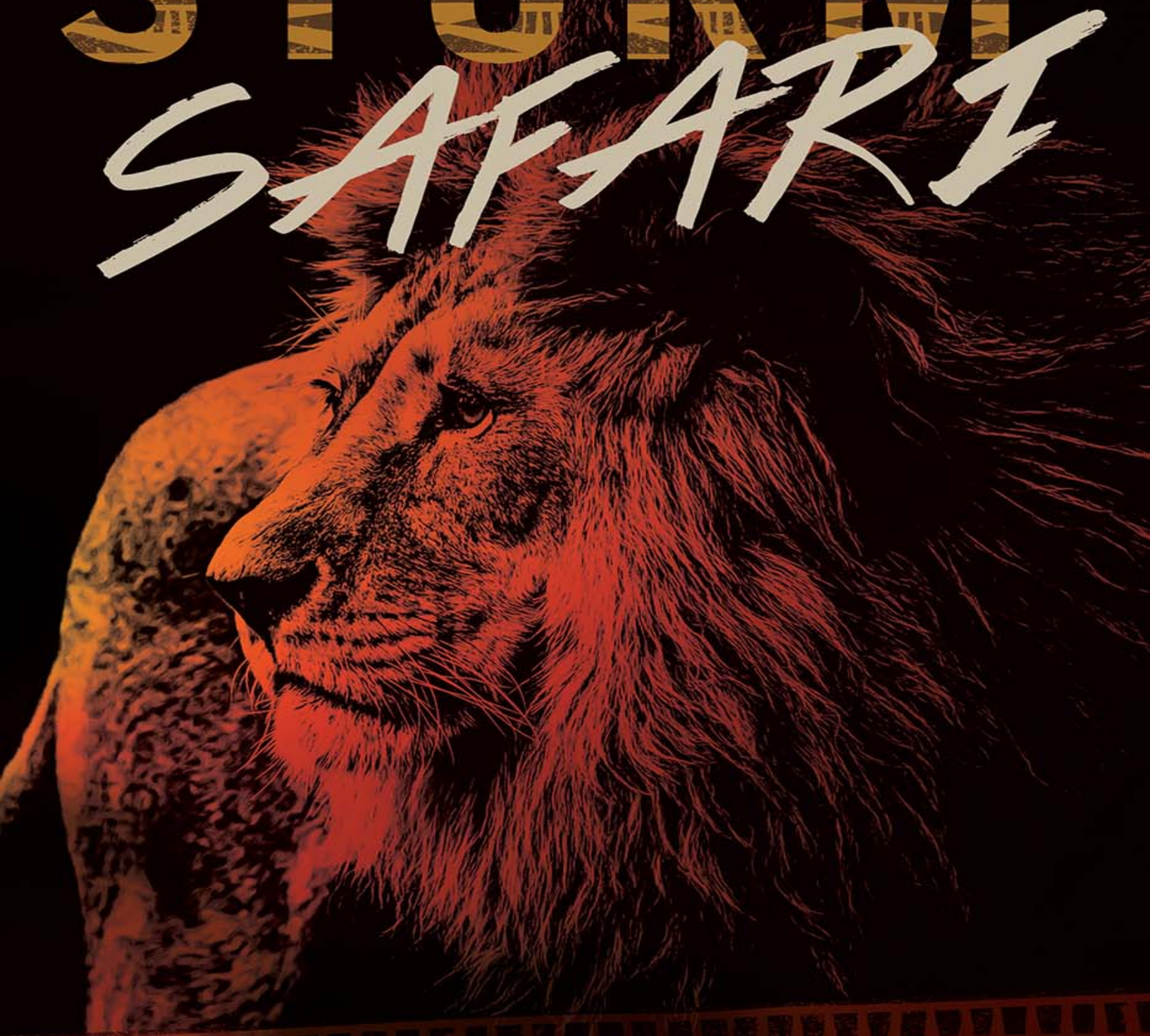


STORM

SAFARI



LEENELSON



Chapter One



Her countenance was both terrible and pleasant, an African queen, the whites of her eyes flashing like polished ivory. Her nose was wide and flat in contrast to the noses of the chattering white people who surrounded her at the dinner table. The black portions of her eyes were reflecting a subtle radiant light, the glow of life and vitality.

