s movements via a control console.

A spotlight followed Lex around the small stage as he performed a herky-jerky dance. Everyone clapped. The colleague adjusted a dial, whereupon Lex took a bow.

Gordon shook his head and moved on.

Coral, now a beautiful young woman of seventeen, placed a needle on a phonograph record, *Claire du Lune*, Chopin’s piano waltz, curtsied and extended a hand to her partner. There came a loud thud, thud, thud as he lumbered across the floor. The thin walls vibrated. The linoleum creaked. An immense black arm, all muscles and hair, accepted the hand. Shoulders like a plank, legs like living oak, arms like iron cranes, Sebastian could easily crush the life from her. Instead, he enveloped her gently in his burly arms. Together they performed what passed for a waltz, Coral all smiles and soft laughter, Sebastian cumbersome but doing his best to follow her lead. The music ended. She curtsied again. He bowed.

Someone applauded. Glancing across Gordon’s office, they saw he had been watching.

Afterward, Gordon and Sebastian walked Coral to a waiting taxi.

The ape climbed into the backseat. The taxi sank to one side.

“Funny,” said Coral.

Sebastian climbed out and Coral climbed in. Sebastian knuckle-walked to the cabby’s window and signed.

“He’s giving you the address. Twenty-two Beacon,” Gordon chuckled.

Sebastian signed again. “What’s he saying now?” asked the cabby, amused.

“He hates how I’m always sending my daughter away in a cab.”

“Actually, he’s calling you a thief,” said Coral.

The cabby was suddenly not so amused. He quickly rolled up the window and drove away. Sebastian bounded after them down the lane.

“Sebastian, stop!” Gordon ordered.

Sebastian stopped, rose to his full height, and appeared about to challenge the doctor.

“Sebastian! No!”

The great ape instantly adopted a subordinate posture and reluctantly returned to the doctor’s side. Together they returned to the habitat.

Shoulders sagging, Gordon wandered through the imitation jungle while Sebastian hunted for tasty bugs among the deadfall. The doctor bent to the pool at the base of the waterfall and splashed his face. Sebastian descended from the deadfall, approached, and signed.

“Home. Coral went to her home,” Gordon signed back.

Sebastian signed again.

“What’s that? You want to be a man?” The question was unexpected, catching Gordon off guard. He considered how best to answer. “Be careful what you wish for,” he cautioned, leading Sebastian to the gazebo as the ape began to sign again. “You want to be a man so you can come and go? No locks? That’s how it looks to you. But there are all kinds of locks, Sebastian.”

Sebastian signed again.

“So you can be with Coral?” Gordon interpreted.

Sebastian took Gordon’s hand.

“Hand lonely? No. I’m fine, Sebastian.”

He took a seat within the gazebo while Sebastian shuffled to a half-finished jigsaw puzzle and began haphazardly arranging the pieces, forcing square pegs into round holes, as it were. “Do you remember what it was like? Where you came from?” asked Gordon. “To be wild?”

Sebastian gave the questions some thought before signing his answer. Gordon read the signs. “World small—Simple—Like puzzle—Everything is a piece—Trees—Clouds—Water—Rocks—Father—Mother—Me—We—” He seemed unable to conjure just the right word—“sing together.”

“Hmmm, must be nice,” signed Gordon. He sighed and leaned back.

Sebastian mimicked Gordon’s sigh and also leaned back, the doctor and his patient side by side. Gordon scratched his nose. Sebastian scratched *his* nose. Gordon crossed his ankles. Sebastian crossed *his* ankles. Gordon folded his hands in his lap. Sebastian folded his hands in *his* lap. Something occurred to him and he signed again. Gordon read his hands. “My home—Your home—Thanks.” After a few moments, his eyes began to droop and he nodded off. Triggered by the change from day to night, the automatic timer kicked in, activating the effect of moonlight, casting the two into an unearthly glow. Across the grounds, a square of light in the single window in the top floor of the monolith sprang to life, then quickly went dark again, like a signal code, but even if it were a signal, it would have been meaningless to Sebastian; enough time had passed so that he no longer thought of his half-brother Lex. The silverback squatted before his friend, softly hooted, and lightly poked his knee. Gordon stirred but did not awaken.

Sebastian, in his own way, put one and one together: sleeping man plus opened door equaled escape.

Shortly afterward, Sebastian crouched in the deep shadows of a topiary peacock, one of a pair flanking a gated staff and delivery entrance, deciding his next move while observing a uniformed guard inside a kiosk. Soon, a vehicle approached. It was a pick-up truck, the bed loaded with empty animal cages. The gate swung wide and the truck drove through. Before it closed again, unseen by the guard, who had bent to some paperwork, Sebastian slipped past and out the gate.

A deserted lane wound through the dark, bucolic woodland where Sebastian knuckle-walked, sometimes along the grassy shoulder, sometimes in the middle of the lane. Perhaps Coral was somewhere nearby, he thought. Overhead, dappled starlight filtered through the canopy of interlocking branches. To one side, twin shafts of bright light sliced through the tightly packed trees, vanished, and suddenly appeared again from behind a sharp bend.

Too late to avoid what followed, the driver, a female staffer returning for the evening shift, saw the shape looming through the windshield, but knew it couldn’t possibly be what it appeared, more likely a bear, a young moose, or even a wolverine, which were not uncommon in the ample forests of southeast Minnesota, sometimes seen even in suburban yards. But was there ever a bear, moose, or wolverine with such a silvery sheen? More so, the creature appeared to shield its eyes against the glare of the headbeams before dashing into the forest. The car swerved off the lane, hurtled a short distance and struck a tree, not with any great force, but enough to buckle the hood. Hissing steam wafted from a tear in the radiator.

After a few moments, when the steam had begun to dissipate and it seemed safe, bear or moose, the creature having disappeared into the forest, no doubt as shaken by the near miss as she was, the driver cautiously climbed out to inspect the damage. Sensing a presence, she froze, and then, ever so slowly turned. Sebastian, who had been watching from behind the trunk of a thick tree, now hunkered in close proximity, his fingers hoping to communicate—possibly the human knew where to find Coral. The staffer began to shriek. Sebastian raised his arms to show that he meant no harm, but she was well beyond the point of reasoning with. “Oh my God—Oh my God—Oh my God,” she spluttered over and over as she wasted no time climbing back in the car and locked herself inside. Not yet dissuaded, Sebastian stood his ground. The door suddenly swung open again. The shoe she hurled bounced off his chest and was hardly felt, but now the ape was heartbroken and bewildered. He buried his face in his raised arms when a metal briefcase struck his nose.

Twenty minutes had passed since the ape’s escape. Now, a hedge outside the staff and delivery entrance rustled. Teddy, who happened to be inside the kiosk sharing a dirty joke with the guard, thought he saw movement. The gate parted and Teddy stepped through. He listened, tapping the ever-present pipe in his palm, then listened some more. Seeing nothing, he was about to turn back when Sebastian suddenly rushed past onto the Center grounds.

Teddy’s heart nearly stopped, then quickly recovered. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Sebastian, who feared Teddy, but was torn between the voice of authority and saving himself a great deal of hurt, froze and turned to face him.

“Bad boy, Sebastian. Can you say that? Can you say, ‘I’m a bad, bad boy?’” Teddy barked as he approached.

Sebastian cowered.

“No? Well, my pipe can,” said Teddy. So saying, he walloped Sebastian across his already bloody nose.

### CHAPTER TEN

Several days had passed when Coral hurried into Gordon’s office and found him slumped in the only remaining chair. Almost everything else had been cleared out. All that remained were a bank of monitors that two lab assistants were in the process dismantling. Images of Sebastian in his habitat flickered and vanished from the screens as they went dark, one by one.

“They say there’s better security upstairs on the sixth floor,” Gordon said morosely, anticipating her question.

“What are they going to do to him?” asked Coral, distraught because she had already guessed the answer.

“Sebastian’s a lab animal, after all.”

“No, he isn’t. Don’t say that.”

“I’m sorry, Coral. What happened is—I failed.”

But she had already fled.

Coral, who had long ago been given her own key, which she wore on a thong around her neck, approached the gazebo, putting on a false face, hoping to mask her grief.

“Hello, Sebastian.”

She found him hunkered on a mattress of withered leaves. His nose was still swollen from Teddy’s blow. He signed a question.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” Coral replied.

Suddenly, she could no longer maintain her carefree air and began to fight back tears.

“You shouldn’t have tried to run away, Sebastian.” She tried to compose herself. “I have something to tell you. It’s not something good.” But now, neither signing nor the words she intended would come.

“Time to say bye-bye, Sebastian.” It was Teddy’s voice from outside the habitat. Startled, the two saw the custodian dismounting a forklift bearing a gorilla-sized cage.

Coral panicked. “No! Don’t you dare! Go away! Go away!” she shouted.

Teddy entered the habitat and approached the gazebo where Coral and Sebastian had retreated. Poking his head inside, he began to threaten with his pipe. “Just doing my job, Coral.” He turned to Sebastian. “Come on, Sebastian.”

Coral rushed the intruder, but he deflected her charge. Sebastian lunged, grabbed Teddy’s arm, and hurled him across the gazebo. He struck a stump, rolled and quivered, fearing for his life as the Silverback towered over him—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*. Teddy scuttled toward the entrance, then suddenly was on his feet, backing away while groping in his pocket. Sebastian lumbered closer, still thumping his chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*. Teddy revealed a cigarette lighter, flicked it, and extended the flame. “Back now—Back—Tell him,” threatened Teddy.

“Sebastian, don’t hurt him!” begged Coral.

Sebastian appeared momentarily alarmed by the flame, then grabbed Teddy’s hand and began to squeeze. The lighter exploded, engulfing the custodian’s fist in a burst of fire. Sebastian loosened his grip and withdrew.

Screaming in pain and waving his blazing arm, Teddy dove onto Sebastian’s blanket and snuffed the flames.

Coral, always fearful of Teddy, but also being of kind heart, and assuming the custodian had lost the will to fight, lowered her guard and bent to him. Without warning, his good hand whipped out and snatched the key from around her neck. Coral grabbed for it, but too late, Teddy had staggered to his feet and begun to back away, taunting with the dangling key.

“Why don’t you wait here, how’s that sound? I’ll be back soon,” he panted. He quickly retreated and, using his good hand, with some difficulty locked the habitat door, trapping the two inside.

“Fine, come back. But he’s not going anywhere. You’re not taking him!” Coral shouted as Teddy mounted the forklift and fled. She turned to Sebastian. “Oh, Sebastian, Sebastian. You shouldn’t have done that.”

The ape gathered her in his powerful arms to comfort her, then suddenly jerked his head aside, sensing something was terribly wrong. The blanket had begun to smolder. Wrinkled leaves and dead twigs began to ignite. Coral, too, saw the danger. Smoke was clouding the habitat with alarming speed.

She tried to force the iron bars, but it was no use. “Help! Someone help! Fire! Fire! Help! Fire! Fire!” she screamed. She turned to the gorilla. “Sebastian, can you open it?” There was no need to sign.

Sebastian repeatedly slammed his great weight against the mesh, but it held fast.

“Help! Someone, help! Fire! Fire! Help! Fire! Someone, please!” Coral continued to scream.

Lost in misery, Gordon, unaware of what was happening only a short distance away, watched as the lab assistants wheeled out the last monitor.

Trapped within the smoldering habitat, gasping, Coral sank to the ground and sucked down the thin layer of air there. Sebastian saw she was on the point of collapse. She peered up at him. “I’m afraid—” she whispered, her words barely audible.

Sebastian looked around. Flames were spreading on every side. He began a low, guttural grunt, building to a tremendous shriek. Pounding his heaving chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*, he strode about the habitat in a growing panic, his grunts fading to a whimper.

Then, an idea occurred. Mounting the escarpment, he hauled himself to the upper reaches. There, using his powerful forearms he hammered the domed glass, again and again, until the first crack appeared, then, again until the ceiling shattered in an avalanche of shards.

The great ape rose through the jagged opening, stood erect, and inhaled the clean night air. An inhuman howl surged past his larynx, rising through his vocal cords, transforming into a melodic, singsong wail. And now, his mouth contorted. “Fuh—Fuh—Fuh.” The sound suddenly erupted into “FIRRRRRRRRE!”

He filled his lungs again.

“FIRRRRRRRRE!”

Gordon, hearing the disturbing, primordial cry, bolted from his trance. Never had he heard anything remotely like it. Springing from his chair, he bolted from the office. Sooty smoke billowed from the nearby hilltop. Ascending to the habitat, the lab assistants close behind, he saw the silhouetted Silverback protruding through the domed roof, the shaggy head thrown back, mouth stretched wide, canines barred, screaming “FIRRRRRRRRE!”

Gordon’s moment of triumph vanished in an instant.

“FIRRRRRRRRE!”

“Sebastian! Where is Coral? Sebastian! Climb down! Jump!”

But Sebastian was unable to hear.

Another heated pane exploded.

And another.

He peered down at the inferno.

Below, Gordon unlocked the habitat door, entered, and was immediately enveloped in swirling smoke. Fearing for their lives, the others lagged behind.

“Help—Fire—Help—” Coral coughed from somewhere in the smoke. With each cough her voice was slightly diminished, until it ceased altogether.

Gordon groped blindly while bursts of orange light flared, vanished, and flared again in the gray outline of the deadfall. Scorching heat seared his eyes, singed his nostrils, and blistered his lips. The limbs of unseen trees, like ghostly hands, grasped at his coat.

“Coral—My darling—”

The distant wail of an approaching fire truck, summoned by one of the assistants, rose above the sound of crackling flames.

Finally, the doctor’s hand brushed against human flesh. Grasping hands, father and daughter attained the exit, staggered from the habitat, and withdrew to a safe distance. There, Gordon eased her to the ground, tore off his lab coat, and snuffed out the flames lapping at her hem and sleeves.

“CORALLLLLLLL!”

They turned to the habitat.

WHOOOOOOOOSH!

The crackling deadfall imploded in a muffled roar, sucking Sebastian into the fiery furnace. There immediately followed a tremendous WHOOOOOOOMP, Gordon shielding his daughter with his body as a blast of flaming debris blew over them, denuded a pine, uprooted another, toppled the assistants, rocked the parked Rambler, and smashed several trailer windows, the sound so extreme that it carried to the heart of the Center.

Bunny Bull sat propped in his bed, even more alert now, if that was possible, facing the shadowy profile framed by afternoon light.

“What I’d really like is a cigar,” the shadow spoke, interrupting his tale. “You wouldn’t happen to have a cigar, would you?”

“I don’t understand. You—he—died?” Bunny said, ignoring the question.

The storyteller reached around for another cigarette. “Yes, in a manner of speaking. There was even a funeral. The doctor also died that day.” He paused to light the cigarette. “A part of him, in any case.” He took a puff. “His capacity for sound judgment perished.”

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

A steady drizzle disturbed the lake surface where Gordon and Coral sat in an antique motor launch. The launch reminded her of one she had seen in an old black and white movie, The African Queen. Once, on a rare occasion when Gordon allowed himself a day of leisure, he, Coral and Sebastian had motored upstream and camped along the shoreline. There, while father and daughter roasted marshmallows over a campfire and Sebastian devoured a cantaloupe, Gordon had explained that the lake was not really a lake, only a wide place in a river connecting to other rivers until it led to one of the truly Great Lakes, and from there to the ocean.

Coral was about to ask what lay beyond, but stopped in mid-sign because she already knew the answer—Africa—Sebastian’s true home. Gordon had guessed the question and quickly changed the subject, but it was too late. Sebastian’s mood had changed and he refused to eat. Gordon and Coral exchanged glances, each wondering how much the Silverback understood.

Now, aboard the launch on the rain-peppered lake, Coral opened a wooden box and scattered Sebastian’s ashes upon the surface.

“Hear it?” asked Gordon.

“What, Dad?”

“Their laughter.”

He nodded to where Leland and a handful of colleagues observed from a rickety wooden pier, their faces shielded beneath umbrellas. Behind them in the distance, the mock turrets and soaring chimneys of a cheerless stone mansion, which could easily be mistaken for a castle, were visible above the treetops.

“In his prime, he was considered a young man of great promise, without parallel among his peers,” the voice behind the screen continued after reaching around the partition to pour himself a glass of water from a chipped porcelain pitcher. “It was like a curse. Big things were expected. Now he looked back and was reminded that his wife was eight years in the grave, his little girl had grown into a young woman, and he was wearing clothes that were a dozen years out of style. The benchmarks of an auspicious career had not only failed to materialize, they were no longer expected. ‘Obler’s Folly’ became the new catchphrase of those who had mocked him. He was washed up. In time, he was forgotten.”

The shade stubbed out his cigarette, reached around the partition, and without asking helped himself to another.

“When she became of age, he sent his daughter away to attend a prestigious university in France; the École Normale Supérieure. She was accustomed to being pushed away, shut out of his life, but never quite so far. She had been raised in an artificial world, a test-tube universe created by her father. She was accustomed to strangeness—it was normal she had difficulty with. She spoke with him occasionally by Skype and email, but wasn’t to see him again for almost two years.

When she insisted on returning (there had been boyfriends, one in particular, an Italian poet, but no one who held her heart as tightly as she held her own), saying that it was time to renew their bond, Gordon tried to dissuade her, claiming that he had undertaken a special project and would have little time to spend with her (So what else is new, she thought), and refused to listen.

A taxi stopped at the entrance to a cobbled drive fronted by an ornate iron gate set between high, liver-colored walls.

