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Exposed

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

Lake Victoria
Uganda, Africa

Waheem was already bleeding when he boarded the crowded motorboat. He kept a bloodstained rag wadded up and pressed against his nose, hoping the other passengers wouldn't notice. Earlier the boat's owner, the man islanders called Pastor Roy, had helped Waheem load his rusted cage stuffed full of monkeys onto the last available space. But not even a mile from shore and Waheem noticed Pastor Roy glancing back and forth from his wife's tight smile to the blood now dripping down the front of Waheem's shirt. Pastor Roy looked like he regretted offering Waheem the last seat.

"Nosebleeds seem common on these islands," Pastor Roy said, almost a question, giving Waheem a chance to explain.

Waheem nodded like he had no idea what the man had said. He understood English perfectly but pretended otherwise. There wouldn't

be another charcoal or banana boat for two days, so he was grateful for his good fortune, grateful that Pastor Roy and his wife allowed him on board, especially with his cage of monkeys. But Waheem knew it would be a forty-minute trip from Buvuma Island to Jinja and he preferred silence to the pastor's chatter about Jesus. All the others had boarded first, so Waheem was stuck sitting up front, in salvation range. He didn't want to encourage the pastor to think he might save one more soul on the trip across the lake.

Besides, the others—a sad assortment of women and barefoot children and one blind old man—looked much more like they needed saving. Despite the bloody nose and the sudden throbbing pain inside his head, Waheem was young and strong and if things went as planned, he and his family would be rich, buying a shamba of their own instead of breaking their backs working for others.

"God is here," Pastor Roy called out, evidently not needing any encouragement. He steered the boat with one hand and waved the other at the islands surrounding them in the distance, beginning one of his sermons.

The other passengers all bowed their heads, almost an involuntary response to the man's voice. Perhaps they considered their reverence a small fee for passage on the pastor's boat. Waheem bowed his head, too, but watched from behind his blood-soaked rag, pretending to listen and trying to ignore the stink of monkey urine and the occasional spatter of his own warm blood dripping down his chin. He noticed the blind man's eyes, white blurry globes that darted back and forth while his wrinkled lips twitched, but there was only a mumbled hum, perhaps a prayer. A woman beside Waheem held tight the top of a burlap bag that moved on its own and smelled of wet chicken feathers. Everyone was quiet except for three little girls on the back of the boat who smiled and

swayed. They were singing softly in a whispered chant. Even in their playfulness they were evidently aware that they shouldn't disturb the pastor's words.

"God hasn't forgotten you people," Pastor Roy continued, "and neither will I."

Waheem glanced at Pastor Roy's wife. She didn't seem to be paying any attention to her husband. She sat next to him at the front of the boat, rubbing her bare white arms with clear liquid from a plastic bottle, stopping every few seconds to pick tsetse flies from her silky, long hair.

"All of Lake Victoria's islands are filled with the outcasts, the poor, the criminals, the sick—" He paused and nodded at Waheem as if to differentiate his handicap from the rest of the list. "But I see only Jesus' children, waiting to be saved."

Waheem didn't correct the pastor. He didn't consider himself one of Buvuma's diseased outcasts, though there were plenty of them. It wasn't unusual to see someone sick or covered with lesions, open sores. The islands were a last resort for many. But not Waheem. He had never been sick a day of his life, at least not before the vomiting started last night.

It had gone on for hours. His stomach ached from the reminder. He didn't like thinking about the black vomit speckled with chunks of blood. He worried that he had thrown up pieces of his insides. That's what it felt like. Now his head throbbed and his nose wouldn't stop bleeding. He readjusted the rag, trying to find a spot that wasn't soiled. Blood dripped onto his dusty foot and he found himself staring at the pastor's shiny leather shoes. Waheem wondered how Pastor Roy expected to save anyone without getting his shoes dirty.

It didn't matter. Waheem cared only about getting his monkeys to

Jinja in time to meet the American, a businessman dressed in equally shiny leather shoes. The man had promised Waheem a fortune. At least it was a fortune to Waheem. The American had agreed to pay him more money for each monkey than Waheem and his father could make in a whole year.

He wished he had been able to capture more, but it had taken almost two days to secure the three he had shoved together into the metal cage. To look at them now no one would believe the struggle he had gone through. Waheem knew from experience that monkeys had sharp teeth and if they wrapped their tails around a man's neck they could slash his face to shreds in a matter of minutes. He'd learned that much from the two short months he had worked for Okbar, the rich monkey trader from Jinja.