She was taller than the average woman, her muscles stronger. A large woman by most standards, but not plump or saggy. Her navy blue cotton dress, though close at the neck and covering her knees, could not hide the swells and valleys that were both frightening and inviting. Her shin-high boots were thick and brown, the kind men wore in snake country. There were heavy copper bracelets on her sleek, black wrists, and her earrings were polished silver spoons, lures for subduing the wild men-trout of the world.

As I sat there looking at her, I realized the Lord in heaven had shown me his finest work—a frightening goddess for the pagans, or a loving heavenly mother for the civilized nations, I had found her.

Her perfection had only become more refined and convincing during the twenty-five years since I had last seen her. No more than a girl then, she was working with her father, a famous whiskey trader and commercial fisherman. The moment I met her, I nicknamed her Queen Victoria, because I mostly couldn't pronounce or remember her real name, Adjoa Ewudzie. Her father didn't seem to mind me giving his daughter a nickname, one that shortened to just Victoria as she grew older.

She had not noticed my arrival, occupied with the others at her table, all talking at her, angry, over-serious, accusatory frowns on their pale, white faces.

Victoria seemed to be handling the onslaught with grace and confidence. Otherwise I might have joined her, uninvited, an admirer coming to the rescue.

We were in Vic Baboo's Cafe, one of the few air-conditioned eating places in downtown Kumasi, Ghana, the last major town on the northern edge of the more civilized portion of Ghana. Kumasi was the stepping off place for those venturing into the wild northern frontier, full of gold, dangerous animals, tribes that still waged war with one another, Muslim terrorists, and slave traders who openly disregarded the anti-slavery laws.

I had driven to Kumasi from Accra in a brand-new Land Rover, provided by the Department of Game and Wildlife. The compartment in the back, as well as the rack on top, were packed with boxes of supplies: ice chests with food and drink, plastic containers and canvas bags carrying ammunition, night vision binoculars, rifle scopes, and firearms. Included with the firearms was a sawed-off, nine-slug, Winchester shotgun, the model stagecoach guards in the 1800s used to call a Mule's Leg, because every time the shooter pulled the trigger, it kicked like a mule. Also included was a #5 steel bear trap—against the law in the United States—the jaws lined with one-inch steel teeth that when slammed shut on the foot of an adult lion would never let go until the lion was dead.

My plan was to link up with government officials at Vic's Cafe, game wardens who were directed to guide me to the locations where man-eating lions were stalking and killing people. But the wardens hadn't arrived yet.

While waiting and watching Victoria, I was trying to make sense of the biggest, thickest, most confusing restaurant menu I had ever seen. There were Chinese dishes, Japanese sushi items, Italian, German, Mexican, and American selections too. Vic seemed to put anything on the menu that anyone might ever want to order, even if the cooks didn't know how to cook it. I figured my chances for a nice meal would improve if I ordered something African, something they made every day for the regular customers. So I ordered peanut soup with guinea fowl drumsticks and a side dish of brown rice.

The soup arrived in a broad, shallow bowl, looking very African indeed: thick brown swamp water sprinkled with green jungle-leaf herbs, and soggy, boiled drumstick crocodiles lurking beneath the surface. It had a smooth, wholesome feel on the tongue, and just enough kick from some kind of pepper to keep my attention as I swallowed. I was pleased with my selection as I began to wash it down with two cans of cold Coke and bottled water. In the tropics one should never pass up the opportunity to consume lots of liquids.

“Mr. Storm, you whiskey smuggler, rum runner, desert pirate. You’re back! I didn’t recognize you at first.”

Victoria recognized me after so many years. I pushed my chair back, standing to greet her. I hoped for a hug, or at least a handshake. She offered both.

“What brings you back to Africa?” she asked as we sat down beside each other at the table.

“I am a respectable attorney in Salt Lake City, the land of the Mormons. And a hunter. I’ve come to Ghana to kill man-eating lions.”

“A lawyer and a lion killer. I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said, grinning, obviously pleased with my response. “But why did they choose you to kill the lions? We have hunters here.”

“Yes, mostly poachers who follow elephants around in broad daylight. Man-eating lions kill and eat in the night. Actually, African hunters are already involved in the chase and have been for a number of weeks. A \$2,000 bounty is being offered for each animal killed, with a bonus of another \$2,000 if evidence of human remains are found in the digestive systems. But the killing and eating of humans continues, and that, I suppose, is why I was invited to join the hunt.

“But those people at your table,” I continued, changing the subject. “Angry white people. What’s going on with you?”

“They saw the children on my boat. They think I’m a slaver,” she said.