“Why are we stopping?” asked Coral.

The cabby shrugged. “Because this is it.”

Tucked away like a secret among the dense trees bordering the lake edge, the multi-story, ivy-shrouded, eponymously named manor house of matching liver colored stone, faux battlements and keep, the whole now the epitome of picturesque decay, had formerly been the crowning jewel of a splendid, entirely charming country estate largely at odds with the world that existed just beyond the property.

She knew a little of its history from one of her father’s infrequent letters, the mansion (a summer residence), its building stones fashioned in a Gothenburg, Swedish factory, and surrounding grounds having originally belonged to a turn-of-the-century lumber baron, Viktor Gothenburg, an immigrant of Swedish ancestry. (It was not quite a castle, but close enough, lacking only a drawbridge and moat, yet in the state historical guides it was listed as such: Gothenburg Castle. Locals, the few who knew of it, referred to it as “the pile”). Long after Viktor’s death, and many decades after its tenure as a public arboretum, a surviving great granddaughter had gifted the property to the Center, although it was doubtful the benefactor understood the facility’s true purpose.

Having paid the driver, Coral passed through the unlocked gate and dragged her luggage up the drive. The blue Samsonite contained a trove of books, mostly French romantic novels in the original by Flaubert, Zola, and Proust, among others. There was also a gift for her father, a small plaster bust of the naturalist Charles Darwin, a token indicating she was not oblivious to her own father’s worth. The yellow, a canvas 4-wheeler, unwieldy because of a broken wheel, was packed with clothes and toiletries.

Her father’s old Rambler station wagon stood visible through the open doors of what had once been a carriage barn. Approaching the main house, she heard a low hum and assumed it to be a generator. Below a wide, wrap-around portico, the drive circled the empty basin of a sculpted three-tier fountain, surmounted by a Norse goddess in better days pouring water from a bronze amphora. Attached to the house was a conservatory. It had once been a place for the cultivation of herbs, exotic ferns, and homegrown citrus, but now its former purpose was supplanted with brambles, wild roses, and early summer wildflowers. The mossy boughs of an ancient oak had grown through the glass ceiling, shattering the steeply pitched panes, its canopy overarching the castle that was not a castle’s many-gabled roof. She was reminded of Sebastian’s former habitat. Looking up, she thought she saw movement behind the curved window of a conical turret apparent through the branches.

She still wasn’t sure she’d come to the right place, but it was the address she had been given, which was really no address at all. So, this is it, she thought, recalling the cabby’s words: a sprawling, down on its luck manor house on the extreme periphery of the Research Center. According to another of her father’s letters, he had kept their apartment in the city but rarely spent time there. In fact, he rarely ventured out during the years since she had last seen him. Groceries and other necessities were delivered once a month from the city.

So, it begins again, she also thought. She only truly believed, when, looking back through the gate, she saw the old motor launch still moored to the pier, the place where they had scattered Sebastian’s ashes, as one of Gordon’s letters had also reminded her.

Mounting the portico, she thumped the patinated, dragon-headed door knocker. There was no answer. She thumped again.

“Hello—Dad—Anybody—?”

Her third attempt brought the same result.

“Hello—Hello—Hello—?”

Defeated, she turned to leave, regretting that she had already dismissed the taxi.

Behind her, the door creaked open.

Craning her neck, she peered inside.

“Hey—Hello—Anyone?”

No one appeared or answered.

She crossed the threshold into a grand foyer of impressive woodwork and decorative tile flooring. Her footsteps echoed as she entered the first room to her right.

“Dad—?”

There were few furnishings. A massive stone fireplace flanked by sculpted marble griffins dominated the living room. A tapestry depicted medieval bowmen hunting wild boar and stag. A stuffed moose stood in a far-off corner, its antlers netted in cobwebs. A wide, tapering staircase wound to the upper floors. On the opposite side of the foyer, a room equally large, housing only a vintage French billiards table. Two cues, one heavily taped as if it had recently snapped in two, lay across a tightly packed triangle of multicolored ivory balls. Such was the former elegance of the place that, had a liveried, dour-faced butler materialized to greet her, she would not have been surprised. Out of idle curiosity she opened a closet and found it crammed with a variety of mirrors, the very idea of it very strange.

Hearing footsteps not her own, nor those of a butler, she turned and saw her father standing at the foot of the stairs, a bottle of window cleaner in one hand, a dust rag draped over his shoulder.

“Coral—?”

She quickly crossed to him and kissed his cheek, tagging his collar with her lipstick. “Ooops, gotcha,” she laughed nervously as she wiped away the smudge.

Gordon soaked up the prodigal daughter standing before him.

“I was preparing one of the guest rooms,” he then said. “I think you’ll find it comfortable. After I’ve pruned some branches, you’ll have a good view of the lake.”

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

The formal dining room, illuminated by a single cobwebbed chandelier, even though a third of its constellation of vintage bulbs had burned out long ago, cast its yellow glow upon the empty chairs arranged around a vast mahogany tabletop, which could easily have seated two-dozen, and no doubt frequently had, a century before Gordon took possession. Fabric wallpaper (interlaced acorns and antlers), in the Victorian style of the English textile designer William Morris, decorated the cavernous room. It was early evening and the Oblers were eating the supper Gordon had prepared for his daughter’s arrival. Their plates, cups, and saucers were vintage Wedgewood China, their utensils of silver and bone. The only thing missing to flesh out the Gothic ambience was a pair of candelabra. Again, Coral half expected the arrival of a butler to serve them.

Contrary to what Gordon believed in the first bleak days following Sebastian’s fiery death, Leland Massey, an ardent supporter of genius, no matter how misguided, had *not* been laughing, and still had the utmost confidence in the doctor, believing he was yet capable of good work, and interesting, if not always groundbreaking results.

It was Leland who had arranged that the manor, long shuttered and empty, be placed at Gordon’s disposal, a place to further his experiments. This time, however, it would be out of sight of his colleagues, so as not to embarrass the Center, should there ever be another unfortunate “incident.” Leland, who had considerable clout, had also agreed to continue to fund the doctor’s work, exerting his authority whenever necessary, until such time when Gordon was ready to share his results. Gordon found the situation ideal, allowing him to work in privacy, free to pursue his passions, and long stretches passed during which Leland appeared to have forgotten that the doctor was even in his employ.

All this and more Gordon related during their supper.

“His name is Joseph Young,” Gordon began again. He took a sip of wine, thinking how best to extend his tale.

“And you keep him locked and chained in the basement?” asked Coral in an accusing tone.

Gordon stalled. He took another sip.

“No one’s chained. I keep him secluded because he feels more secure that way. For now, think of Joseph as the mouse behind the wall. You may occasionally hear him, but you’ll never see him.”

“Why isn’t he in a hospital?”

“He was. After the accident.”

“And—?”

“He had a need to disappear. He’s my patient, Coral. It’s really not ethical for me to answer any more questions. Please try to understand.”

They ate in uncomfortable silence for some minutes, Gordon hoping he had put her questions to rest.

“What *kind* of accident?”

He took another sip, his way of ignoring her question. “I still have our place in the city,” he reminded her. “Or I could lease you an apartment,” he added, already having second thoughts about his daughter’s presence, what had he been thinking?

Coral dabbed her mouth with a napkin and slowly shook her head. “No way, Dad. Not a chance.”

They didn’t speak much after that.

Late in the evening, Gordon led the way up the staircase to a third-floor guest room. Lagging behind on the second floor, Coral passed the door to her father’s study. Compared to what she had seen of the rest of the rambling mansion (Gordon had already given her a brief tour of the ground floor rooms: a library devoid of books, the billiards and also a music room, parlor, octagonal sitting room, nursery, maid’s quarters, kitchen and scullery, and numerous nooks), her father’s sanctum was a depository for what the rest of the house lacked. The door was slightly ajar, enough for her to glimpse a roll top desk buried under drifts of documents. A chaise lounge sat smothered beneath mounded files. Overflowing cabinets teetered under the weight of leather volumes. An imaging device and light boards illuminated X-rays of human and animal anatomy. Unseen by Coral, a vintage rocking horse, the kind of treasure sometimes seen on TV on the *Antiques Roadshow*, sat in a corner, concealed beneath a child’s blanket, its edges charred, as if it had been salvaged from a fire.

She caught up to him and continued the ascent to the third floor.

Gordon ushered her into the guestroom. She knew from its circular walls that it was situated in the turret she had noted when first approaching the house. Coral placed her suitcase on the curtained four-poster and took in the quaint room. French doors opened to an ample balcony, and beyond, the old oak glimpsed in the conservatory. In winter, when the leaves were gone, it would be easy to see the lake.

“Let me know if there’s anything you need,” said Gordon before descending to his study, where he locked the door behind him.

Toward midnight, having again locked his study, he returned to the ground floor, and from there to the basement.

Arriving at the bottom of a flight of wooden stairs, he took a slender chain from around his neck. The solitary key dangling from it fit a padlocked, steel reinforced fire door. (You may recall that Coral, too, had once worn a key around her neck, in happier times when she was free to come and go, visiting Sebastian as she pleased). Beyond, after a short, narrow passage, he came to a second door. Here, using the same key, he unlocked a sequence of deadbolts.

Gordon entered the basement. One’s first impression was that of having entered a dungeon. The walls and ceiling were of black stone. The manor had had many years to settle, and the foundation was slightly askew. A glass-fronted medicine cabinet, its shelves lined with varicolored vials and bottled fluids, stood against a wall. The doctor secured a surgical mask to his face and scrubbed his hands in a pristine sink. Pouring pills from a half-dozen of the vials, he placed them on a tray. A drawer contained syringes and packaged needles. Gordon drew fluid into a syringe and added it to the tray.

Across the room, entirely unexpected, stood a glowing glass cube. It appeared to be about the size of a hospital room, the frosted glass rectangle rising nearly to the ceiling.

Carrying the tray, Gordon stepped to a glass door set in the box, opened it, and stepped inside. The sound of hissing oxygen infused the germ-free environment, where a dark, naked shape lay on a hospital bed. Gordon turned off the small television suspended overhead. A toilet and tub stood in one corner, a walker and wheelchair in another. He pressed a button on a control panel, bringing the patient into upright chair position.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The patient’s clean-shaven face appeared to be that of a man—and yet, not quite—beneath the massive, domed head, a single, overarching brow, like a stone arch, shadowed dark brown eyes, while the broad, flat nose was almost on a plane with the sloping face. The lips were of a pinkish gray color.

“Any pain today, Sebastian?”

The voice that answered was off-kilter, but clearly human. “Feel—today—good.”

“See if you can squeeze my hand now.”

“Hand lonely—?”

Sebastian took the doctor’s hand and squeezed.

“Good. You can let go now, Sebastian.” Sebastian released his grip. “Very, very good,” said Gordon, wincing as he flexed his fingers. “Are you ready for your medicine?”

“Yes, ready.”

The doctor extended the tray and Sebastian bent to slurp it.

“Don’t slurp, Sebastian, and remember to use your hands, your fingers.”

The ape-man’s stubby fingers loaded the pills into his mouth.

Gordon poured water from a bedside pitcher into a plastic tumbler, the tumbler wrapped in a cozy so that he was unable to see his reflection.

Grasping the tumbler in both hands, Sebastian drank.

“Just one more thing,” said Gordon, indicating the syringe.

Sebastian turned to present his shoulder, then drew away.

“Don’t be a baby,” said Gordon in a soothing voice.

“Coral call me big baby.”

“Did she now? When was that?”

“When jump and swim.”

The memory caused him to relax a bit.

The doctor delivered the shot, then gently rubbed the affected area.

“Now, are you ready to take a little walk?” asked Gordon. He motioned to the walker.

“Yes.”

Gordon helped steady the ape-man as he grasped the walker. He no longer resembled an ape and could easily be mistaken for a human accident victim after years of skin grafts and successful plastic surgery. His bone structure, both face and body, had been largely reconstructed. The healing was still a work in progress, the skin stretched a little too tight, and there were patches of off coloring, making his race indeterminate. His muscular arms were now almost proportionate with those of a human, while his short legs remained those of a mountain gorilla. His paunch was still larger than his barrel chest. His only simian traits were now his mannerisms, not his appearance. For all intents and purposes, Sebastian was now a human on the outside, an ape on the inside.

“Careful,” said Gordon. “Remember, the accident changed things. Your legs and arms were broken many times, in many places. Some of the bones and cartilage have been replaced by other materials.”

Sebastian had no idea what Gordon meant by “bones,” “cartilage,” and “materials,” but the voice was calm and reassuring, which was all that mattered.

Whoosh. The glass door’s seal was broken again. Wisps of vapor escaped. Shrouded in mist, Sebastian’s slightly stooped form clumped into the dim room.

“Tell it again, Gordon,” said Sebastian.

“The fire also damaged your spine,” Gordon explained. “It fused some of your vertebrae. You won’t be as flexible now. I know you don’t understand any of this, but there’s a reason your body feels so strange, so don’t be afraid.”

“Different after ‘accent,’ I know,” said Sebastian. He slowly began to straighten. Gordon stood back as Sebastian hobbled about the room. He began to sniff and swing his head from side to side.

“What is—?”

“What, Sebastian?”

“Here,” said Sebastian, sniffing Gordon’s collar. “Coral?” he asked in a soft, bewildered whisper. He examined the lipstick smudge more closely—“Coral’s lips.”

“I promised you’d see her again. Didn’t I promise?”

“Yes. When ready. When sure.”

“That’s correct. When we’re sure you’re ready. We’ll show them, Sebastian. We’ll show them all. Coral will be very proud.”

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Coral climbed behind the wheel of the Rambler as Gordon stood by. “We take a walk every afternoon. Knowing you were around would make him rather self-conscious,” he said.

“Fine, fine, you’ve already explained,” she said, not sounding fine. “I’ll find something to do, maybe see a film in the city. See you—whenever.” She drove off, disappearing through the gate.

Back in the basement, Gordon assisted Sebastian into a too tight overcoat over a shirt, pants and suspenders. The ape-man convulsed with ape-like guffaws, all the while scratching himself.

“Don’t scratch,” instructed Gordon. “And stand up straight.”

“Gordon’s clothes—don’t spill—don’t spill—”

“Not my clothes. Mine would never be able to fit. I bought them for you.” He had, at a Good Will shop on one of his infrequent trips to the city.

Sebastian fiddled with his crotch. Thick leather gloves encased his hands.

“Put your hands in your pockets.”

Gordon guided Sebastian’s hands to his pockets.

“Bags in pants,” said Sebastian, marveling at the remarkable concept.

They had been through the dressing ritual many times, a prelude to their daily walks, but the idea of wearing human clothes never ceased to amuse the ape-man.

Gordon placed a broad brimmed hat on Sebastian’s head, casting his face in shadow. The hats high bowl served to accommodate and conceal the patient’s looming skull.

Sebastian chuckled. “Bag on head.”

“It’s a hat. *Your* hat. *Your* clothes.”

The thought of owning his very own human clothes made Sebastian cackle. “Gordon funny.”

Sebastian mounted the basement stairs with slow, heavy footfalls, his great weight causing the wooden steps to creak and bow. His boots squeaked.

“Bag on head. Okay. Bags in pants. Okay. Bag on foot. No.”

Halfway up he stopped, adopted a boyish pout, and stomped his feet, causing the steps to tremble even more so. He looked to the top of the landing where Gordon was waiting.

“They’re boots, Sebastian. Let’s go.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, suddenly dropped to all fours, and clumped to the top of the stairs.

“No, Sebastian. Stand erect. Like a man,” Gordon admonished him.

Upstairs, the two stepped onto the portico. Sebastian sucked down the fresh air, as if the outside world were made of freshly baked banana bread, one of his favorite things to eat. Gordon shot him a “ready?” look. Sebastian nodded.

Together they descended the steps.

“She is where? Coral?” asked Sebastian as they started down the short driveway to the gate.

“Out.”

But Sebastian sensed she was considerably closer.

True, earlier Coral had driven off in the Rambler, but unknown to Gordon, she had parked the car a quarter mile in the opposite direction of their daily walks, then returned to the manor, slipping inside unseen. She now stood watching from her third-floor balcony doors, concealed behind a screen of leafy boughs, well out of earshot, but able to glimpse her father and his mysterious patient, Joseph Young.

Below, the two passed through the gate.

Their frequent outings included a stroll through the nearby forest, something Sebastian especially looked forward to.

“Any pain today?” asked Gordon.

“Feet.”

Crossing a meadow, they stopped beside a clear, clean pool of standing water. An old, grizzled muskrat, who had seen much in the meadow, but never before an erect bear in human clothes, observed them from across the pool.

“I haven’t told you everything about your condition,” said Gordon.

“Okay,” said Sebastian. A dragonfly had briefly settled on his shoulder before zipping off.

“I’m going to tell you the rest now.”

“Okay.”

Gordon placed an arm on Sebastian’s elbow and nodded to the pool. Its surface mirrored the flawless sky.

“Drink?” asked Sebastian.

Gordon nodded.

Sebastian obeyed and crouched ape-like.

“First close your eyes,” said Gordon.

Sebastian closed his eyes.

“Go on.”

He lapped the cool water.

“Now open them.”

When he opened them, there was now the wavery approximation of a man, causing him to gasp and fall back on his rump. “Gordon—?”

“Look again.”

Bracing himself, Sebastian crawled to the pool and observed its rippling surface, waiting for it to settle. Finally, the water became still, again reflecting his unnervingly human face. Warily, he looked around as if there might be someone peering over his shoulder. He turned back to the pool.