The job had been a good one, but there were nets and tranquilizer guns that Okbar had provided that made it seem simple. Waheem's main responsibility was to load up the sick monkeys the British veterinarian expelled out of the shipments; shipments that included hundreds of monkeys that would go onto a cargo plane destined for research labs in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The veterinarian thought Waheem loaded up the monkeys and took them away to be killed, but Okbar called that an "outrageous waste." So instead of killing the monkeys, Okbar instructed Waheem to take the poor sick ones to an island in Lake Victoria and set them free. Sometimes when Okbar came up short of monkeys for a shipment he had Waheem go out to the island and get a few of the sick ones. Oftentimes the veterinarian didn't even notice.

But now Okbar was gone. It had been months since anyone had seen him. Waheem wasn't sure where he had gone. One day his small, messy office in Jinja was empty, all the file cabinets, the metal desk, the tran-

quilizer guns and nets, everything gone. No one knew what had happened to Okbar. And Waheem was out of a job. He'd never forget the disappointment in his father's eyes. They would have to return to the fields and work long days to make up for the job that Waheem had lost.

Then one day the American showed up in Jinja, asking for Waheem, not Okbar, but Waheem. Somehow he knew about the monkeys that were taken to the island and those were the ones he wanted. He would pay the premium price. "But they must be the monkeys," he told Waheem, "from the island where you took the outcasts."

Waheem wasn't sure why anyone would want sick monkeys. He looked in at them now, hunched over, crowded together in the rusted, metal cage. Their noses were running and caked with green slime. Their faces were blank. They refused food and water. Still, Waheem avoided eye contact, knowing all too well what good aim a monkey, even a sick one, had when he decided to spit in your eye.

The monkeys must have sensed Waheem examining them because suddenly one grabbed the bars of the cage and started to screech. The noise didn't bother Waheem. He was used to it. It was normal compared to their eerie silence. But another monkey joined in and now Waheem saw the pastor's wife sit up and stare. There was no longer a tight smile on her perfect face. Waheem didn't think she looked frightened or concerned, but rather she looked disgusted. He worried the pastor might make him throw the cage overboard, or worse, make Waheem go overboard with them. Like most islanders he didn't know how to swim.

The throbbing in his head joined in with the monkeys' screeches and Waheem thought he could feel the boat rocking. His stomach threatened to spew up again. Only now did he realize the entire front of his

shirt had blossomed into a huge red-and-black stain. And the bleeding continued. He could feel it inside his mouth, filling his throat. He swallowed and started coughing, trying to catch the chunks of blood but not quite successful. Some splattered the pastor's leather shoes.

Waheem's eyes darted around but avoided Pastor Roy. Everyone was watching him. They would vote to throw him from the boat. He had seen them bow to the man's words. They would, no doubt, do whatever he asked. They were too far away from the islands. He'd never be able to stay afloat.

Suddenly the pastor's hand waved down at him and Waheem winced and jerked away. Only after he sat up and focused his eyes did he see that Pastor Roy was not getting ready to shove him overboard. Instead, the man was handing Waheem a white cloth, brilliant white with beautiful, decorative embroidery in the corner.

"Go ahead, take it," the pastor said in a soft voice, this not a sermon meant for any of the others. When Waheem didn't answer, Pastor Roy continued, "Yours is all used up." And he pointed to the dripping rag. "Go ahead, you need it more than I do."

Waheem's eyes darted around the small boat, all still watching, but none like the pastor's wife whose face had twisted into an angry scowl. Only, she no longer looked at Waheem. Her eyes, her anger now directed at her husband.

The rest of the trip was quiet except for the singsong chant of the little girls. Their voices lulled Waheem into a dreamlike state. At one point he thought he could hear his mother calling to him from the approaching shore. His vision became blurred and his ears filled with the sound of his own heartbeat.

He was weak and dizzy by the time the boat docked. This time Pastor Roy had to carry the cage for him while Waheem followed,

stumbling through the crowds, women with baskets and burlap bags, men loitering and bicycles looping around them.

The pastor put down the cage and Waheem grunted his thanks, more a groan. But before the pastor turned to leave, Waheem dropped to his knees, choking and heaving, splattering the shiny leather shoes with black vomit. He reached to wipe his mouth and discovered blood dripping from his ears, and his throat already full again. He felt the pastor's hand on his shoulder and Waheem hardly recognized the voice calling for help. The calm authority that preached sermons had been replaced by a panicked screech.

Waheem's body jerked without warning. His arms thrashed and his legs flayed in the dirt, a seizure beyond his control. It was difficult to breathe. He gasped and choked, no longer able to swallow. Then he felt movement deep inside him. He could almost hear it, as if his insides were ripping apart. Blood seemed to pour out from everywhere. His brain registered no pain, only shock. The shock of seeing so much blood and realizing it was his own, seemed to override the pain.

A crowd gathered around him but they were a blur. Even the pastor's voice became a distant hum. Waheem could no longer see him. And he wasn't even conscious of the American businessman who slipped his gloved fingers around the handle of Waheem's rusted monkey cage and then simply walked away.