“You have a boat?”

“Yes, you’ve seen it. A fishing boat, with a diesel engine, on the big lake. My father gave it to me when he died. He called it the *Calderone*. It came from Spain.”

“Are you a slaver?” I asked.

“Kwaku Mensah and I find them, the children who are forced to live on cocoa farms, fishing boats, or with fetish priests. We bring them to the boat where we give them good food, teach them to fish and sing, until we figure a way to take them home. Some don’t know where home is. Some don’t want to go home because they think they will be sold into slavery again. Those people at the other table say twenty thousand children are either slaves or forced indentured servants, in one form or another, in and around Lake Volta.”

“Who is Kwaku Mensah?” I asked.

“A man who carries a big machete, files his teeth into fangs. The farmers, fishermen, and priests fear him. He wears Indian Ocean pirate bloomers with

big pockets for the books he reads and Michael Jordan basketball shoes.

“He brings sugar to the children and gold to me so I can buy diesel for my boat and food for the children. You will meet him when you come to the boat, when the lion business is finished. Bring your guns. The children will watch you shoot.”

The game wardens finally arrived. Four of them, thin black men with shaved heads, spotless khaki uniforms with badges and medals, marching soberly toward our table, important boy scouts in new uniforms, brand new side arms on their hips.

“They don’t look like hunters,” she said.

“No, but they can take me to the kill locations and help with the baiting—”

“The baiting?” she asked. I decided it might be best not to explain that.

As Victoria and I rose to our feet, I grabbed one of the Coke cans to offer a toast.

“Death to the man-eating lions, that they may die quickly, that I may come to the big lake and join you on the boat . . . and meet this Kwaku fellow. . . . You think he might show me his gold mine?”

“No, no, never,” she sputtered. “And don’t ask—not ever. He might kill you.”

She picked up the second Coke and offered her own toast.

“Death to the man-eating lions, so they don’t eat you too, Mr. Storm.”

Neither of us smiled as she forced me to think about a subject I had been avoiding. This was no typical hunt—shooting zebras, antelope, and birds. I would be hunting animals that want to eat me if I don’t shoot straight.



Chapter Two



When I stepped outside the next morning, I was greeted with the scent of raw sewage, overshadowed somewhat with the sharp stinging smell of burning rubber from a nearby landfill. I wasn't surprised. Kumasi is a third-world city with two million people, about a hundred miles from the equator.

Every day, summer and winter, the weather is pretty much the same: the sun comes up at seven in the morning and sets at seven each evening; night and morning temperatures are in the seventies, and afternoon temperatures are in the nineties summer and winter. Plenty of rain with occasional dry periods in between.

Because of the high humidity, the daytime sky is not nearly as blue as in dry climates, and the night sky has fewer stars, not nearly as bright as the stars in less humid climates.

People use mosquito netting and screens to keep away the malaria mosquitos that come out at night, intent on spreading their yellow sickness to humans. Foreigners, and many locals, swallow hydroxychloroquine pills to retard the spread of the mosquito sickness. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic had little success in malaria countries where people have been using this drug to prevent malaria since World War II.

Ancient Kumasi was ruled by the Ashanti tribe. Historians claim a thousand slaves were kept busy digging gold, each man expected to produce an ounce each day. Caravans carried the gold, along with slaves and ivory, to the nations of the world, the northern route crossing the Niger River near Timbuktu and then across the Sahara Desert to North Africa, Egypt, Europe, and the Middle East. Some believe these trade routes existed in the days of King Solomon

more than a thousand years before Christ. Until recently, this wild and rich land was called Gold Coast. The name, Ghana, was introduced at the end of colonialism in 1957.

Large and small gold mines by the hundreds, smelters, and foundries exist there today, with hundreds of goldsmithing shops, large and small, many located in Kumasi.

But I had come to find lions, not gold. I met the rangers at the vehicles. They had come in a new Land Rover that looked just like mine. As we departed, two of the men led the way in the first vehicle, while the third man, Ito, traveled with me.

Leaving the city smells and buildings behind, we entered a world of green meadows, bushes, and trees. The roads and termite castles were red. We saw lots of small houses with dogs, cats, and children who weren't in school in the early part of the day. Most of the homes were made of mud or salvaged building materials from the city. There were no wood houses, which termites love to eat. Mostly, there was no glass in the windows, and usually there was rusty corrugated metal on the roofs.

We saw lots of goats, pigs, and sheep; some cows, and an occasional horse; but the only animals we could smell were the goats and pigs.