“This—this—man—me?”

“That is your hat. Those are your clothes. And that is your face.”

When looking ahead to this moment, Gordon had hoped for the best, but was entirely unsure how his patient would react. Sebastian knew himself from the neck down to be a changed thing, but Gordon having seen to it that there were no mirrors in the house, the shock of seeing such a facial transformation might cause him to—what exactly, how *would* he react? At first, Sebastian was stunned, and it appeared he was about to cry, but there were no tears. His face contorted into what may have been a wince, then dissolved into a broad smile—one of overwhelming joy. Fairly leaping at Gordon, he planted a slobbery kiss on his neck, causing him to stumble back. Then, sinking to his knees, he began to lick the doctor’s hand, as if he were the Maker Himself. He crawled back to the pool and studied his reflection anew.

“This man me?”

“That’s right, Sebastian. I’ve granted you your wish.”

Afterward, when walking back across the meadow to the manor house, this exchange took place: “When day come to see Coral again, it okay to sign?” Sebastian asked.

“No, no, no,” said Gordon. He stopped with the rooftops of the manor house in view and turned to face Sebastian. “It most definitely is not okay. I’ve already explained and it’s very, very important that you understand. Now, *do* you understand?”

Sebastian eyed a caterpillar inching along a stem of meadow grass.

“Are you listening?” asked Gordon.

Sebastian turned back to Gordon. “Gordon talk, I listen.”

“Good. You and I, we’re going to be famous.”

“Why not okay to sign?”

“Because it’s no longer necessary. Speak only with your mouth and with your new voice, the way we’re speaking now.”

“Okay, Sebastian remember.”

“No, not Sebastian. Ever since the accident, you’re Joseph, since that time, always Joseph. We’ve been over and over this. Earlier today, in fact.”

“What mean famous?”

“It means that together we share a secret, a wonderful, crazy, brilliant secret, and when we’re ready, we’ll share it with the world. Then there’ll be no more secrets and everyone will be very interested, very much so. Kings, queens, even presidents, will want to meet you.”

“Walt Disney want to meet me?”

Another of Sebastian’s favorite movies was *The Lion* *King*, one he had watched dozens of times. Gordon had told him a little about the magic kingdom, Mickey Mouse, and the jungle ride.

“I’m afraid Walt’s no longer around, but yes, I’m sure if he were, he’d also want to meet you.”

“Where he go?”

“He died.”

“How that happen?”

“I don’t remember.”

‘Mickey still alive?”

“I doubt Mickey will ever die.”

“How long?”

“Are you asking how long before we share our secret, or how long since Walt died?”

“How long before see Coral?”

‘Very, very soon now, I promise.”

They resumed walking and soon the manor gate came into view.

“Home sweet home. What would you like for supper?” asked Gordon.

“Peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

“That was lunch. Three days in a row.”

“Caterpillar sandwich.”

“Funny. You might talk *me* into it, but I doubt Coral would go along so easily. What about desert?”

“Caterpillar ice cream.”

“Figures.”

“What that mean?”

“It means that ice cream you shall have.”

They passed through the gate.

“Not forget to wipe feet before go inside,” Sebastian saying it, not Gordon.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A month had passed since Coral’s arrival and it was now early autumn.

Soon, another term at university would begin, but she had decided for the time being not to return. Her plans for the future were uncertain; she would bide her time and see what came her way. For one, there was still the matter of the enigmatic Joseph Young.

She lounged in the room she had begun to decorate and make her own, reading a book of French verse when Gordon knocked. “*Entrez*,” she said.

Gordon entered, grinning while concealing something behind his back. “How would you like to go to a party, Cinderella?” Showing what was hidden, he placed three boxes of varying sizes wrapped in pink bows on the bed. Opening them, the first contained a sleek black cocktail dress, the second a pair of matching shoes, the third a string of pearls.

Coral was delighted. “Only if you’ll be my date,” she said.

“I’m your chaperone. Joseph will be your date.”

An hour later, Coral descended the staircase, stunning in the ensemble and pearls, the red of her hair offset by her pitch-black dress, like sunrise perched above a dark night. Gordon, waiting at the bottom, wore a suit and bow tie, the first of either she had ever seen him wear. He nodded approvingly and lifted a finger, indicating he’d be right back.

Sebastian waited in the entrance hall. He was dressed identically to Gordon. The doctor straightened the bow tie and whispered in his ear. “This is going to be a very special night, Sebastian. We’ll be deceiving a lot of people. To deceive has many meanings, but one means to pretend. Later, they will all be very, very impressed with us. What do you say we start with Coral?”

Sebastian nodded and they started for the sitting room. Gordon placed a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

“Remember, all you have to do to be a man—is to act like one.”

“What I want most is to be like you,” said Sebastian, much like a child speaking to his father.

Coral looked over as they entered.

Sebastian froze and averted his eyes. Gordon gently prodded him forward.

“Coral, I’d like you to meet my good friend and patient—Joseph Young. Joseph, this is my daughter, Coral.”

Sebastian locked eyes with the vision in black and red. Irresistibly drawn to her, there was no way he could contain himself. He shuffled across the room, brushing against a chair and causing it to wobble, and enfolded her in his arms. Her feet left the ground as he lifted her in an ape hug.

“Joseph,” Gordon admonished. Then more forceful, “Joseph!”

Sebastian remembered the part he was playing and gently set her down. He looked away, ashamed.

Coral composed herself, rather wishing she hadn’t been the cause of his discomfiture.”

“Anyway, I’m glad this wicked man has finally allowed us to meet,” she said, trying to cast a better light on their awkward start.

“Say hello to Coral, Joseph. Go ahead.” Gordon’s voice had returned to a reassuring tone.

Sebastian attempted to speak but was unable to summon more than a throaty click.

“Joseph,” Gordon coached him.

“Joseph—Joseph—Joseph. I am Joseph,” Sebastian managed.

“How do you do?” Coral said sweetly. An unnamed instinct caused her to curtsy while offering her hand.

Sebastian stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor, another awkward rift in their introduction. His face disappeared behind the broad brim of his slanted hat.

“Well, then. The ice is broken,” said Gordon, making light of the moment.

Out in the carriage barn, they were about to climb in the Rambler.

“What’s up with the hat?” Coral asked her father.

“What hat?” asked Gordon, pretending not to have noticed.

“The hat, Dad, the hat.”

“I suppose you’ll have to ask him.”

“Joseph? I’m curious about your hat.”

“Hat keep head warm,” said Sebastian.

She decided to leave it at that.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gordon drove, following the weave of the lake road. He and Coral sat in front, Sebastian in back. It is unlikely there would have been room for more than one of him. The entire way his eyes were glued to the back of Coral’s neck, her soft pale flesh almost luminescent.

It took five minutes to arrive at their destination, still on the Center property.

One look and Coral was appalled.

“*This* is where the party is?” Gordon hadn’t mentioned where they were going, and she, wanting to be surprised, hadn’t asked.

“Please, Coral, not now. I need this night,” said Gordon, looking straight ahead, not willing to meet her eyes.

A valet stepped forward to open their doors. Due to Sebastian’s considerable bulk, the car tilted at a pronounced angle. When he climbed out, it righted itself again.

Sebastian peered around, taking in his former haunt.

Japanese lanterns strung from low trees bejeweled the grounds, their orange glow washing over the nearly one hundred smartly attired guests milling about. By far, the largest, most luminous lantern was the full moon. Liveried waiters bearing trays of enticing finger foods and glasses of champagne roamed among the assembly. Dozens of round tables draped in eggshell-colored tablecloths dotted the grounds, like miniature islands in an ocean of green. Each table featured a glorious arrangement of fresh cut flowers in cut glass vases. An all-female cello quartet entertained on a bandstand erected for the occasion. It being late in the year, and therefore a bit chilly, heat lamps had been strategically placed here and there.

Sebastian, made anxious by the sight of so many humans in one place at one time, tensed and reached for Gordon’s hand. The doctor drew away and shook his head “no.”

“Are we crashing this party?” Coral asked coolly.

“Actually, you were invited.” Turning to the voice, they saw it belonged to Leland Massey.

Sebastian had never before met the man, but was familiar with his voice. Sometimes, deep in the night, he overheard the two men talking on the portico. He stood nearby in a pool of light. “How are you, Gordon? Coral?”

Coral remembered the elegant gent from her frequent visits with her father during the years when she and Sebastian were inseparable.

“Welcome to our little fundraiser,” said Leland.

Coral gave a perfunctory nod and moved off. Sebastian was suddenly panic-stricken without her. Leland’s presence further distressed him.

“Leland. Wouldn’t miss it. Wouldn’t miss it,” said Gordon, offering his hand. “Would we, Joseph?”

“W—w—w—wouldn’t miss it,” was the best Joseph could muster.

Leland turned to the hulking figure. He gave a long, assessing look before he spoke again.

“How do you do? I’m Leland Massey.”

“This is Joseph Young. A patient,” said Gordon, placing a hand on Sebastian’s shoulder.

“So, you’re working. Good. Splendid,” said Leland.

“Oh, yes. I’m working,” Gordon replied. There was a subtle, conspiratorial undertone to their exchange, as if the two shared a secret.

“My dear doctor—I un—under—stand Gordon once worked for you.” The words came from Sebastian who, in the days preceding the event, had gone to great effort to prepare his speech.

“That’s correct,” Leland acknowledged.

“How did you ever let such a talented—talented man slip through your fingers?” Sebastian’s tone and inflection were nearly pitch perfect.

“Good question, Joseph,” Leland answered, adding a chuckle.

“Doctor, we’ll see you later, all right?” Gordon said, taking over.

Leland nodded and turned his attention to another guest.

Gordon and Sebastian wandered off.

“Did I say right?” asked Sebastian.

“Word for word. What a night, Sebastian,” Gordon said. “What a night.” He appeared to be walking on air.

Seeing a pair of former colleagues, Gordon steered Sebastian toward them. “And how are you gentlemen this evening?” asked Gordon.

The men nodded, not sure what to make of the hulking figure in the oversized, floppy hat.

“Shake hands, Joseph,” Gordon suggested.

Sebastian took one of the fellow’s hands in his own and squeezed. The man winced. The doctor waited impatiently for Sebastian to release the trapped hand. “You may let go now, Joseph.”

Sebastian quickly released his grip.

“Thank you, Joseph,” said Gordon.

Sebastian appeared about to shake the second man’s hand. Instead, he lightly patted the fellow’s balding head.

“No hair. You need bag on head,” Sebastian said matter-of-factly. The balding man puzzled out what had just happened.

“Joseph. Why don’t you go mingle,” Gordon instructed. He turned aside to his protégé and spoke in a low voice. “Watch people. Study them. Observe.”

Elsewhere on the grounds, Erhardt, the Great White Hunter who was once Sebastian’s captor, looking dashing in a tux and an eye patch, a recent addition—entertained a cluster of black attired beauties.

“A gorilla charge isn’t something you’re likely to soon forget,” he was saying. “You know something’s coming because of the smell, a musky barnyard smell—” He heard a sniffing sound and glanced around. Sebastian stood nearby, sniffing the air around the poacher.

“It appears you know a great deal about gorillas,” said one of the women.

“I should. I once went six rounds with a silverback,” Erhardt boasted.

Made uneasy, Sebastian listened discreetly, but was unaware of the momentous role the poacher had played in his life.

“Silverback?” the beauty questioned.

“Every troop, which can grow to twenty or more animals, has one, and only one, alpha male.” The poacher was eager to share his hands-on knowledge.

“Is this *troop* his family?” another beauty asked.

Sebastian continued to listen, not understanding a word of what was being discussed. Seeing the women nod, he likewise nodded.

“More like his harem,” Erhardt continued. “He has total authority over the females, and can get very violent to prove it. He fends off challenges from other groups—other silverbacks—finds food, disciplines the kids. When a young male reaches sexual maturity, he may try his luck with the old man, try to dethrone him. Sometimes it works, sometimes he gets his head handed to him.”

“What a man won’t do to get some,” the third beauty quipped.

The women giggled. Tilting his head to the light, Erhardt proudly displayed a wicked scar on his cheek. “I was almost handed *my* head once,” he said nonchalantly, like it was no big thing.

The women “oohed” and “ahhed.”

Sebastian mimicked them, likewise “oohing” and “ahhing.” “Handed my head,” he tittered in a childlike way. Now *that* was funny.

Erhardt looked at Sebastian as if having noticed him for the first time. Their eyes locked briefly before Sebastian averted his gaze.

It was time to explore.

Something occurred to him on his way to a large gaily-striped tent. He peered over his shoulder, eyeing Erhardt, who had resumed his act for the benefit of the beauties. The ape-man was suddenly wracked with a painful and distant memory, which left him momentarily paralyzed. He sniffed again, but could make no sense of his sudden distress. “Who is this man?” he spoke to himself.

A dapper couple turned to look at him. Realizing he had spoken out of turn, Sebastian quickly put his hand to his mouth and strode away.

Inside the tent, no one noticed as he picked at a centerpiece of fresh, succulent flowers. He chewed and swallowed an instant before one of the guests glanced his way. Observing guests loading their plates with food, he followed their example. His powerful fingers cracked the delicate plate. The sound was clearly audible above the low buzz of voices. Eyebrows were raised but no one spoke. He helped himself to a second plate, but it, too, snapped in two. He tried yet a third plate, holding it as daintily as he could. His tongue wiggled in the corner of his mouth as he tried to concentrate. He managed to load the plate and moved on. Observing guests picking at their food, he mimicked them. He took a bite of a chicken wing and dabbed his mouth with a napkin, something he had often seen Coral do when she, Gordon, and he dined together. Suddenly, he was appalled.

“What is this? Animal?” He sniffed the wing, tossed it, and spit out the half-chewed meat.

“Vegetarian, huh? Me too.”

Sebastian glanced across at the man with braided hair, who grinned and nodded in complicity. Sebastian affirmed the grin with one of his own and turned his back. “Must study. Must mingle,” he told himself.

Loading a plate with diced fruit and watching intimates socialize, he pretended to recognize someone and nodded in greeting. Seeing a man with a limp, he decided to follow, matching the limp. The man noticed, scowled, and hobbled off. Observing a couple seated on folding chairs, he also sat. The chair collapsed beneath his suited rump. He hit the ground hard, spilling food on his coat. People had begun to stare. Sebastian looked around helplessly.

Then, an angel in black appeared—

It was Coral, reaching down to help him to his feet.

“Oh, there you are,” she said, happy to see him.

Sebastian, in turn, had never been so happy to see anyone in his life. “Here I am.”

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Together they strolled away into a copse of trees. Moonlight filtered through the leafy boughs. Once, a tire swing had been here, but the swing was now long gone. Dark smudges against the blue-green surface, a wedge of black swans went about their business on the near side of the lake.

Coral was briefly reminded of the black swans the Empress Josephine had imported for her chateau at *Malmaison*, while her husband, the Emperor Napoleon, was away on campaign in Egypt, the chateau being a place Coral had visited when she was still in Paris.

She turned to Sebastian.

“Joseph, that man you were talking to—?”

“What man?”

“—when we first arrived. The man who runs this place? Do you know him? Is my father working for him?”

“Naughty girl.”

“Why? For asking a question?”

Sebastian nodded.

“Did Gordon say I was curious about you?”

Another nod.

“And he told you not to answer my questions?”

He nodded once more.

They stood beneath the roof of a solitary elm. Coral had become sad and silent. The tire swing of years ago was long gone.

“Coral sad?”

“A little bit, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Because I used to climb this tree.”

“Coral, with whom did you climb?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Trees are not sad alone.”

“An ape, actually.”

“An animal?”

“A smart animal.” She had turned away.

“What else did you do with this smart animal?”

“Oh, lots of things. We danced. Once.”

Sebastian offered his hand. “Coral, come.”

She hesitated.

“If you can dance with an animal, you can dance with me.”

Turning, she locked eyes with him, with ‘Joseph,’ and felt a little wobbly by what she saw. Sebastian? She quickly dismissed the thought as not being remotely possible. It had to be the moonlight, or reminiscing about days long past. “All right,” she said, clearing her head.

And so they danced, a clumsy affair at best, until Coral took the lead. She held him at arm’s length until he began to draw her close. She politely resisted.

Gordon stood at a distance, unseen, observing them with mixed emotion. Sebastian’s deep affection had already begun to concern him, and now, this evening, it was on full display.

The moon disappeared behind a bank of clouds, cloaking the couple in shadow. Sebastian was unable to see Coral’s face, but sensed she was weeping. “Coral crying?”

The memory of Sebastian had overwhelmed her.

“I’m sorry. I can’t be here,” she whispered. She broke away and disappeared through the trees.

The swans also took flight, their beating wings skimming the lake surface.

Sebastian’s heart was desolate. He stood alone beneath the elm. He peered around when he heard an approaching squeak. Soon, he saw Teddy approach, wheeling a squeaky cart on the cobbled path that wound through the area. The cart supported a cage swarming with fat white rats.

Sebastian’s distress turned to alarm. He backed away into the shadows, watching Teddy pass.

After a short time, he reluctantly returned to join the party. Teddy hadn’t spoken or looked in his direction when he passed, but he was afraid the ill-tempered custodian might have seen and recognized him.

He soon saw Teddy again, wheeling the now empty cage. This time he took courage and decided to follow. There was, after all, a score to settle, if the opportunity presented itself.

