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Opening Extract from...

THE LION TAMER WHO LOST

Written by **Louise Beech**

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The Lion Tamer Who Lost

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ZIMBABWE

Home Is Always Near

Ben's Grandma said she had never forgotten Jenny, her best friend at school, even though she disowned her in favour of Linda Palmer. She said the friends who turned you away are often the most irreplaceable.

Andrew Fitzgerald, *The Lion Tamer Who Lost*

Morning is Ben's favourite time in Zimbabwe.

He has been here five days. Each of the mornings so far, he wakes before the other volunteers and stands on his hut's wooden decking in shorts, surveying what he secretly calls his: his sunrise, his land, his refuge. With only the hum of his roommate Simon's snoring, and the buzz of insects, at this moment it *is* his. No one else rises this early to watch the colours come to life; no one else witnesses the sky turning from ash into flame, or the trees from shadow into textured browns, like a tray of different flavoured toffees.

Ben enjoys the solitude of dawn more than the merriment of evening, when the volunteers prepare food and discuss the day's events around a roaring campfire pit, eyes orange in the glow. He enjoys it more than the two walks he has done with the lions in the enclosures.

The lions here look nothing like those he has seen in the circus or watched on TV documentaries. The first time Ben saw one pacing the enclosure fence five days ago – when he was dropped off with other new volunteers in a rickety bus – he thought it must have been the

sun that lit his orangey fur with fire, or that the deep shadows had somehow inflated his size. But as he warily approached the high fence for the first time to look more closely, he realised that it was probably contentment that so increased him; being in a more natural environment than a circus ring gave him beauty.

Now Ben stretches, offers his skin to this new day, scaring a skittish split-lipped hare loitering by a thorny scrub. He laughs. The hare freezes for a second and then lollops off. Beyond them both, black against the dawn, tepee-shaped lodges zigzag like teeth. Behind it are the fenced grassy enclosures where cubs live before they are moved to the surrounding ten-thousand-acre park to learn how to hunt and return to the wild.

This is the Liberty Lion Rehabilitation Project. It is the kind of place Ben has wanted to visit since he was eleven. The kind of place about which he read endlessly before signing up. Just forty miles from Victoria Falls, the project site is parallel to the Zambezi River. The area was a hunting ground once, where warthogs and wildebeest were shot by cross-border trophy hunters. Now a national park, its riverbanks are a catwalk for elephant, buffalo herds, and lone antelope, which amble in the heat and dust, safe now from those guns.

This land is a temporary asylum for Ben.

He closes his eyes. The musky smell of hot animal fur drifts on the air. The muggy morning breeze seems to whisper something to him. He won't listen. He didn't come here to listen. Or to think. Or to remember. But the breeze tugs at his shorts, whispers in his ear. It sounds like *home, home, home*.

Suddenly the smells of England that have faded since he got here come alive in the air, merging with lion shit and heat. His father's cigarette smoke seems to rise from the parched ground. The stench of old beer has Ben opening his eyes again, sure there will be a pint sitting in front of him. He lets it in, just for a moment. He pictures the tiny bedroom; he sees the kitchen sink where he and his dad often argued; where they occasionally stood looking at the garden quietly; where Ben once dried dishes and talked about a future.

No. Shut it out.

He came here for the now. For *this*. He surveys again the new and beautiful land. Every day, every moment, he tries so hard not to think about...

The door creaks and Ben turns.

Simon emerges from the hut. Sniffing the air, he says, 'I slept like a corpse,' just as he has every morning since their arrival, and then breaks wind heartily. A solicitor from Essex, he's on a break from his tricky divorce. He said on the first day that he would stay here until the mess was sorted out.

Ben's ownership of the dawn is over.

'How long you been up?' Simon asks.

'A while. It's so hot I just toss and turn.'

'I noticed.' Simon breaks wind again. 'You're bloody lucky I don't knock you out of your bed, all the noise you make.'

'What do you mean? Do I snore?' Ben never has before.

'No. You shout out all kinds of crap.'

'Do I?' Ben's heart feels tight. 'Like what?'

'Can't tell. Doesn't make any bloody sense.'

Ben exhales.

Simon narrows his eyes at him. 'Might be something about...' he whispers, '...bury the bodies ... hide the evidence...'

Ben tuts. 'Yeah, right.'

Simon laughs. 'I'm off for a shower.'

Ben is sure he has never cried out in his sleep before. Certainly no one has ever told him he does. Shit. Time to eat. Time to forget the dawn. Time to start the day.