I braked to a stop in front of a little green house where a tidy row of large goats were tied to the front fence.

“Why do we stop?” Ito asked.

“Fresh meat,” I said. “When I'm hunting in Africa, I like red meat for my supper.”

“But we have American MREs, meals ready to eat,” he argued, “supplied by your state department. Excellent food, what your soldiers eat.”

“When I got out of the Marines I swore I'd never eat another MRE,” I fired back, hoping to end the debate.

He started to say something else, but I was already out of the vehicle and walking toward the goats. The largest was at the far end—a tall billy. He was watching us when we drove up, but now he was stretching his neck to push his face as far as possible under the near side of his belly so he could pee on it.

Ito was beside me, staring at the Billy too, so I said, “There are men in the human race who put strong-smelling lotions on their faces to attract the opposite sex. I think old Billy is doing the same thing, but with no money to buy Old Spice, he's using the next best thing.”

Ito didn't laugh, seeing no humor in what I said.

By then the woman of the house was outside, watching us, a middle-aged woman, draped in a peach-colored robe, a blue scarf coiled around the top of her head, plump in all the right places, a happy smile on her face, as clean and fresh as a summer morning. I looked forward to doing business with her.

“I want to buy two Billy goats,” I said.

“To pull a cart?” she asked.

“To eat.”

“The females taste better, and don’t stink,” she said.

“The billies are bigger,” I said. “More meat.”

After thinking about that for a minute, she said “One hundred Cedis.” Seemed like a fair price to me, twenty U.S. dollars for two big goats. I handed her the money.

By this time the first Land Rover had turned around and was coming back to see what had happened to us. They were just in time to help lift the two animals to the luggage rack on the roof of their vehicle.

I explained my plan, and they were against it as Ito had been. Plus, they didn’t want reeking goats scratching the roof of their brand new Land Rover with their sharp little hooves.

“Everybody listen up,” I growled. “There are three ways to hunt a dangerous lion. The first is to go where he lives, hike along the trails until he hears or smells you—if you are lucky—and then hope that when he ambushes you, you’ll be fast enough on the draw to get him before he gets you.

“The second way is to scatter a bunch of smelly goat guts around your camp in open places where you can shine spotlights. You ambush the lion on your terms, at your camp, instead of him ambushing you on his terms.”

I let them think about this for a moment.

Finally, Ito asked, “What’s the third way?”

“The third way is the most dangerous,” I began. “In any ambush, things can go wrong. People and lions make mistakes with everything happening so fast. A wounded lion may turn and run to avoid being shot again. Most of the time, he will leave a trail of blood, so you follow him. If he has a broken bone, or has lost too much blood, he won’t go far, just hide and wait, hoping to kill you before you kill him or her.”

All three of my companions were wide-eyed, staring back at me.

“That’s what we signed up for, my men,” I said quietly. “I don’t want to be eaten by lions, and none of you want that either, so let’s do what’s safest. Let’s ambush some lions instead of them ambushing us. Load up the goats and tie

them down.”

The three wardens hoisted the two goats onto the first Land Rover, tying their feet together, and securing them to the luggage rack before I had time to put on my gloves to help.

A minute later, after waving goodbye to the happy lady of the house, we were on our way. On the first Land Rover the already homesick goats were bleating and straining at their ropes.

The first Rover was leading the way, wild men in a hurry, churning up a monster cloud of red dust, forcing Ito and me to rumble along about a quarter of a mile back, leaving Kumasi farther behind. Best I could tell, it seemed we were going north most of the time as the red roads kept changing directions.

The first time we had to slow down to drive through a stream, with fairly steep brushy banks, Ito explained that the thick brush along most streams was ideal habitat for snakes and bush pigs. Some of the snakes grew very large, and some were poisonous. The boar pigs were mean and dangerous. They had large yellow tusks, which they used when attacking people and dogs. Tusk wounds often became infected.

One good thing about the pigs, he said, is their love for snakes, killing and eating them, so where pigs were plentiful, one should find fewer snakes.

I asked Ito which snakes were the most dangerous. He said the carpet viper, which looked much like our American rattlesnake, killed the most people, especially in the northern portions of sub-Saharan Africa where anti-venom was hard to find. He said all the varieties of cobra were poisonous, including the spitting cobra, the puff adder, and the black mamba. He said some of these snakes could slither along on flat ground as fast as a man could run when trying to catch and bite a victim.