The path led to the dark, towering monolith that was the heart of the Center. Sebastian hung back, invisible in the shade of a tree, while Teddy unlocked a side door, and disappeared inside. After a moment, the ape-man emerged from the shadows and peered through the glass door, but there was nothing to be seen. He cracked the door and peered down a stark, empty corridor. Still not seeing anyone, he dared to enter.

The passage in which he found himself connected with another, then another, and another. The jungle forest, too, had its muddle of mazes, but an ape soon learned to distinguish between the trees, trails, and brooks, while here everything looked the same. His twitching nose sought a scent, something to guide him, but there was nothing to smell.

Soon he was lost.

Twinkling lights drew him to a lush evergreen of nearly his own height, tapered at the top and broad at the bottom, bedecked with shiny silver balls.

“Magic tree,” marveled Sebastian.

It was not the first time he had seen such an indoor tree. When he was still Sebastian, before the great change, when the weather changed, a time Gordon called “winter,” such a tree would appear in Gordon’s office. And always there were gaily-wrapped boxes at its base for Coral and him to open. His contained delicious fruits and vegetables, while Coral’s contained toys and clothes, and when she grew older, baubles and bangles which she wore around her neck and in her hair. Once, the kind doctor had presented him with a strange wooden creature, called a rocking horse. But here there were neither gaily-wrapped boxes nor a horse of any kind.

His reflection grew huge and distorted as he leaned toward one of the silver orbs. He made an open-mouthed grimace and quickly stepped back.

It was time to return to the party, to Gordon and Coral. By now, the good doctor would be looking for him, and he was determined not to disappoint him.

Opposite the magic tree stood an empty room of four close walls. So much walking upright like a man had made Sebastian very tired. Perhaps he would rest there for a few minutes, and then renew his search for the way he had arrived.

No sooner had he entered the elevator, than the doors suddenly slid closed. Groping for a way out, his gloved hand pressed against a panel of numbered buttons. There was no way to understand what was happening, but had the curious sensation of being lifted without actually leaving his feet. He tried to return the way he had entered, but the doors were stuck. He pounded the doors and walls, but they refused to open. Ding! The rising feeling suddenly stopped, causing his heart to lurch. After a moment, the doors parted.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sebastian timidly emerged onto the sixth floor—another stark, empty corridor. This time, however, there was a familiar odor. He sniffed himself. The smell wasn’t coming from him. He sniffed down the corridor—yes, definitely coming from the far end.

Then, faint, familiar animal sounds, also from the direction of the smell—the disquieting sounds of gorilla hoots and grunts.

Sebastian backed to the open elevator, but too late, the doors slid shut again.

Bracing himself, he started down the corridor until he arrived at a steel door housing a small square window. The sounds of agitated primates were clearly coming from behind the door, and getting louder. When he stepped through, the sounds immediately stopped. Now the odor was overwhelming. Sebastian curled up his nose and became rigid.

Before him stood a large, dimly lit, heavily barred enclosure. It appeared unoccupied, but there had been a half-hearted attempt to make it livable, if not comfortable; fake log, a tire hanging from a frayed rope, an aluminum tub of grayish water. Half spoiled fruits and vegetables littered the floor and sat in rusty buckets. Drifts of befouled straw spilled from between the thick bars.

Now, he made out five dark, huddled shapes against the walls. The two largest, though dimly seen, were adult males, silverbacks, but their coats were dull and matted. Two were mature females. The fifth was a juvenile, not much older than Sebastian when he first arrived at the Center.

Thumping his chest, one of the silverbacks made a sudden lunge at the bars—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*—then quickly withdrew.

Sebastian staggered back and fell against the door through which he’d entered.

Next, the females charged, gesturing with swinging arms, canines displayed as they shrieked and threatened before also retreating. The juvenile peered from behind her mother.

Sebastian gawked, too stunned to react.

What he saw next chilled him to the bone.

The remaining ape, glassy-eyed and weary, nearly Sebastian’s twin in size and weight, his shaved head scarred with lesions, now advanced, cautiously eying the mysterious visitor. The others kept their distance. A closer look revealed that each suffered from similar afflictions, all bearing the scars of *in vivo* experimentation.

The caged ape sniffed, confused by what he saw and sensed. Glands beneath his armpits produced a pungent odor and the room began to smell very, very bad.

Sebastian, too, was utterly perplexed. He had not seen the ape in many years, yet somehow knew him to be his half-brother—Lex.

Lex shuffled to the bars where the two bewildered animals studied each other.

Behind Sebastian, the door suddenly flew open, squashing him against the wall as Teddy entered. The custodian quickly stepped to the cage and reached through; the iron bar he gripped raining blows upon the nearest animal’s head. Lex retreated and cowered behind the tub.

Turning to leave, Teddy spied Sebastian’s shadow splayed across the wall. Expecting likewise to be pummeled, Sebastian slunk from behind the door and inched toward the corridor.

Teddy neither advanced nor raised his weapon.

“Sir, you all right, sir?” he asked.

Sir? Sebastian didn’t understand. He was about to hoot and pound his chest when Teddy spoke again.

“Are you all right, sir?”

Had Teddy mistaken him for a man?

“What did you call me?”

“I don’t get what you mean, sir.”

“Yes. That’s it. ‘Sir.’”

“Sorry for the trouble, sir,” said Teddy, and escorted him into the corridor. He returned to the enclosure to further discipline the apes.

Sebastian used the distraction to back away, and suddenly Gordon was there. He grabbed the doctor’s arm and yanked him around a corner.

“Sebastian, that hurts—,” Gordon winced. “Sebastian—”

Sebastian attempted to speak, but all he could manage was a rapid click of his throat. He began to sway.

“What’s the matter? Sebastian, what’s wrong?”

“That—that—me? Was me? Dirty thing? Dirty animal?”

Gordon peered through the open door into the enclosure, the gorilla cage.

“You were never a dirty animal, but—yes.”

“You—you—promise me, Gordon. Promise no one will know Sebastian dirty thing.”

Gordon nodded.

“Coral, too. I am man. You made me man. I am man. I am sir.”

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gordon’s Rambler pulled up to the lake house, and he, Coral and Sebastian climbed out. “Good night, father,” said Coral after they had entered and were about to part for the night.

“Coral, wait,” said Gordon.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs.

“Thank you for joining us tonight. It meant a great deal. If for some reason I upset you, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

She nodded her acceptance and he gave her a peck on the cheek. “Good night, Joseph” she said to Sebastian. She plucked a chrysanthemum from a vase and pinned it to his lapel. “Thanks for the dance.” She turned to ascend the staircase.

“Come along, Joseph,” Gordon said, leading the way to the basement stairs.

“Wait. Not yet,” said Sebastian. “I want this day to never end. This is the best day, Gordon. The best day.”

He had seen terrible things, things that confused and frightened him, the deep trauma of seeing his half-brother again, but he had also spent time alone with Coral, edging out the confusion and fright, and making it a very good day indeed.

“There’ll be other days,” said Gordon.

“Gordon promise?”

“I promise.”

Gordon escorted Sebastian to his basement room.

“Gordon?” said Sebastian, as he began to undress.

“Yes, Sebastian?”

“I have a thought. It is this.” He hesitated.

“Yes, go on.”

“If I am a man, why—why you lock me in?”

“It’s better this way. Trust me.”

Gordon locked the door and returned up the stairs.

Alone, Sebastian paced. After a short time, his eyes shifted to the barred window high on the wall. “I want this day to never end,” he said.

Gordon stepped to the portico. Exhausted but elated, he loosened his tie and sank into a wicker chair. Soon he began to doze. The sound of clapping hands quickly brought him to his feet again. Leland Massey climbed from his luxury car parked beside the dry fountain. The old gent gestured with a bottle of champagne.

“Brilliant. Absolute genius. No one suspected,” said Leland. “I can’t wait to see their faces when we tell them who ‘Joseph’ really is.”

“He saw the other animals.”

“Other animals?”

“On the sixth floor. And do you know what he said? That he was no longer one of them, no longer a ‘dirty thing.’ He was a man. He asked me to promise to keep his secret.”

“And did you promise?”

“I’ve made a man, Leland.”

“You’ve made something better than a man. Well, more useful to us, anyway,” Leland said. He stepped closer. “And what does your daughter think?”

“She still has no idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not going to tell her.”

Leland mounted the portico and gave a questioning look.

“She couldn’t handle losing him twice. She’d never forgive me. I’d lose *her*,” said Gordon.

Leland popped the cork on the champagne bottle.

“So, when do we publish?”

“There are some bugs to work out yet. He still has episodes of regression. Throat clicking when he’s flustered, occasional chest pounding, not to mention an insatiable need to masturbate.”

“Sounds a bit like my teenage son. I’ll be sending him off to university at the end of summer.” He took a sip of champagne and offered the bottle to Gordon. “Time you thought of letting yours go, too.”

Sebastian lay in the dark, plucking the chrysanthemum and eating the petals one by one. She loves me, she loves me not, though the concept of the game was unknown to him. He struggled to form a thought, then lost the thread. Rolling out of bed, he exited the cubicle, tried to open the door, and was not surprised to find it locked. Attempting to shoulder it proved futile. He stepped to the barred window. Outside, a semi-circular well surrounded it. Passing by that side of the manor house, the well would not have been easily noticed, the area around it long overgrown with tall riotous weeds and an aggressive hedge. But back to Sebastian. Once through the window, from there it would be easy to climb to ground level. But he was unable to unlatch it. His fist, however, did the job nicely. The tinkle of broken glass sent him quickly back to his bed, feigning innocence there. After some minutes, when Gordon did not come to see about the disturbance, he returned to the now open window. But there was still more to it; the row of reinforced iron bars still prevented his escape. Grabbing the bars, he pulled himself up and tried to squeeze through, but was far too big to fit. Joining booted feet to hands, he made another attempt, but still it was no use. One of his boots had slipped off. Looking at his naked foot, Sebastian saw something exceedingly strange—unchanged gorilla feet, narrow like a human hand, with thumb-like toes, the only part of his anatomy that betrayed his true animal nature—hence the boots. Removing the other boot, he swung back to the widow, his toes grasping the bars like fingers, and began to strain.

This time, the bars slowly began to yield.

Only once had they been interrupted, when the stringy taciturn nurse wearing the kind of starched half cap and sky blue apron he’d only seen in war movies brought Bunny his noonday meal; an unbalanced assortment of two fried eggs, two slices of untoasted bread, a bowl of chicken soup, a whole tilapia that had likely been fished from a nearby river within the hour, and a plantain, all served on a red plastic tray, and a green tumbler of some kind of lukewarm tea. Bad timing, thought Bunny, sensing the speaker’s story was about to take another turn. At the same time, he’d anticipated her arrival, hoping the intermission would allow more than just a glimpse of the storyteller, more than just the hand that periodically helped itself to another smoke. He’d offered to share his meal, maybe that would bring the speaker into full or partial view, but the unbodied voice declined, saying his stomach had been misbehaving. Before the nurse left, never having said a word, Bunny asked, in Kinyarwanda, the national language, with a smattering of French and English, did she smoke or know anyone who did? At the rate they were disappearing, the pack would soon be empty. She shook her head, no. Still, if wasn’t too much trouble, would she ask around, maybe even locate a cigar or two. She said smoking was bad for his health, but would do what he asked. She never returned, not even to collect the food tray. More exactly, she did return, but only when she delivered his breakfast the following morning, and by then—

It had rained during the night, but now moonlight flooded the conservatory. Earlier, on the grounds at the rear of the manor, Sebastian squatted on the diving board extending over an empty swimming pool carpeted with damp, dead leaves. From there the heady aroma of wasting vegetation had drawn him to the glass house. Exhilarated, he wandered among the maze of elevated potting beds, his bare feet squelching on the muddy bricks. Scooping up handfuls of damp earth and bunches of wilted flowers, he smeared his face and clothing, snuffing in the faintly cloying aroma of rot.

Nimbly hauling himself into the lower branches of the oak towering beside the third-floor balcony, he began to climb. Soon he had ascended through the broken roof and perched adjacent to the turret balcony. He paused there, peeling brittle branches and slurping at the juicy pulp. Noting that the window stood ajar, he inhaled deeply, sensing Coral nearby.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

A musty, overpowering smell caused Coral’s nose to twitch. Blinking awake, she was astonished by what she saw. The bed and floor were strewn with wild roses and rotting leaves amid a pattern of sodden prints.

A dark shape standing at her bedside shifted.

“Dad—?”

“Coral like to hold hands.” It was Sebastian’s voice.

Coral bolted upright and jerked the bed sheets under her chin. “What—What are you doing here?”

“Coral like Joseph.”

“Could you leave now, please?”

Sebastian leaned forward, wanting a hug. “Hold.”

“Listen, I don’t know what you think is going on between us-”

Sebastian attempted to wrap her in his mud-caked arms. She recoiled, yanking the bet sheets with her. “Dad! Goddamn it, Dad! Get up here!”

“Hold Joseph.”

“Help! DAD!”

Sebastian leaned closer and suddenly Gordon was grabbing his arm. The ape-man glared and barred his canines, as if he were about to remove the doctor’s head. Gordon stood his ground, steered him from the room, and directed him down the staircase to the ground floor. There, Sebastian balked, swung his arm, and pinned the doctor against the wall. The gorilla stood back, straightened, and began to pound his chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*.

“DOWN! NOW! DOWN!” Gordon commanded.

Startled, Sebastian backed down and stooped subordinately.

“Let’s lock you in,” said Gordon after the moment had passed.

“Yes. Hurry.”

Sebastian slouched down the basement steps, Gordon close behind. Once in the ape-man’s lodgings, Gordon immediately saw the problem—the bent window bars and broken glass. Hurrying back upstairs, the doctor quickly returned with a heavy chain and padlock. Weaving the chain through the bars, he secured them with the lock.

Sebastian turned away guiltily. “Gordon? What bad with me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I see myself hurting you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

Gordon paced outside Coral’s room. Finally, he entered and found his daughter still terribly shaken.

“I think he’s a little bit in love with you,” said Gordon.

“What makes you think that? That keen scientific mind of yours?”

Gordon hesitated, and then spoke. “Coral, I’m so sorry, but I must ask you to leave.”

“I haven’t seen you in two years, and now you’re asking me to leave? Doesn’t matter. The idea already crossed my mind.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just not working with you here. You’re a distraction. For Joseph, I mean. For our work.”

“Fine.”

She brushed past him and opened an antique wardrobe.

“Coral—”

“No, it’s fine, really.”

She began throwing her clothing into a suitcase. “But I’ve got to say, I’m getting tired of being a daughter only when it fits your schedule.”

“It’s not like that, Coral.”

“Then why are you always sending me away? Like you’re slamming a door in my face. How long have you been doing this? Never mind. It’s impossible. *We’re* impossible.”

“I don’t.”

“Then tell me what’s really going on here. Who exactly is this Joseph? And what’s Leland Massey got to do with him? What does the Center have to do with him?”

Gordon looked away, not ready to confide in her. “Coral, please try, try to under—”

“Slam,” said Coral, closing the wardrobe door harder than necessary. When the door sprang back, she slammed it again for emphasis. Gordon stood silent, watching as she returned to packing. She turned to face him. “What?”

But Gordon had nothing more to add, only sighed. “As you wish. I’ll call a taxi.”

Morning light spilled through the basement window, casting the pattern of the bent bars across the floor. Gordon entered and found Sebastian still fully dressed, sitting in the wheelchair. “Good morning, Sebastian. How did you sleep?” he asked somberly.

“No sleep. Wait at door. Coral awake now?”

Not waiting for an answer, Sebastian bounded past Gordon and up the stairs. In the kitchen, he scampered about setting a table for three.

“It’ll just be the two of us this morning, Sebastian,” said Gordon, entering the kitchen.

Sebastian ignored him and finished setting Coral’s place.

“It’s just the two of us,” Gordon repeated. “Sebastian, are you listening?”

Sebastian took his seat and waited for Coral, keeping his eyes on her empty chair.

“Eat,” said Gordon.

Sebastian appeared not to hear.

“Go on. Afterward we’ll play a game of billiards. I fixed your stick again.”

Sebastian still did not respond. For the first time he noticed the tranq gun beside Gordon’s fork and spoon.

“But first eat.”

Sebastian slowly rose, sniffed the air, and suddenly bolted up the stairs. There he found Coral’s room unoccupied, her bedding neatly piled, her belongings gone.

Two floors below, Gordon shared the gorilla’s anguish, but was also a little afraid.

The clump of heavy footsteps announced Sebastian’s return. Dishes and silverware rattled as he entered the kitchen. “Bring her back.”

“I can’t bring her back, Sebastian. I’m sorry.”

“Where is she?”

“Our old home in the city, I expect. It’s best you put her out of your mind now.”

“Did you tell her?”

“I was going to, but not now. How could I now?”

“Bring her back.”

“Sebastian, do you remember what this is?” asked Gordon. “I know it’s been a long time, but do you remember?” He lifted the tranq gun, but Sebastian was unfazed. Instead, he violently up-ended the table and lunged for the gun. Gordon stumbled back, steadied himself, and took aim. “You’re letting us both down,” he said, pleading and angry in the same voice.

Sebastian eyed the gun, slouched, and grew despondent. Dropping to his knees he whimpered and began to stack the shattered dishes. “No—more—talk.” Reaching for a broken glass tumbler, he opened his mouth wide.

“Sebastian! Oh no, don’t do that!”

Sebastian jammed the tumbler in his mouth.

Gordon heard a sickening crunch.

Panicked that years of surgical work were about to be undone, Gordon ignored his own safety and rushed the ape-man. Locking an elbow under Sebastian’s jaw, he hoped to keep him from swallowing. Sebastian was ready, easily lifted Gordon off his feet, and hammered him against the wall. A framed daguerreotype of Viktor Gothenburg crashed to the floor. The table settings rattled. A spoon leapt to a chair. Gordon slowly slid down the wall. Blood dribbling from between his lips, the ape-man spit out the glass shards and crouched beside the supine doctor. Mortified, he lifted Gordon’s hand, then let it drop, rag-doll limp.

“Gordon—?”

Dressed in his overcoat, broad brimmed hat, gloves, and combat boots, Sebastian paced on the portico. The scarf wrapped at his neck belonged to Gordon. The ape-man’s pockets bulged with good things to eat taken from the kitchen. Fortifying himself with a deep breath, he descended the portico and stepped into the wide world, alone there for the first time.

The deserted lake road Sebastian traveled while munching a head of lettuce wove through the Center grounds. A UPS truck rolled past. Anxious, Sebastian quickly stepped aside.

A lab assistant riding a bicycle approached from the opposite direction. “How’s it going?” said the bicyclist.

After the rider was gone, Sebastian tipped his hat to no one. “How’s it going?” he said, as if tasting the words.

Looking one way, then the other, he started down the road again.

Back at the lake house, Gordon, unsteady but recovered, stood on the portico holding an ice pack to the knot on his head. “SEBASTIAN!”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The ape-man had stopped in front of a rustic bungalow, the home of a handyman employed at the Center. A boy peering through the screen door gawked and stuttered. “M—M—Mom? There’s a man drinking from the bird bath.”

Sebastian looked up and tipped his hat. “How’s it going?”

The boy’s mother stepped outside and was shocked to see exactly what her son described: a hulking figure on her lawn lapping from a bird bath. She yanked her child inside, locked the door, and turned on the lawn sprinklers. Soaked, Sebastian bolted from the yard. “Coral there?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

A few miles away, in his city house, his man cave appointed with stuffed and mounted animals, Karl Erhardt sat in a Barcalounger eating his supper while watching a nature show (hippos vs. crocs) on TV. Flanked by twin stuffed zebras, the head and shoulders of an African wildebeest appeared to charge through the wall.

The poacher carved himself a slice of bloody rare prime rib.

A telephone rang. Erhardt belched, muted the onscreen carnage, and calmly finished chewing before answering. “Yeah?” He took a sip of milk. “Yes, doctor.” He listened, then, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” and was quickly on his feet.

The day had grown dark and chilly. During the afternoon, Sebastian had come upon the charred remains of the habitat where he had spent the years when he was still nothing but an ape. There he napped in the shelter of the ruined gazebo. Once, he had awakened to the sound of a slowly approaching car. He quickly withdrew when he saw it was Gordon in the Rambler. The doctor wove past the trailer that had once been his office, but now stood an empty, weathered shell. Drawing near, he climbed from the car and studied the former habitat. Turning to the surrounding forest, he cupped his hands to his mouth.

“SEBASTIAN! SEBASTIAN! SEBASTIAN!”

Sebastian noted the holstered tranq gun strapped to his waist.

Gordon returned to the station wagon. Sebastian watched as he wound away back down the hillock.

Now, in the early evening, Sebastian was ready to resume his search.

Coral. Where might he find Coral?

A scarred and dented Land Rover passed through the gate fronting the lake house. A souvenir from a brief stint in the jungles of South America, a shrunken head dangled from the Rover’s rearview mirror. The vehicle parked beside Leland Massey’s car. Erhardt climbed out. The trio of African trackers who were part of his team remained in the Rover. Because he was impossibly tall, the one named Lumumba sat uncomfortable bent, the top of his head brushing the headliner. Speaking their dialect, Erhardt instructed them to wait, then mounted the portico. Leland opened the front door, nodded solemnly, and ushered him inside.

A quarter-mile away, outside the cottage of a groundskeeper, a snarling dog tugged at its chain, chomping to get at an intruder. The ape-man crouched in the fenced yard sampling the dry food in the dog’s bowl. Sebastian sniffed and nibbled as the cottage lights suddenly sprang to life. In the next instant he was over the fence, the spinning bowl overturned in his wake.

Erhardt paced Sebastian’s basement cubicle while Leland stood outside it. Gordon sat in Sebastian’s wheelchair, his head cradled in his hands. The bent barred window had been hung with thick chains, in the event of Sebastian’s unlikely return.

The three men had descended from Gordon’s upstairs office where the doctor had shown them anatomical charts and X-rays.

“I smell ape,” said Erhardt. “It’s all over this house. You can wash him. You can dress him in silk and leather, put a part in his hair and teach him to cook a three-minute egg, but I still smell ape.”

The poacher placed his hands on Gordon’s shoulders and eased him to his feet, the laying on of hands a not-so-subtle reminder of who was now in charge.

“Two hundred thousand years separate us, doc. Not two. What you’ve done is create a clown. He thumbs his nose at man. He isn’t one of us.”

“He’s a lab animal. And a very, very expensive one,” said Leland. “What I need to know is—how we’re going to get him back.”

“Can we go back up now? This room makes me sick,” said Erhardt, then added, “He’s picked a mate.”

“What’s that?” said Gordon.

“Your daughter. And he’ll challenge any mature male that gets in his way. That’s what your little run-in was all about. Two guys fighting over a dame.”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Didn’t count on that, did you?” said Erhardt. “Your ape-man thinks it’s mating season, and it’s not even Saturday night.”

“What’ll we do?” said Gordon.

“I go after him, what else?”

“He couldn’t possibly get to Coral,” said Leland, sounding not entirely convinced. “She’s miles away. In the city, isn’t she, Gordon?”

Gordon nodded.

“Of course he can’t,” said Erhardt. “He’ll get lost. He’ll get hungry. He’ll miss his pop. He’ll come home. In fact, he’s probably on his way now, save me a trip.”

The doctor had briefly considered telephoning Coral to alert her, but then decided against it. Alert her to what exactly? How could he possibly hope to explain; that Joseph was not who he appeared, had developed a deep attraction to her, and was even then on his way to find her? In any case, Erhardt was likely right; the idea that Sebastian might actually succeed was far-fetched, if not utterly absurd. Sebastian *was* likely returning to the lakeside manor at that very moment.

“How do you know?” asked Gordon, a hint of hope in his voice.

Erhardt gave an exaggerated sniff.

“Like I said. I smell ape.”

Sebastian lumbered on. His pockets were now empty and his stomach had begun to grumble. Suddenly, sensing where he was, he halted, and then slowly turned. Nearby, workers were dismantling the gaily-striped tent where, only the previous evening, he had cracked plates, gorged himself on fruits and flowers, and spent precious time alone with Coral.

Something else stirred his memory.

Away in the distance, dark and ominous, loomed the granite monolith where he had recently seen his half-brother Lex.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The caged gorillas twitched in their slumber, then stirred awake when they sensed a presence. Lex shuffled to the window, grasped the bars, and cut loose with an agitated hoot. The other apes immediately sprang to action, crowded around and pressed their faces to the window, adding their voices to his.

The lights flickered on. Teddy entered, a little drunk, a nearly empty bottle of twist-cap wine in one hand, the ever-present pipe in the other. He strummed the pipe across the enclosure bars. “Tonight’s lesson—Teddy don’t like a lot of noise,” he slurred, reaching through the bars and attempting to club the nearest ape but missing.

Lex shuffled to a corner, lay down, and pretended to sleep. The others quickly did the same.

“Have I got a knack, or what?” Teddy chuckled. He switched off the light and returned to the corridor, twirling his pipe.

“I lost something,” someone spoke.

Halfway to the elevator the custodian stopped to puzzle out a figure looming in the near dark. “Someone let you in?” asked Teddy.

Sebastian nodded.

Teddy stepped closer.

“Oh, I recognize you.”

“You called me sir.”

“You must have been wearing your Sunday best, because right now, I got to say, you look like shit,” said Teddy, not caring whom he was addressing because he was emboldened by the wine.

“I lost a key.”

“A key?”

“In there.”

“Whatever,” said Teddy, his exhale causing his lips to flutter as he turned to open the door.

Sebastian’s hand brushed the custodian’s pipe. “What this for?”

“Stick around, I’ll show you,” said Teddy, always eager to demonstrate its use.

“May I hold it?”

Teddy considered, then handed it over. “Wait here,” he said, stepping back through the door and switching on the light.

The gorillas quickly withdrew to the far wall.

“These monsters will eat anything. I’d do better poking through last night’s shit,” Teddy muttered as he scanned the floor for the alleged lost key.

Sebastian stepped to the door and peered inside. Catching sight of him, the apes went wild, voicing their distress with grunts and groans.

“They don’t seem to like you, fella,” said Teddy, glancing at Sebastian. He returned to sifting the filthy straw for the key. “Maybe you better give me the pipe,” he added, this time without looking up.

Sebastian granted his wish and brought the iron pipe down on Teddy’s head, not enough to cause serious damage, but more than enough to take him down. The custodian crumpled beside Sebastian’s booted feet.

The caged apes became even more unruly as the man in the floppy hat removed the ring of keys from Teddy’s belt.

“I found it,” said Sebastian.

Lex charged the bars and began to thump his chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*. The shrieking apes gathered behind him, venting their bewilderment with screams and hoots.

Sebastian rose fully erect and filled his lungs. The buttons of his shirt went pop, pop, pop. He, too, began to thump his chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*.

Teddy’s head began to clear. Peering up from the floor he saw the booted stranger asserting his dominance—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*.

Dumbfounded, the primate prisoners shrunk back.

“What the—?” Teddy stammered, stroking the goose egg forming on his noggin.

Sebastian stepped to the cage door. One by one, having often enough seen the doors to his own habitat locked and unlocked, he tested Teddy’s keys in the old fashioned, chain draped padlock until, on the fifth try, there was a soft, satisfying click. The door swung open and he stepped through.

The stunned apes stood back silent.

“Yes. It’s me,” said Sebastian, slowly removing his hat, a dramatic, sweeping gesture he had once seen in a movie, although if asked he would not have been able to remember which.

Behind, Teddy crawled into the corridor, but Sebastian and the others paid him no mind.

“Now we go,” the ape-man said.

The caged apes remained hushed and frozen.

“We go. Now. Must hurry,” said Sebastian. He left the cage, stepped into the corridor, and waited. After several moments, he saw Lex peering from behind the open door. The half-brothers gave each other a wide berth, each sniffing the other as Lex slipped past. The remaining gorillas soon lumbered into view, withdrew, and reappeared.

Sebastian led the way and the wary troop followed. Having arrived at the elevator, he held the door and motioned them to enter. After some reservation, Lex muscled past and entered. Their courage boosted, the others crowded inside. Sebastian joined them, only to realize they were only five, when they should have numbered six.

Returning down the corridor, he found the juvenile fearlessly leaping up and down on Teddy’s back. Unable to control his bladder, the overexcited youngster added insult to injury by emptying himself on Teddy’s neck. Sebastian took the champion by the hand and led him to the elevator.

The doors closed and they began to descend. The unfamiliar sensation caused the panicked apes to shriek and throw their weight against the walls, seeking a way out.

The doors opened again on the ground floor.

“Magic tree,” said Sebastian, as he stepped into the corridor. The doors closed again before any of the others were able to follow. It took some minutes while the elevator went up and down, up and down, stopping at random floors, but in time, all were gathered beside the “magic tree.” Behind, the elevator floor was damp with urine, the walls splattered with regurgitated vegetable matter.

Sebastian again led the way, twirling the pilfered pipe. Rounding a corner, he saw a security guard patrolling the far end of the corridor. The guard, who in the dim light assumed Sebastian to be Teddy, gestured with *his* pipe, nodded, and moved on.

Sebastian entered another corridor. A moment passed before five hairy stooped forms fell in behind. Now, the door through which he had entered stood in sight. Seeing the exit, the escapees could no longer contain themselves, and broke into a spirited dash.

Sebastian and Lex stood back.

“No! No! No!” Sebastian ordered, but it was too late. With no experience of the properties of glass, thinking the opening was free and clear, the one leading the charge hurled himself straight ahead. Shards exploded as the animal passed through and bolted into the night. The females and the juvenile climbed through the jagged opening and knuckle bounded after him.

Sebastian grunted and motioned Lex to follow.

Once outside, alarm bells rang and tree and ground lights ignited all around. Lex cowered and fell behind. Sebastian went back for him. Together they rushed for the fence.

Suddenly, a figure teetered from the dark and barred their way. “These are my animals, goddamn it!” Teddy yammered. He had mostly recovered from Sebastian’s blow and had taken the stairs while the apes were going up and down, up and down. “*My* animals!” He removed the tranq gun from his holster and took aim at Sebastian, who swung the pipe and knocked the gun from his hand. The custodian sank to his knees, whimpered, and shielded his head as the ape-man hovered over him.

“Teddy hit Sebastian with stick. Remember?”

“What—? Who—?”

There was no answer.

Sebastian had fled.

No sooner was Teddy on his feet than Lex barreled from the dark, bowled him over again, and began to pummel him. Teddy screamed and flailed. Sebastian quickly returned and pulled the ape aside. “Must stop! Enough!”

The ape-man and his lost half-brother faced off, comparing height and weight, canines exposed while pounding their chests—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*. Eyes locked, they charged, their collision like the meeting of runaway trains.

Something had ruptured in Sebastian, his beastly nature now on the surface, powerful and terrifying. Taking the would-be attacker down, Sebastian howled like a demon. They rolled like entwined eels. The mutinous ape sunk his teeth in the defender’s neck. The two were eye to eye, neither blinking, squeezing the life from each other. “Look—away,” Sebastian frothed, but the challenger held his gaze. “Look—away.” The words, of course, held no meaning for Lex, but the tone was unmistakable.

The rival held fast, then blinked and only slightly averted his eyes.

Sebastian loosened his grip and staggered to his feet, but Lex appeared ready to renew the attack. Sebastian pounded his chest—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*. Chastened, Lex relaxed his stance and assumed a subordinate pose.

Sebastian turned and shooed away the others who had returned to watch the brawl. “Go. Go away. Go. Go.” They shambled off, scaled the fence, and were gone. Only Lex remained.

The dark suddenly came alive with human shouts. Behind, a half dozen guards and staff were pouring from the building.

The half-brothers turned to the fence.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sebastian and Lex loped through the night forest. They were no longer on the Center grounds, but in an adjoining wood, heading roughly east toward the city. Night creatures scurried to avoid them.

Sebastian halted. “I am looking for Coral. Coral. Do you understand?”

Lex returned a blank stare.

“Not know how to make you understand,” said Sebastian.

Lex relieved an itch by rubbing his rump against a tree.

“You cannot come. Rest here. Rest. Trees good here. Tall. Safe.”

Lex stopped rubbing and began gnawing a dry twig.

After a moment, he realized Sebastian was gone.

Back at the Center monolith, a guard led Gordon, Leland, Erhardt, and the three Africans across the surrounding property. The group arrived at a cluster of staffers examining the supine Teddy. The comatose custodian was being strapped to a stretcher. Nearby, more guards and staffers were searching the area.

“They broke his jaw,” someone said.

“They’re taking him to the city,” someone else said.

“So what are we looking for?” asked Leland.

“His left ear,” the first someone replied.

Leland turned to Erhardt. “What do you smell now”?

“Blood.”

Erhardt observed the Africans. Sniffing, they strode directly, uncannily toward something under a hedge.

“They found it,” said a staffer.

“What?” asked Leland.

“Lefty,” said the staffer, training his light on Teddy’s severed ear. Another staffer hurried over with an ice chest. A guard vomited.

“Sebastian is now in the company of four fully grown gorillas and an infant,” said Leland.

“He won’t stay with them,” said Erhardt.

“Why not?” asked Gordon.

“Because he’s too much of a snob to follow a bunch of common apes.”

“He set them free. Maybe they’re following him,” said Gordon.

“The group already has a leader. My guess is he’s the one who used Teddy as a punching bag. They’ll stick with him,” said Erhardt.

“I want them back, Karl,” said Leland. “All of them.”

“I’m going with him,” said Gordon.

Leland nodded. “I’ll stay here, handle damage control. Someone somewhere will spot them and call the police.”

Gordon and Erhardt regarded one another. Although throughout the years their contact had been limited, Gordon had never approved of the poacher, and he, in turn, had no use for the doctor. Erhardt, who thrived on hostility, spoke to Gordon in Congolese.

“What’s that?” asked Gordon.

“A blessing before the hunt. About the same as ‘break a leg.’”

“Thanks.”

Erhardt shrugged and began removing equipment from the Rover. Gordon glanced in and saw the seats were covered in gorilla hides. A hollowed-out gorilla foot on the console served as an ashtray.

Suddenly, the three Africans were behind him.

The one named Lumumba spoke to Erhardt. “*Ngyulla*?”

Erhardt held up six fingers and nodded. “Six *ngyulla*.”

Sebastian trekked through the woods alone. Hearing the rustle of leaves, he turned and braced for another confrontation.

Lex stepped into view.

“No,” Sebastian ordered.

Now, the remaining gorillas appeared.

“No. You cannot come.”

Sebastian moved off again, glanced back, and saw the fugitives knuckle-walking behind him. He picked up his pace. The apes matched it.

Sebastian stopped and glowered. “Stop.”

The apes stopped and looked away.

Sebastian ran.

After a moment, the apes followed.