The biggest snake, the rock python, he said, would wait in ambush, holding still, waiting quietly until it could strike out and grab its victim. It doesn't have any fangs with venom, but lots of sharp white teeth, angling to the rear, making it difficult for the prey to pull away. Next, it would wrap the thick body around the victim, squeezing it to death before beginning the very slow process of swallowing its dinner.

Ito said the rock python found in Ghana and along the African equator was the largest member of the species. The females are larger than the males, sometimes reaching twenty-five feet in length and weighing 200 pounds. Colors include brown, olive, chestnut, and yellow. The head is triangular with a brown spearhead design outlined in yellow with a touch of white in the

middle.

He said favorite foods of the Rock Python include rodents, monkeys, fruit bats, monitor lizards, warthogs, antelopes, guinea hens, dogs, goats, and lion cubs. Ito said he saw a film of a rock python squeezing and swallowing a 150-pound hyena. He said hunters discovered a partially digested five-foot Nile crocodile inside a 25-foot female python. He said a woman in England was squeezed to death by her eight-foot pet python. Also a two-year-old child in Chicago was killed by a pet python. He said it is not uncommon in Africa to hear of people being pulled from the grasp of these giant snakes.

He said the giant pythons were not an endangered species. The tourists loved to see big snakes, so hunting was banned, but locals sometimes killed them for the skins and meat. One could find snake steaks for sale in the bushmeat markets. But if I killed a giant snake, being an outsider from America, I would go to prison, so I should be careful what I shot for camp meat.

“But,” Ito concluded, “across the entire African continent in a single year, human deaths resulting from biting and squeezing by snakes is only about twenty thousand.”

As the hours passed, with Kumasi far behind, we continued to speed through small villages, some with just two or three huts, but always plenty of dogs, goats, and children. It seemed we were driving too fast to avoid running over people and pets, but somehow we never did.

After about two hours, we stopped for a bathroom break, near one of the strangest buildings I had ever seen. Ito called it a mud mosque. It looked like a cluster of huge, white dinosaur teeth pointing up from the ground, the sharp points of the teeth perhaps twenty feet above a brown mud foundation. The biggest tooth was perhaps thirty feet high. The teeth were joined together with smooth areas of white plaster, or mud painted over with white paint. There was a black doorway between two of the smaller teeth, and a bigger doorway entering the biggest tooth. Dark brown post ends extended sideways out of the outside walls in vertical and horizontal rows across the surface of the pointed structure.

Ito said it was a Muslim mosque, that there were over a hundred mud mosques in northern Ghana. Not all had the white tooth look.

He said Ghana provided a sanctuary for Middle East Muslims, mostly Sunnis, who wanted to get away from the fighting and killing, or avoid the powerful eye of the U.S. military with a hundred drones feeding information

to long range guns. He said Osama Bin Laden was a Sunni from Saudi Arabia, and perhaps some of his friends were hiding in Ghana.

As long as the Gold Coast Muslims remained peaceful, government leaders seemed mostly content to watch and worry. A network of unsupervised dirt roads made it easy to slip quietly across the Sahara sands to a peaceful land of green grass and water, hundreds of miles from Ghana's government and mostly Christian population.

Ito said some government officials thought terrorist gun smugglers used the mosques to rest and hide on their way to rebel factions in Nigeria and the Congo, that the guns headed for Nigeria avoided border checkpoints by crossing Lake Volta in boats and then were carried overland on trails that avoided border checkpoints.

Ito added that while Muslims seemed to be filling the open spaces in northern Ghana, the Mormons were filling up southern Ghana, from Kumasi to Cape Coast, over a hundred meeting houses, and a temple as big and expensive as the ones in Utah, and that the Mormons were almost as numerous in Ivory Coast and Nigeria as in Ghana. He said he thought a little man named Joseph Billy Johnson was leader of the Mormons, a man who prophesied the future and performed miracles, just like in the Bible.

Several hours later, just as the sun was setting, the Land Rovers turned between two huge teak trees into a meadow surrounded by mostly smaller trees and brush, with no homes or livestock in sight.

Ito said a female villager, who lived near there, had been pounced on inside her hut in the middle of the night and dragged outside where she was killed and eaten, and we were setting up camp in the exact spot where the remains of a German tourist had been found. Since it was almost dark, there was no reason to discuss the decision to camp here.