Sebastian pushed through the foliage bordering a road, but it was nothing like the empty two-lane he had grown accustomed to. A steady flow of traffic whooshed past, their headlights washing over the dark clad figure.

He made up his mind, picked his moment, and dashed between passing vehicles. Crossing the highway, he ducked into the trees. Glancing back, he saw the others still huddled on the far side, this time too terrified to follow.

Satisfied he was finally on his own, Sebastian started off once more. When he turned again, he saw Lex timidly step unto the pavement. A flatbed semi was fast approaching.

“No! No! No!” Sebastian shouted.

Bewildered, Lex looked up and cocked his head.

“Back! Back! Back!” Sebastian barked.

Hypnotized by approaching headlights, the ape was powerless to save himself. Even the sustained blast of the honking truck was not enough to make him budge. Sebastian broke into a run, crossing back the way he’d come. Grabbing the frozen ape on the pass-by, they leapt into the bushes. The truck that nearly mowed them down bore an enormous “magic tree” strapped to its back.

Deep in a forest clearing, the gorillas collapsed in a pile, Sebastian buried in the middle. He tried to rise, but Lex playfully wrestled him down.

“Off. Get off.”

Sebastian half-heartedly wrestled back, but wasn’t playing. Lex kept up the game, playing the fool to Sebastian’s snob, mimicking his awkwardness at physical contact.

The others aped their version of a laugh. Sebastian finally saw the humor, joined in their laugher, and rolled with Lex until both were spent.

He was back among this own kind.

Sebastian awoke to find the infant combing his hair. He returned the favor, found a tick, swallowed it, and looked for more.

The rest nestled in all around, touching him all over, poking in the folds of his clothing—part petting, part affection, part examination of the strange creature in their midst.

Lex observed his long-lost half-brother, satisfied he was not as different as he at first appeared.

Far across the wood, thunder boomed and the apes were afraid. They huddled close around Sebastian, tucking their heads beneath his tree trunk arms. The sky opened and it began to drizzle.

“Don’t be afraid. Water our friend,” said Sebastian. “Knows you need bath.” He rose and started off. The others remained huddled, dismayed to see him go.

After a short distance, Sebastian stopped and waved them to join him.

“This way. Hurry.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Several miles from the Center, six dark shapes lumbered across a sea of withered, rustling cornstalks. The drizzle had turned to freezing rain, silver needles in the dark. Foraging creatures scurried beneath their feet. A solitary harvester stood vigil as they passed. Ahead, they saw lights just beyond where the cornfield ended. Now, before them in a clearing stood a white clapboard farmhouse, the eaves festooned with glowing red, blue, and green orbs.

Sebastian grunted for the apes to halt, and approached the house alone. A small humanoid creature, no taller than the smallest member of their troop, wearing a beard and tall pointy blue cap, stood on the lawn. The ape-man paused to sniff it, but it had no smell, so he passed it by.

Stealing around the side of the house, he peered through a window. Inside, all was dark and still. Moving to another window, in the room where humans slept the bed appeared empty. Having completed a circle and peeped in each of a dozen windows, he was satisfied there was no one inside. He called to the others who loped across the clearing and quickly joined him.

Lex paused beside the lawn gnome, gave it a kick, displayed his canines, and pounded his chest in victory—*Pok*, *Pok*, *Pok*.

Sebastian mounted the porch and tried the door, but found it locked. Returning to a side window, their leader smashed it with his fist and climbed through. The rest then followed.

Once inside, the animals marveled at another “magic tree,” much smaller than the one at the Center, but with colorful boxes spread around its base. Paired red stockings with white trim hung before a fireplace.

Then they sniffed around the kitchen.

The infant tugged at Sebastian’s arm.

“Don’t you know anything? Water behind wall,” Sebastian said, a bit pompously. He motioned to the sink and turned on the spigot. The apes crowded in, slaking their thirst.

“Food in cold box,” said Sebastian.

He opened the fridge and the hungry apes grabbed stalks of celery, ears of corn, fresh fruit, and a pumpkin pie. The youngest grabbed a carton of milk and dropped it. A scuffle broke out over a Tupperware bowl of potato salad. A jar of pickles shattered on the linoleum. Sebastian took a container of ice cream from the freezer, sat at the dining table, and began eating with a spoon. Watching the others gorge themselves while rolling in their mess caused him to shake his head.

Afterward, they returned to the living room and the magic tree. Sebastian tore away the silver wrapping on a long, narrow object, pointy at one end, curved at the other. Handling it, the collapsed umbrella sprang open, causing the alarmed apes to scatter, but Sebastian knew it to be harmless, a canopy designed to protect against sky water. The others cautiously returned because their leader saw no cause for distress. Then, they too began tearing into presents, but each contained things used only by humans and held no interest for an ape; a toaster, a pair of boots much like the ones Sebastian wore, and a metal box of many small compartments filled with iron hooks, dead grubs, and fat red worms. Lex, in imitation of his half-brother, tried to put his foot in a boot, but the footwear was far too small. The infant put one of the grubs in his mouth, but it had no taste, so he spit it out.

From outside, bright light washing across the windows brought a sudden halt to their diversion. The humans who lived there had returned.

The apes scrambled over the couch and chairs and quickly returned to the kitchen.

They heard the sounds of car doors opening.

They crowded the kitchen door, six pairs of alert animal eyes peering into the living room.

Footsteps were heard on the porch.

The front door opened.

A farmer and his wife stood gawking in disbelief.

The apes gawked back.

Sebastian quickly turned to the rear door. There was no time to unravel the mystery of the deadbolt. Shouldering the escape hatch did the trick, allowing the apes to disappear into the night.

The humans, unsure of what they had just seen, cautiously inspected the damage. A window had been broken. A couch knocked askew and two chairs overturned. The Christmas tree lay atop vandalized presents. The kitchen was a shambles. The back door had been knocked off its hinges. Returning to the living room, they discovered that the paired stockings on the mantle had been reduced to a single. And the next day, that an umbrella was missing.

The air had turned bitter cold, the freezing rain into fat, fluffy flakes. The farmhouse had fallen behind, and once more they were tromping through deep forest. Sebastian led, holding the umbrella, while four of the apes jockeyed for a spot out of the whorling white. The infant, now wearing one of the fireplace stockings on his head, rode piggyback on the ape-man’s shoulders.

Sebastian had seen the white stuff before, as had the others, from the window of their enclosure in the monolith. Gordon called it snow. It fell from the sky every year, stayed for a while, then disappeared when it grew warm, only to return when it grew cold again. The snow always appeared around the same time as the magic trees. Coral had taught Sebastian how to roll the snow into great balls, which they stacked one atop the other. She said they were building a snowman.

The forest abruptly ended. Beneath their feet, the terrain gradually sloped away to expose an astonishing view—a vast sea of glimmering lights.

“Where people live,” Sebastian said softly.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The billowing snow had turned to a blizzard. Gordon and Erhardt caught up to the Africans. The men had stopped to inspect some footprints in the late autumn cornfield.

“They’re sticking together!” shouted Erhardt, in order to be heard above the howling wind.

“What?” Gordon shouted back.

“Whoever’s leading them stopped here, changed his mind, then went this way. These are his prints!” The poacher’s flashlight revealed a pair of booted footprints. “The others followed!”

“Bags on feet!” said Gordon.

“Huh?”

“Sebastian’s boots. He’s leading them!”

Two of the Africans appeared baffled.

“Five *ngyulla*. One man!” Lumumba explained.

The overnight whiteout had passed. Dawn light cast its glow upon a suspension bridge spanning a river. Commuter traffic streamed to and from the city. A broad-brimmed hat flopped over the rail and fell to the pedestrian walkway. A gloved hand grabbed hold and Sebastian pulled himself over the rail. Scooping up the hat, he did his best to appear nonchalant.

Behind and below, a hairy paw grabbed hold of the rail.

Sebastian slapped it away and leaned over the side. “No. I go alone now. You wait.”

Adjusting his hat, he joined the flow of traffic.

The African trackers were speaking to Erhardt, shaking their heads and gesturing. The tracks had led them to a multi-lane highway where they suddenly stopped. Beyond lay the city. Passing traffic splashed slush at their feet.

“What’s the problem?” asked Gordon, already knowing the answer.

“They can’t track apes during rush hour,” replied Erhardt.

“He’s getting closer,” said Gordon.

“To your daughter?”

Gordon nodded.

“Right, Obler. I suppose he’ll take a taxi. It’s a long walk and sidewalks can be hell on knuckles.”

Lumumba drew Erhardt aside. The poacher listened, then turned back to Gordon. “They want to know how much ape you left in him.”

“I’m not sure. He can be an ape. He can be a man,” said Gordon. “And he’s smart enough to help the others steer clear of us.” He looked across the river toward the city. “Everything he’s done in the last twenty-four hours has surprised me.” He paused. “And what if he does somehow reach Coral?”

“He can’t,” said Erhardt. “And you’d better hope I’m right about that.”

Sebastian wandered the city in a daze, without direction, entirely overwhelmed. Sights and sounds and smells beyond anything he had ever experienced assaulted his senses. There he saw others much like himself; disheveled men and women in ones and two’s, huddled in doorways or gathered in small groups around trashcan fires in trash-strewn lots. Drifts of dirty snow covered the curbs and were banked against the walls of buildings.

Late in the afternoon, approaching dusk, he fell in beside a spindly fellow bundled in a trench coat, much like his own, pushing a shopping cart filled with bulging garbage bags along a sidewalk.

“Do you know Coral?” asked Sebastian, for the umpteenth time that day.

“Who the hell’s Coral?” the fellow asked.

“Where is she?”

“Buzz off, scram.”

The fellow pushed his cart to the other side of the street.

Further up the block, seeing a parked taxi jarred Sebastian’s memory.

“Taxi,” he said to himself.

The cabby rolled down his window as the broad, squat figure in the long coat and hat approached.

“Are you a taxi?” asked Sebastian.

The cabby reached back and popped the rear door lock. Once they were underway, he glanced at the passenger in his rearview. “Where we going?”

Sebastian tried to recall Coral’s address. In his mind’s eye, she was climbing into a taxi, and then he remembered. Unable to say the words, his hands were able to sign the name and number. All he needed to do was to translate from Ameslan. “Twenty. Two. Bea. Con. Bea—con. Twenty-two Beacon.”

Twenty minutes later the taxi pulled up before a fashionable brownstone. Both sides of the street were aglow with magic trees, although here their branches were stark and bare.

“Eleven-fifty, big guy,” said the cabby.

“Thief,” said Sebastian, out of habit. He had often used the word in his youth when Coral was taken away in a taxi.

“Yeah, well, I don’t set the fares—” said the cabby, annoyed because he misunderstood what the customer meant.

Sebastian started to climb out, but the cabby reached back and grabbed his wrist. The ape-man elbowed him in the neck and bounded clear. The cabby climbed out and followed, looking for the freeloader, but his fare had suddenly vanished. Cursing under his breath, he returned to his taxi and sped away.

Behind, Sebastian perched in one of the magic trees, his eyes fixed on Coral’s city house.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

An hour passed, then another, and another, and still Coral had not appeared. Famished, Sebastian thought to pass the time by chewing one of the many green vines strung with glowing yellow lights. The vine suddenly sparked and sputtered, the shock of it nearly causing him to fall.

Finally, well after dark, Coral emerged, accompanied by a young couple. They started down the sidewalk, unaware they were being watched.

After several blocks, the three entered a coffee shop.

Seated at a window table, Coral studied a menu while their waitress served them hot chocolate.

“Oh, Jesus,” said Coral, suddenly distracted.

“I’m sorry?” said her waiter.

“Nothing.”

“What? Coral?” asked her female friend.

Coral nodded to the lunch counter where an imposing hulk wearing a floppy, broad-brimmed hat had caused a disturbance. A stool had collapsed beneath his weight and the bewildered patron was trying to reassemble it.

“Oh my God, what’s *he* doing here?” said Coral, quickly looking away.

“C’mon, who is it?” asked her male friend.

Coral glanced at the trench coated figure again, then said, “No one. It’s not who I thought.” Sebastian had turned his back and she was unable to see him clearly. She returned to her menu.

A minute passed.

“Hello.” It was Sebastian’s voice.

Startled, Coral saw him towering beside her. “Oh—hello. I didn’t—didn’t realize you got out that much,” she stammered, knowing it sounded lame, but what else *could* she say? She peered around, assuming her father must be close by, but Gordon was nowhere to be seen.

“I do,” Sebastian answered.

“You do? Really? I’m surprised.” And then, after a moment, “Where’s my father?”

“Gordon with Cheetah,” said Sebastian, a dim memory, but the first thing that popped into his head.

“Cheetah?”

“Joseph sit?”

“I’m sorry. Yes. Please,” said Coral, wanting to be polite, but at the same time entirely at a loss.

Sebastian scooted a chair and planted it hard between Coral and the young man. He looked at everyone around the table. “Hi.”

“Everyone, this is Joseph,” said Coral. “Joseph, these are my friends.”

Without warning, he gave her hand a licking kiss, astounding them.

“He’s friendly. Aren’t you friendly?” said Coral, more than simply taken aback. “May I have my hand back?”

Sebastian held firm.

“Let go, Joseph,” said Coral.

“Hey, pal, I think she asked for her hand back,” said the young man.

“Buzz off, scram,” said Sebastian, aping the earlier fellow with the shopping cart.

“Who *is* this guy?” asked Coral’s female friend.

“It’s all right. Let’s go outside and find Gordon.” Her father *had* to be someplace close by. There was simply no other explanation.

“Gordon not here.” Sebastian was still holding her hand.

“You’re hurting me.”

The young man leapt to his feet. “What do you want me to do, Coral?”

Other customers had begun to look their way.

“Coral like to hold hands,” said Sebastian.

“No, she doesn’t!” Coral said, jerking her hand free and quickly standing. “Are you going to leave, or should we?”

Peering through the window, craning her neck, her eyes searched the street, up and down, because surely Gordon *had* to be nearby.

“Coral *like* to hold hands.”

Exasperated, Coral and her friends abruptly left the coffee shop.

“Something’s not right. He should be with my dad,” said Coral as soon as they were outside.

“Your dad?” asked her female friend.

Inside, Sebastian sat alone at the table, fidgeting. The waitress came over. “I’m sorry. This table’s reserved for four.” Sebastian gnarled and quickly rose.

Coral and her friends hurried along the slippery sidewalk, toward her apartment building. Peering back, she saw that Sebastian was now following.

“What is your problem? Huh? Would you like us to call the police?” her male friend demanded. “Huh? Is that what you’d like? ’Cause I will.”

Coral pulled him away. “We can’t call the police.”

“Why not?” asked her female friend.

“Listen, forget this happened. I shouldn’t involve you in this,” said Coral. She deflected the couple’s grasping hands and hurried away. “No, no, I’m fine. Please.” She looked to hail a taxi, but there were none around. Rounding a corner, she looked back, again, but Sebastian was nowhere in sight. She exhaled a sign of relief and quickly moved on. Then, a half block later, there he was, still lumbering after her.

Not thinking clearly, she turned into an alley. Clouds of warm vapor from restaurant kitchens and cafés with their backs to the alley puffed from pipes and oozed from under doors and window cracks, giving the impression of walking along a corridor of clouds. Picking up her pace, anxious, she glanced back again. Finally, she’d lost him.

Joseph was who he was, she told herself, giving him the benefit of the doubt, and so, certain behaviors, accounted for by the unfortunate “accident” that had created them, which her father had never taken the time to fully explain, could be overlooked, but what had just happened in the coffee shop was too much to easily excuse. She was not yet ready to patch things up (she was mostly over the unsettling incident that had sent her packing for the city, but still needed time), but now, because she *would* confront him and demand answers, she knew their relationship had taken another step in reverse. Why did it always have to be this way? Was their father/daughter bond forever doomed?

Had Joseph actually tried to lick her hand? No, not *tried*, it had happened, and in public, in front of friends. What was she supposed to do, pretend she’d imagined it?”

Why had she slipped into the alley? There would be no taxi there. That was foolish and she was not accustomed to being foolish, she berated herself. She would wait three minutes and then retrace her steps. Why wait? To be sure. Three minutes, was that long enough? A cook in a dirty apron and a hoodie stepped from the Good Eats Café (Coral’s guess, it was about a third of the way down the block on the street side), shivered for the duration of half a cigarette and hurried back inside.

Three minutes passed. She started back up the alley and then stopped short. She yelped.

The veil parted, and there he was again, Sebastian, a shade lumbering toward her through the clouds.

“Coral—?”

“You’re really, really frightening me.”

He advanced. She backed away. “I know,” he said. He took another step.

He knew? “Why are you doing this? What do you want?” Her heart was racing.

“I choose you.”

“What?”

“I choose you.”

“I’ll scream my head off. Swear to God I will.”

Sebastian took another step and cornered her against a sooty brick wall. Coral started to scream and he quickly clapped a hand over her mouth. Their brief struggle, which was only meant to calm her, abruptly ended when both slipped on the icy artery. Losing their balance, they overturned a garbage can. Coral’s head struck the frozen ground.

It took Sebastian a moment to realize what had happened.

He crawled to her.

“Coral—”

She lay there still and silent.

Mortified by what had happened, this terrible turn was nothing he had intended, Sebastian saw pedestrians passing at both ends of the alley, and knew he was in danger. The two had not yet been noticed, but soon would be. He also realized he was kneeling on a garbage bag. Nearby lay an overturned shopping cart.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Coral moaned. Only half conscious, her eyes fluttered open. *She had gone to a coffee shop with friends. Then, something to do with her father’s mysterious patient, Joseph Young. His awkward, insistent behavior had led to cross words. Had there been a struggle? And where was Gordon during all this? Nowhere, if she remembered correctly.*

Peering about in the misty dark, she found herself trussed inside some kind of bag—a common garbage bag? Still woozy, she began to wriggle free, one arm tearing through the thin plastic sheath. Blood coated her fingertips. No, not blood, but a dusting of rust. Again, how did it get there? Where was she? Her vision cleared. Suddenly, she froze—sixty feet below, the silver ribbon of a river wound beneath the bridge. She was perched on a decaying girder overlooking a steep and narrow gorge. About to swoon, she groped with her free hand to steady herself.

The situation was impossible. Was she dreaming?

She became aware of being watched. Five pairs of brownish, curious eyes swam into focus, became vague, and reappeared. Nearby, five dark, hairy shapes perched on a grid of girders. Adding to her disquiet, one, much smaller than the rest, appeared to be wearing a stocking cap.

Rubbing her throbbing head, certain she was dreaming, she tried to make sense of what she saw. One of the shapes grunted and, with the greatest of ease, swung closer. It was clearly a gorilla.

Coral jerked back and doing so nearly lost her grip. A strong hand steadied her. A dark, familiar face came into view.

The face belonged to Sebastian.

The shock of it caused her to kick, one foot tearing through the bag, almost knocking him off the girder. It allowed time enough to shed her cocoon. Flinging away the bag, she watched it billow to the river below, then crawled out of Sebastian’s reach.

“Coral—”

“What do you want with me? What, what?” she croaked. She lost her balance, dropped to the girder below, and began to slide.

“Coral—” Sebastian effortlessly swung down toward her.

“Get away from me!” she screamed. “Get away! Get away!”

Sebastian offered a hand. Attempting to elude his reach, she slipped again.

“No—Coral—Stop—Coral.”

She lost her grip and began to fall. Sebastian deftly snatched her in his powerful arms and drew her back.

After a moment he spoke again. “I—am—Sebastian,” his voice both sad and reassuring.

Coral stopped squirming.

“I—am—Sebastian.”

The bleakness of it touched her heart. It was too real, too sincere to be anything but true. She softened as he gently turned her to face him. The humanity of his brown, damp eyes transfixed her. She no longer felt threatened, but sensed an overwhelming, crippling sense of grief. Unable to speak, she could only slowly shake her head. Sebastian positioned her firmly on the girder and removed his hands. His fingers signed a word.

Finally, Coral found her voice. “Sebastian—”

He nodded.

She fought back tears. Her gut believed, but her heart still found it impossible to follow. “No—No—No—it’s not possible.”

Sebastian signed again. “I am Sebastian.”

A part of her still refused to believe and she turned away.

“My eyes,” said Sebastian.

Coral turned slowly and locked eyes with him. The eyes, she realized, hadn’t changed. The realization made her head swim and her strength drained away. She tottered, but Sebastian drew her into his arms.

The other apes swung to their level and gathered around.

Coral studied Sebastian. “It’s not—just not possible.” She examined his hands. “What did he do? What did he do?” She cupped his face and began to weep.

“I not know,” said Sebastian.

“Sebastian—Sebastian—Sebastian. You’re alive.”

“I am.”

Coral heard animal grunts and remembered the other apes. Were they equally as real, five dark shapes swinging from the underbelly of a bridge spanning a river in Duluth, Minnesota, USA?

“They not hurt you. They know you with me,” Sebastian assured her as he took her hand. “Coral like to hold hands.”

The apes huddled beneath the bridge, grooming each other.

Coral and Sebastian perched side by side. “Why didn’t you tell me what he did to you? Why were you—Joseph?” She was unable to take her eyes off him.

“Joseph was man. Sebastian—” he nodded toward the apes cracking lice between their teeth. “I wanted you. To find you.”

“We have to go to Gordon, Sebastian. I’ll convince him to help you, us. I wouldn’t know where else to turn.”

“Help?”

“You certainly can’t stay here.”

Sebastian appeared to give this some thought.

“What will you eat? What will happen when someone sees you?”

Her questions went unanswered. There were no easy answers.

“They’ll hurt you, Sebastian. They’ll take you back.”

“We don’t want to go back.”

“Then let me help you, Sebastian.”

“No. You cannot go. You can never go now.”

“Sebastian, do you trust me?”

“Not know.”

“You do know. You sense things. You were always able to sense things. Now tell me, am I telling the truth?”

Sebastian studied her eyes as he considered her question. “Yes.”

“Then let me go. I’ll come back. Swear I will.”

“Then you come with us? Live with us?”

It required all her concentration to make him believe what came next. “Yes.”

Sebastian considered and finally nodded.

“I won’t be back until after dark,” said Coral. “Look for a light. I’ll shine a light when it’s safe.”

“Okay. We wait for light.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Entirely by chance, the same taxi that had earlier delivered Sebastian to her Beacon Street address, now deposited Coral in front of her building. The cabbie lingered briefly, hoping to catch sight of the fare that had stiffed him, then drove off.

Once inside her apartment, she rushed to the telephone. She had just begun to dial when a voice froze her finger.

“Coral? Are you alright?” It was Gordon. She made him out seated in a dim glow of neon from outside a window. He switched on a lamp, then stood and quickly stepped to her.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she said, fighting the urge to immediately demand answers to a hundred roiling questions.

“Please sit. There’s something I have to tell you.”

“About Joseph, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

Gordon returned to the couch. Coral sat across from him, desperately needing her father to confide in her. “Please, Dad, tell me, tell me.”

Gordon peered around, seeming uncomfortable, as if they might not be alone. “He’s not right, I’m afraid,” he began. He’s had a complete breakdown. You may be in danger.”

Terribly disappointed, Coral turned away. “I see. Is that all?”

“I think it’s best that you stay here.”

“I’ve seen him.”

“Joseph?”

“Not Joseph.” Her eyes began to tear. “We scattered his ashes.”

“You were only a child. You wouldn’t have understood.”

“I was seventeen, for God’s sake.”

Deeply ashamed, Gordon turned away. “I wanted to tell you. I was going to. But when I saw how he felt about you—” He paused. “How do you feel about him? Did he try to harm you?”

“Of course not. But why, why, why? What were you thinking?”

Gordon ignored the question. “Is he safe?”

Coral nodded. “I told him I’d convince you to help. I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt him. He’s waiting.”

“Such a coincidence,” said Erhardt, stepping into view from the bedroom. “We’ve been waiting.” The three Africans stood behind him.

Sebastian and his band shivered in the clammy night fog.

“Wait for light. Wait for light,” he repeated over and over, vigilant for Coral’s promised signal. Finally, there was a faint glimmer of approaching light. Sebastian became fully alert.

He climbed to the uppermost girder. Accompanied by the clatter of rotor blades, the light grew uncomfortably bright and he was forced to shield his eyes.

The other apes had seen it, too, although to them the consequences of the approaching light were meaningless. In any case, there was no way that their fearless leader, who understood much about the perplexing world of humans, would have been able to explain.

Too late, Sebastian understood that something was terribly, horribly wrong. The chopper descended and hovered at a stone’s throw—Erhardt framed in the open hatch.

Sebastian squinted into the blinding light. “No Coral.”

Gordon and Coral were at that moment in the Rambler speeding through the fog toward the bridge. All around, city lights twinkled in the fog.

“What will they do with him?” Coral asked.

Gordon stared impassively ahead, choosing not to answer.

“Just tell me one thing,” Coral insisted. “He’s a lab animal, correct? Are they going to cut him open?”

They rode in silence.

“I see,” said Coral.

“I’m afraid so.”

Erhardt reached back as Lumumba handed him a shotgun. “No, the tranq,” said the poacher. “We take him out, the others should turn into lambs.” Lumumba passed him the tranq gun.

Erhardt leaned out, trained his gunsight on Sebastian and fingered the trigger. “What’s your guess? Sink or float?”

Lumumba shrugged.

Below, the Rambler braked hard halfway across the bridge.

“Sebastian!” Coral shouted as she climbed out, bolted to the rail and extended a hand over the side. Ten feet below, Sebastian clung to a girder, looked up and reached in the instant that a dart impaled his thigh. Coral extended her reach, but the distance between them was still too great.

Gordon, too, bolted from the vehicle. Coral was climbing over the side.

Sebastian blanched as she reached for his hand.

“You did this, Coral—?”

“No, Sebastian, I didn’t. I mean—they—”

“You brought them.”

His eyes turned to Erhardt as the breeze snatched the Stetson from the poacher’s head, sending it slowly spiraling toward the river—

*The infant studied his reflection in the shallow jungle pool. A prankster, he scooped rainwater into his palm and splashed a second ape, also an infant, snoozing amid a bed of leaves. Jolted awake, the doused ape took his half-brother down in a playful wrestle. They rolled and rolled, playfully nipping each other, but causing no real harm. They were inseparable—the same father, different mothers.*

*They did not yet have names, but soon would.*

*Sebastian and Lex.*

*Pok, Pok, Pok—an adult male told them that play was over. The infants pinched and poked each other as they pushed through the sunlit clearing to join the small group that comprised their family.*

*Sebastian leapt into his mother’s arms.*

*Lex also leapt into his mother’s arms.*

*The pair nursed at their mother’s teats.*

*Now, approaching up the mountain, a strange sort of sudden summer storm, unaccompanied by ominous clouds or rain, only the dull roar of wind, closer and closer, forest palms shuddering in the gale.*

*Then—a sharp CRACK audible above the gusting wind.*

*Sebastian’s mother staggered and collapsed.*

*A heartbeat later, a second CRACK, nearer than the first.*

*Lex’s mother collapsed.*

*The shrieking, stomping infants clung to their fallen mommies.*

*There followed something equally horrifying—a deafening clatter of rotor blades. The plague that followed was over and done in a scatter of shots, the dell littered with the dead and dying.*

*The half-brothers looked to the circle of blue sky visible above the clearing.*

*Whock, Whock, Whock! A god was descending.*

*A helicopter.*

*A figure wearing an enormous white hat appeared in the open hatch, a long stick positioned to his eye. The stick spoke like thunder, and an instant later their father was dead. The hat blew free, floating to the jungle floor.*

Now, Sebastian too was falling, falling, ever falling. The white hat tumbled with him, side by side until both vanished into the fog.

Coral stood on the shrouded bridge, devastated. Gordon stepped close to comfort her, but she shook off his embrace and strode away.

Erhardt too had seen the gorilla vanish, along with the poacher’s hat. “The rest’ll come out now,” he said.

Lumumba spoke and calmly pointed.

Erhardt’s head swiveled. “Jesus, what are they doing?”

Beneath the bridge, Lex dangled one-armed from a girder. Releasing his grip, he plunged toward the river. The chopper’s beam swung wide to reveal the other apes. One by one they followed Lex, black smudges against the pearly white. A sixty-foot plummet into the void and they were gone.

Erhardt looked on, dumbfounded. There were no longer any apes, only the river dimly visible beneath a veil of drifting fog. He leaned back and sighed. “Let’s check the river, see if anything washes up. Like my hat.”

Gordon, too, had seen his life’s work vanish, followed by the five apes. He rushed to the other side of the bridge, but again, there was no trace.

Coral was gone as well.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A half-mile downriver, a white Stetson washed against the shore and bobbed there in an eddy. Soon, a dark clad mass joined the hat. Frigid water lapped the lifeless form. Moments passed before five soggy, hairy shapes emerged from the treeline and trooped to the water’s edge.

The apes dragged the inert giant from the shallows. Propping his head and limbs, the four adults, accompanied by the infant no longer wearing the stocking cap, carried their leader to the forest edge. There they gently lowered him to the ground. Lex withdrew the dart still buried in Sebastian’s haunch.

After some moments he stirred, coughed, and emptied his flooded lungs. His eyes flickered and opened. Rising on unsteady legs, he stripped himself of coat, shirt, pants, gloves and boots, until he stood naked before his faithful band. Then, spying the Stetson, he returned to the water’s edge. His voice barely audible, he turned to the others. “This—the man.” He passed the sodden hat around, but they seemed not to understand.

He gave up trying to communicate with man words and began to speak in the gorilla tongue, scolding the hat, accusing it of Erhardt’s wretched acts. Finally, the apes understood—the one who wore the hat was responsible for their misery.

Again, they heard the faint clatter of the metal bird.

The chopper followed the silvery sheen of the river.

“Over there,” Erhardt instructed.

Slicing through the dark, their roving light revealed discarded clothing strewn at the forest edge. Then, Erhardt saw movement—lumbering shapes skirting the dark wood. He counted them as they scattered into the sheltering trees. “One—Two—Three—Four—Five. They made it, all of ’em.”

Lumumba tapped Erhardt’s shoulder and nodded.

The spot had picked up a sixth ape, the lingering effect of the tranq impairing the natural grace of his gait as he followed the others into the woodland park.

Coral, too, after descending a treacherous path, had followed the river’s course and come upon Sebastian’s discarded clothing. Her face tilted to the beam of the muted chopper growing small as it skirted the treetops.

Erhardt’s team, including the pilot, climbed from the chopper. They had set down beside the lake house.

“This is smart,” said Erhardt as he surveyed the nearby wood. He was again in possession of his shotgun. “They know these trees. Apes are good in trees.” The five shouldered their weapons and turned their flashlights to the forest.

Not far behind, Gordon’s Rambler sped down the lake road. Hurtling past a stand of shrubbery, he was unaware of Coral who had slipped to the roadside and watched him pass.

Not wanting to announce her arrival, in case Gordon had returned, a mile from the lake house, its slate roof and towers already visible above the ground mist, she had paid her cabby and continued on foot. After her father’s betrayal it was finished between them, she no longer wanted any part of him. What had she been thinking? It was a mistake ever to have returned to the States. She had but one reason to return to the old manor, to see with her own eyes the basement “habitat” where Sebastian had spent the years since his rebirth as Joseph Young

An animal howl disturbed the silence.

“What was that?” one of the Africans asked.

“Wolf?” asked the pilot?

“Not sure,” said Erhardt, leading them further into the snow-dusted timber. Another howl and the five men exchanged uncertain glances.

“Gorillas have their own language,” said Erhardt. “Voice prints have ID’d twenty-two different sounds.”

“Which one was that?” Their pilot, although long part of the team, had no experience tracking game on the ground and was ready to abandon the hunt before it had even begun.

“Number twenty-three.”

The four men ventured deeper into the wood, their eyes turned to the treetops, alert to any sign of danger. A dark, antlered shape suddenly crossed their path and ambled into the undergrowth.

“Moose,” Erhardt told his startled team.

“Moose?” Lumumba questioned.

“Big horned goddamned antelope,” Erhardt explained.

“Goddamned antelope,” Lumumba shared with the other Africans.

The men proceeded a short distance before Erhardt signaled another halt. He turned to the pilot. “Go back. Find Leland. Tell him they’re making a stand. Say we could use a couple more men.”

The pilot quickly departed, happy to be assigned a less daunting task.

The rest proceeded, finally coming upon a footprint trail in the thin snow. Erhardt studied the prints and appeared mystified.

“No man. Six *ngyulla*,” said Lumumba.

Sebastian’s ape-tracks, trailing the others, led into the foliage. Erhardt nodded, trading the tranq gun for Lumumba’s shotgun.

The tracks wound into a shrouded glade and went no further. Erhardt halted in mid-step. Training their lights, the men made out Sebastian, naked, crouched motionless in their beams. Erhardt stood in awe. Could this man actually be part ape? Could this ape actually be part man? He lowered his light, spotting Sebastian’s ape feet. “You him?”

Sebastian made no sound.

Erhardt kept his distance, the shotgun ready. “Okay, then here’s something I always wanted to ask, guess now’s as good a time as any,” he said. “You guys, when you’re not busy swinging through trees, what do you like to do for fun?”

Sebastian grunted.

“I didn’t catch that. Why don’t you come a little closer,” said Erhardt.

Sebastian remained crouched.

“You don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?” Erhardt sniggered. “Maybe you’ll understand this.” He fired the shotgun into the air. A branch shattered. Clumped snow and pine needles fluttered to the clearing. When all was still again, the ape-man was no longer there.

Gordon came to a hard stop beside the chopper as it lifted and veered toward the city. When a short distance from the manor, a taxi had passed in the opposite direction. He assumed Coral to have returned to the house and he would find her inside. What he would say to her was unclear, but it would have to wait—the sound of a gunshot from the nearby wood now diverted his attention.

Climbing from the Rambler, he sprinted toward the forest wall.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

Deep in the forest, Sebastian stumbled on. Behind, four flashlights closed the distance through the dense, whitewashed greenery. Finally, overcome by the lingering effect of the tranq, he tottered and sank to the ground.

The pump of Erhardt’s shotgun ended the silence as the team surrounded the fugitive, four beams of light trained upon him. The trackers leveled their weapons.

“Say something, anything,” Erhardt hissed.

Again, Sebastian refused to speak.

The poacher and the three Africans turned to the sound of someone, something approaching, crashing through the underbrush. Gasping, Gordon stumbled upon the scene and moved quickly to Sebastian’s side. “Sebastian, are you alright? What have they done to you?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’d want my money back,” quipped Erhardt.

“There’s something wrong. He’s been injured,” said Gordon, bending to the ape-man. “Sebastian?”