As soon as the vehicles stopped in the middle of the meadow, the wardens began throwing camping gear out of the first Rover: hammers, hatchets, saws, coils of rope, a bundle of wooden stakes and poles, folded white canvas, lanterns, pots and pans, and bags of hammocks and mosquito netting.

I dragged the goats down from the first rover, tying one to a tree and dragging the other to the edge of the meadow where I slit its throat, spilling the blood to form a nice round puddle.

I thrust a forefinger in my mouth and then held it high in the wind. A steady and strong ten-mile-per-hour breeze was moving out of the north.

Dragging the carcass another fifty feet to the south, I slit open the belly and

removed the entrails. This took about five minutes. The wardens were pounding stakes into the ground with a heavy hammer.

I dragged the goat carcass fifty feet to the west, using up another ten minutes to remove the hide, which I spread out on the ground, flesh side up, using a short rope to tie one end of the hide to a small tree, preventing night critters from dragging it into the bush.

Depositing the carcass between the vehicles and the rising tent, after checking the wind again, I grabbed a hatchet and headed to the edge of the woods where I cut two Y-shaped posts, sharpened at the bottom end, and a long green pole, leaving three-inch branch spikes in the middle so the tightly secured goat would not slip as I turned the spit.

Before securing the goat to the spit with tie wire, I washed the flesh surface clean with a wet rag and scrubbed as much of the goat scent as possible off my hands. Then I sprinkled the entire carcass with plenty of salt and pepper.

After placing the skewered goat on the Y posts, I headed to the woods to collect a huge armload of firewood. Checking the wind a third time, I was glad I had my Colt .45 on my belt. The wind was coming from the east, making it possible for twice as many night critters to sniff the blood pool, the pile of rank guts, the bloody skin, and the mouth-watering aroma of roasting goat on an open fire.

I started the fire and dragged the huge bear trap out of the Rover, including two C-clamps that were attached to the trap. I carried it over to the gut pile. After securing the trap's chain to a mahogany tree, and using the C-clamps to compress the two leaf springs, I was able to spread the steel-toothed jaws and set the pan. I sprinkled some dry leaves to hide the trap from curious eyes, and then I unzipped my trousers and sprinkled the remaining contents of my bladder on the dry leaves covering the trap. A man-eating lion ought to be curious about man scent, and once he stepped in the trap, there was no escape. The killing part would be easy and safe.

I returned to the fire where the bottom portion of the goat had already turned a golden tan, dripping melted fat into the fire, sending the irresistible scent of roasting flesh out with the changing winds. I fussed and toyed with the goat on the turning spit until all of it was golden brown, the fat and juice continuing to drip into the flames, sending more of that delicious smell into the night air.

It was totally dark—jungle dark, Africa dark—except for the cookfire and a lantern in the tent. I could not see the pool of blood, the gut pile, or the smelly

hide. The trap was set. The ambush was perfect, or almost perfect.

Ito called for me to join him in the tent. He showed me the hammock they had prepared for me, with a canopy of netting to protect me from the night mosquitos, but it wasn't insects that worried me, only the man-eating lions.

I told them what I had known all along, that I was not going to spend the night in a hammock protected by a flimsy canvas tent but in my Land Rover. They all started to protest at once, but I waved them to silence, explaining that in the vehicle, I had instant access to the spotlight and night-vision binoculars. I had four firearms, locked and loaded, and plenty of ammunition within reach. I told them I had two driving purposes that would keep me awake all night—kill the lions and protect my friends who were sleeping in the tent.

No one rushed forward to hug or thank me for caring enough to want to protect my new friends. I knew what they were thinking. The final piece of lion bait was three sweaty Africans, covered only with frail mosquito netting, sending their scent out on the night breezes. The last three pieces of lion bait were in place, and it was them.

None of them joined me at the fire that night as I sliced off salty slivers of roasting goat flesh, chewing while sipping a Coke. The wardens were enjoying the many edible surprises found in the U.S. government MRE packets.

As for me, there are not enough good things to say about fresh goat meat roasted over an open fire. As I wrote in my notebook that night after the fire had burned down, recording the events of the last two days, I hoped I was ready for the surprises surely to come my way in the days to come. I hoped Martha was getting more mellow over the divorce issue. I was glad I had come to the Gold Coast to hunt lions—bad lions. Much better than putting on a white shirt and tie and heading down to divorce court each morning.

These were some of my thoughts that night. I did not have a hard time staying awake, staring out the window into total blackness, wondering what creature eyes were staring back at me.

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