Sebastian’s eyes opened. Seeing Gordon, he slowly rose and began to knuckle walk, weaving aimless circles while grunting like a common gorilla. His eyes fell on one of the African’s flashlights. “Light.”

Seeing this impossibly strange “man” behaving like a gorilla confounded the Congolese tracker. Dropping his light, he quickly backed away. Sebastian scooped it up and took a bite. The lens shattered and went dark.

Erhardt turned to Gordon and said, “Don’t know what you were thinking, doc, E for effort and all that, but this guy’s a bust,” as though unimpressed, although in truth, he was unnerved and astounded.

“Sebastian? What is it? What’s happened?” asked Gordon.

“Light,” Sebastian repeated. He turned to Erhardt’s light, drew close, sniffed, and gave it a lick.

“Yeah, very good. That’s a light. Just don’t drool on my hand,” said Erhardt. He turned to Gordon. “What else can he say?”

“Hello, Gordon,” Sebastian spoke softly.

Now Erhardt was impressed. “Can he understand me? Can you, Sebastian, Joseph, whoever you are? Are you really an ape? A goddamned ape?”

“You are all apes.”

“Go on, I’m listening,” Erhardt goaded.

“I have learned some things about men.”

“Do tell.”

“They not like dark. These trees not their home,” he said, his eyes taking in the forest. “They think they smart. They think everything outside them not smart.”

“Well, now, aren’t you clever,” said Erhardt. “Anything else?”

“Everywhere they go, they carry big stick—or gun.”

Sebastian slowly rose to his full height, stood erect like a man, and glared into Erhardt’s eyes. “But I—I carry bigger stick.” The hunk of dead wood came from behind his back in a blur and hammered Erhardt’s temple. The poacher groaned and slowly sank to his knees.

The surrounding forest immediately came alive. Branches rained down, pelting heads, slashing faces, bruising limbs. From all around came the hoots and shrieks of unseen, tree perched apes.

Two of the Africans ran to save their lives.

Erhardt staggered to his feet and followed through the underwood.

Only Lumamba stood his ground, prepared to use his weapon, but was quickly outnumbered and battered to the ground by a mob of hairy, pummeling shapes.

Gordon, too, fled, the forest stillness punctuated by the shrieks of the pursuing, rapidly gaining apes. After a short distance, a body hurled from the dark blindsided and toppled him. The doctor crawled from beneath the dead man, pausing long enough to recognize one of the Africans. Back on his feet, Gordon began to run again. Finally, ahead above the thinning trees, he could see the turrets and spires of Gothenburg Manor.

Inside, Gordon’s fingers trembled as he snatched his own tranq gun and a handful of darts from a lockbox in the manor library.

Behind, a dark shape shadowed a window. Seeing the shadow splayed on the opposite wall, Gordon spun. Glass exploded and the shape climbed through, was briefly entangled in the velvet drapes, a purple ghost, shook them off, and charged the doctor.

Gordon retreated through the parlor. There was no method to his plan, only to find Coral and escape with their lives, his flight passing through a succession of rooms, several of which he had never before entered.

“Coral! Coral—?”

But there was no answer and no sign of her.

“My darling!”

She was nowhere.

Was she injured? Had one of the apes gotten to her first? Had Sebastian?

Elsewhere in the manor, another window exploded, followed by a third, then a fourth. Disoriented in his own house, coming nearly full circle, stealing along the hall connecting to the dining room, he found the way barred by a second ape. Darting through a side door and hoping to attain the staircase, his ascent was blocked by a third. Attempting to pass through the billiards room on his way to the foyer, he found an infant gorilla perched atop the maroon felt. The simian’s size did nothing to dampen the doctor’s fear. Sidestepping the startled juvenile, he arrived at the foyer. Reaching for the knob, the front door flew off its hinges, revealing Lex.

Bereft of options, Gordon turned and fled down the basement steps.

Outside, Coral paused at the gate, the castle that was not a castle looming just beyond. Earlier, when she was still some distance from the house, she’d heard glass break, several times and in rapid succession, wondered whether her father had smashed the Rambler, and had quickened her step to come to his aid, but now saw the undamaged car parked below the portico. The front door, however, hung askew.

Drawing near, movement in the conservatory drew her attention. Cloaked in shadow, a tall figure stood beside the towering oak Sebastian had once attained to reach her bedroom window.

“Dad, is that you?” asked Coral.

Silence.

“Dad? Please say something.”

But the figure was *not* her father.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gordon entered the basement, flung open and quickly shut the steel door. Since Sebastian’s absence there had been no need for locks, but now, when it was most needed, the key always around his neck was gone. It flashed through his mind that it had been lost in the forest and now likely lay beside the dead African that had brought him to the ground.

The stark glass cubicle that replaced the fairytale gazebo of Sebastian’s youth stood dark. The wheelchair stood nestled in a puddle of moonlight. Gordon turned briefly to the chained window, but knew there was no hope of escape there. He had trapped himself, not through an ill-considered decision, but because every other avenue had been denied.

The door swung open.

He withdrew into the shadows.

A broad, tall shape—too tall to be a gorilla—stepped through. Had one of the Africans, perhaps, escaped the forest melee? But the Africans were exceedingly tall and thin, not broad. Whomever, his features were difficult to make out in the meager light.

Gordon shrank back further.

The intruder lumbered to Sebastian’s wheelchair and nudged it across the room. Now, in the shafting moonlight, there was no mistaking the tall white Stetson.

“Erhardt—?”

The figure drew near.

It was not Erhardt.

Sebastian’s features had lost their innocence. All trace of the slow-witted smile had vanished. He stood motionless, shaded in dirt and leaves.

Sebastian kicked the wheelchair, knocking Gordon’s legs from under him so that he toppled into the chair. Sebastian lifted an arm as if to strike him. Gordon flinched, prepared for what he felt he deserved.

Then silence. Several moments passed before Sebastian spoke. “Con—grat—u—lations, doctor.”

“What—?”

“I am suck—cess. Success.”

Sebastian was offering to shake his hand. Gordon steeled himself and grasped it in his own.

“I have a place now, Gordon. I fit. Here. Now. Tonight.”

He nodded to the other apes now crowding the open door, looking lost and helpless. “I have led them this far. I will lead them the rest of the way.”

“And where would that be, Sebastian?”

“Home. Af—ri—ca. Africa.”

Gordon knew this was utter folly, but chose not to speak.

“Where is Coral?” asked Sebastian, sensing she was somewhere close by.

“I wish I knew, but I don’t.”

“The man I hit with dead tree. She told him where to find me.”

“No, Sebastian, please don’t think that. She came to me for help. The bad man found out about it. I didn’t try to stop him. I’m the one who lost Coral, not you. I’m sorry.”

“You get her back.”

“No. I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“Not too late, Gordon. Take us away from here.”

“All of you? How?”

“Your boat.”

“No, Sebastian. That’s just not possible.”

Sebastian eased Gordon to his feet and looked into his eyes. “You can, Gordon.”

“What about Coral? I can’t just leave her.”

Sebastian preferred not to answer.

“To be a man, all you must do is act like one.”

Sebastian and the five gorillas gathered around while Gordon siphoned fuel from the Rambler into a gasoline can. Pinkish light from the eastern sky tinged the upper layer of pearly white that shrouded the lake as the doctor led the way through the gate. Sebastian followed, the other escapees at his heels. Beyond the gate, it was but a stone’s throw to the pier. Seeing the motor launch moored there, and finally realizing what was expected, the apes were reluctant to board. Sebastian hooted and grunted, giving encouragement. After some moments of heated protest, Lex climbed aboard. The sturdy craft swayed, but quickly steadied itself. The rest soon followed, crowding the vessel stern to aft.

Sebastian turned for a final look at the house that had been both refuge and prison in the years since his transformation.

Then—silhouetted movement at an upstairs turret. Leafless branches partially blocked his view, but there was space enough, sufficient to make out a man, a woman, behind the balcony doors. Sebastian looked on, repelled by the bodies entwined there. Somehow, he knew. The doors banged open, revealing Coral in Erhardt’s embrace.

It was not an embrace, but a fierce struggle.

“Sebastian! Look up! I’ve got your girlfriend!” yelled the poacher.

At the sound of Erhardt’s voice, Gordon spun, then quickly scrambled off the launch to the pier. The recent days and nights had seen a progression of horrors, but now he was truly afraid.

Sebastian’s hackles rose. His throat clicked. His arms swung.

“Sebastian, it’s all right! Go on! He’s not hurting me!” Coral shouted, desperate to escape Erhardt’s grasp.

Gordon was already sprinting back through the gate.

Erhardt became more aggressive, pawing Coral’s breasts, his grunts and groans not unlike those of an ape.

Sebastian’s open palms rose to his chest—*Pok, Pok, Pok*. He lumbered forward, agitation mounting.

“No, Sebastian! No! Keep away! Stop, Sebastian! Stop!” Coral begged.

“He can’t stop,” Erhardt gloated. “No more than he can stop his heartbeat.” One eye remained on the charging primate, while the other fell on the shotgun propped nearby. His tongue swiped across Coral’s neck.

Below, Gordon bolted past in the shadow of the great tree, mounted the portico, and entered the house.

Close behind, Sebastian entered the conservatory, hauled himself into the lower branches of the oak, and began to climb.

“No, no, no, Sebastian! Stay away! He’ll hurt you!” Coral shouted.

“He’s beyond words. He’s untamed, savage,” said Erhardt. “A low, undisciplined brute. Which makes him mine,” theatrical because sometimes that was his way.

Sebastian had obtained a sturdy limb beyond the turret and was inching closer.

Erhardt waited, then flung Coral aside, lunged for the shotgun, pumped it, and took aim. She quickly stepped onto the balcony, clambered atop the balustrade, and flung herself unto the branch where Sebastian perched. An instant later she was sheltered in his arms.

The poacher had hoped for a clean shot, but Coral blocked his target. Stepping onto the balcony for a better angle, he again sighted his weapon. Buckshot tore through twigs and branches, but had no visible effect on the ape-man. He quickly reloaded, adjusted his position, took aim once more, thumbed the trigger—and in that instant felt a stabbing pain at his neck. Wobbly, he tried to steady himself, but overcorrected. Spilling over the rail from his perch, he groped for a branch to break his fall, the firearm still in his free hand. The gun was wrested from his grip. The poacher’s stomach churned as Sebastian peered down the barrel, almost comical, decided which was the end to point, and fit the butt to his shoulder.

Erhardt’s fear turned to scorn. “No. Not like this. And damn sure not by you—”

Before the ape-man could fire—a soft whoosh of escaping gas from the balcony. The poacher’s free hand slapped at his neck. The hand grasping the branch began to lose all feeling. Unable to maintain his grip, he plunged three stories through the roof, landing amid a tangle of briars.

Gordon peered down from the balcony, pale vapor from the tranq gun still wafting from the barrel.

Coral secure in his arms, Sebastian nimbly descended, lowered her to the ground, and dropped to her side.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Moments later, Gordon rushed from the portico, into the conservatory, and bent to the broken poacher. The dart still protruding from his neck had caused him to lose his grip, but death came from a broken neck.

Coral flung herself into her father’s arms. “What do we do, what do we do?”

“Remember, Gordon—my home—your home,” said Sebastian.

And so, it was decided. Gordon and Sebastian returned down the pier to the launch. “We’d better hurry,” the doctor shouted as he climbed aboard. The five that were pure ape followed the human.

Coral joined them and was ready to board, but Sebastian held her back. In the delirium of her struggle and rescue, she had been unaware of his nakedness. Now, she blushed and averted her eyes.

“No. You will not fit,” he said.

She knew it was true, but there were other, better reasons as well.

Gordon, too, understood that his daughter would not be coming. There was no time to linger, none for prolonged good-byes. Several vehicles were fast approaching on the lake road, Leland leading the motorcade.

Sebastian had also seen them.

“Coral—?”

She turned to him. What was there to say? What *could* she say? Placing her lips to his cheek, she planted a soft kiss. Sebastian’s eyes fluttered.

The ape-man boarded the launch. His back turned, Coral saw faint traces of a lambent “saddle” on his haunches, shimmering like rustling silk, the first evidence of a return to his natural state.

She untied the mooring line.

Gordon poured gasoline into the tank, started the engine, and they began to move.

The last of the winter stars dissolved in the pre-dawn light. Five apes huddled together in the mist while Gordon steered from the wheelhouse. Sebastian, wearing the white Stetson, knelt at the prow, leaning on the poacher’s shotgun. His eyes turned from Coral to face the first glint of the rising sun.

On the Dark Continent, an eight-hour time difference, early evening shadows crept through the row of tiny windows facing the row of empty beds. A lantern shone beside Bunny’s bed, replacing the storyteller’s silhouette with the listener’s shadow cast upon the nearby wall.

“I’ve finally grown weary of my own voice. Thank you for the chat.” The chair creaked as the speaker rose and emerged from behind the partition. A part of him still half expecting Sebastian, Bunny scooted back and stiffened, wincing as the tension vibrated through his lower limbs. Instead, he was in the presence of Dr. Gordon Obler.

The doctor was a changed man; scruffily bearded, of bronzed face and limbs, a year’s growth of uncut, unkempt hair, his shirt torn, most of the buttons missing, nothing like Bunny had imagined while the doctor told his strange tale. There was something of the savage about him, yet calm and steady. Hefting the shotgun, he stood close by the bed and observed Bunny’s leg. “He didn’t mean to hit you. It was a warning. You’ll recover.”

“Yes, more or less. Or so I’ve been told.”

Gordon took another cigarette from the nearly empty pack. “I advise you stay off the mountain.”

Bunny nodded. He offered Gordon the pack and he accepted. The doctor’s footsteps echoed past the empty beds and he was gone.

In the deserted lobby he deposited a letter in a mail tray. Because there was no regular postal service it would not begin the long route to its destination without someone first taking it to the nearest town, twenty miles distant on a pretend road, and from there to Kigali, the nation’s capital, another seventy.

Bunny raised himself up as much as he was able, craned his neck to see above the partition, and peered through the window. After a short time, he saw him—Gordon, slightly stooped, as if he bore an invisible burden, using the shotgun as a walking aid, making his way to the verdant slope of one of the five volcanic peaks. Ascending a switchback trail, he was soon swallowed in thick foliage.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Mailed from a Kigali post office, the envelope bearing a collectible stamp marked Rwanda Republique, depicting a tableau of leopards, arrived in Coral’s mailbox thirty-three days later. Inside, she found a letter written in her father’s script. A single Polaroid photograph fell out.

Slightly askew and out of focus, it showed Gordon and Sebastian among a troop of mountain gorillas assembled in a jungle clearing, not unlike a party of campers, mugging into the lens—a group portrait. Lex was there, and so were the others from the Center.

Coral read the letter.

*Dearest daughter,*

*After weeks of perseverance, I finally managed to teach a large female—whom I have taken to calling Annette—how to operate my camera. She snapped this picture shortly before dining on it. I did, however, manage to salvage this shot.*

Coral pictured the one named Annette taking a nibble from the instant camera. The photograph nestled in her lap was fully developed, but now, in her mind’s eye, she saw it anew; the layers of light-sensitive chemicals packaged in the thin square sheath triggered to form an image; Gordon tucking it under his armpit, the warmth there speeding the process, the picture ghostly at first, then brighter and clearer until she saw what she saw.

She continued reading.

*I’m here now with Sebastian and his group of thirty-one animals, cut off from my own kind, as he was once cut off from his—as it should be.*

The view in her mind’s eye changed again.

Gordon, much thinner than when last she saw him, and clearly more fit, wielded a shotgun while following Sebastian and the apes up a steep, twisting trail.

*I need you to know that I’m not doing this simply so that you’ll forgive me. The animals in Sebastian’s group are still, after years of mistreatment, frequently sick, and require my help in overcoming illnesses they’re not prepared to fight in this wilderness.*

Tears flowed.

*You cannot possibly know how much I miss you, and although he and I now talk of other things, I have no doubt Sebastian feels the same. It’s not a good time to visit, as outsiders to this mountain are met with—aggravated skepticism.*

The group arrives in a glen not far below the summit of the cloud mountain. A panoramic view, a thousand shades of green stretching away in all directions.

*Sebastian says he would like to return to the States someday. There are still rats to catch, is how he put it.*

Coral, who had never seen Sebastian in his prime or in his element, now pictured him so: Sebastian, this impossibly strange creature, this ape-man, a shotgun strapped across his back, his body covered in a thick coat of luxuriant hair glistening like polished chrome in the setting sun, rising to his full height and pounding his chest—Pok, Pok, Pok.

*Sebastian is a changed “man,” and it is entirely possible that even you would fail to recognize him. Much of his hair, which has grown back, has turned an almost unearthly shade of silver.*

*With love,*

*Your Father,*

*Africa*

The extraordinary primate stood apart from the others, watching over his own, and as he reared his head, canines and gums exposed, the roar that followed rustled the trees and carried down the forested slope. From there it was borne across the Great African Lakes, to the equator, and swept into the neighboring nations of Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and across the ever mysterious and malevolent Congo, continuing on the backs of trade winds, blowing all the way across the Big Water to the apartment on Beacon Street.

Coral returned the letter to its envelope and tucked it under her pillow. Before turning out the light, she propped the Polaroid against a bedside lamp.

That night she dreamt of what her father had once christened Shangri-La, she called her Rock Candy Mountain, and Sebastian considered his home away from home, although he never actually spoke the words. What they did there, the girl and the gorilla, was entirely predictable and sentimental, but it made her laugh in her sleep. The photograph was the first thing she saw when she awoke in the morning.