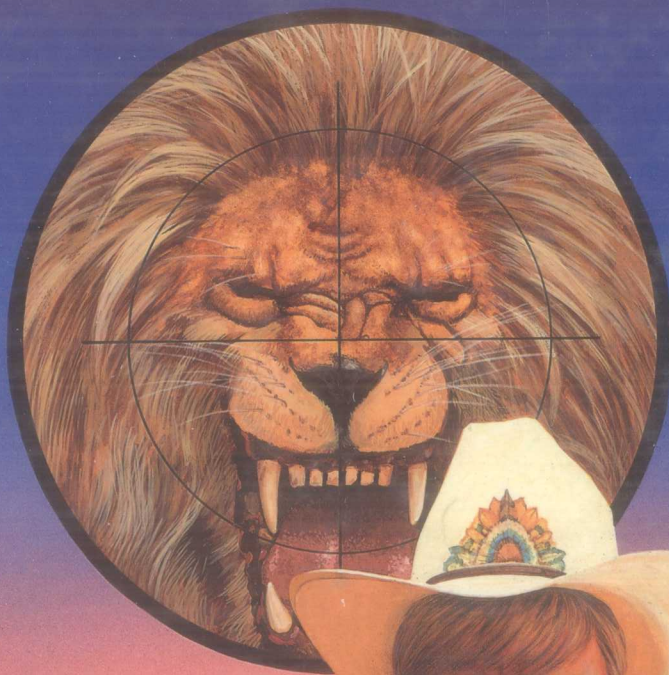


SNIPER

Theodore Taylor



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THE BODLEY HEAD
London

For Tippi Hedren with love

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First published in 1989 by
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc
First published in Great Britain in 1990 by
The Bodley Head Children's Books,
an imprint of The Random Century Group Ltd
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random Century Australia (Pty) Ltd
88-91 Albion Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010, Australia

Random Century New Zealand Ltd
PO Box 40-086, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random Century South Africa (Pty) Ltd
PO Box 337, Bergvlei 2012, South Africa

Phototypeset by Input Typesetting Ltd, London
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

'Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys' by Ed
Bruce, Patsy Bruce, copyright © 1975 Tree Publishing Co. Inc.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available

ISBN 0-370-31465-4

By the same author:

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The Cats of Shambala (with Tippi Hedren)

When Ben met his first fully grown lion, his dad said, 'Wait and maybe he'll come up to you. Just stand still. He might brush up against you, or maybe he'll stop and take your shoulder into his mouth. Don't resist it, don't be scared. You've seen a lot of big cats from a distance.'

On he came, over 200 kilograms, with a massive brown-black mane, huge eyes targeted on the boy. His name was Reggie, and he'd grown up in captivity, though he was never a circus or zoo cat. He made movies and TV commercials.

Eight at the time, Ben was truly frightened, though his dad was only a metre or two away. But he had no gun, no weapon of any kind. His dad didn't believe in guns. The nearest thing to a weapon he had ever used was a fire extinguisher, a whoosh in the face of a big cat.

'Don't turn your back on him. He has a sense of humour, likes to come up behind people and trip them. So if you run or make fast movements, he'll think you want to play, and he plays rough. If you want to pet him, use strong, firm scratching. Otherwise, it's like a fly getting at him. Scratch under his chin or deep into the mane but not on his face. He's very dignified.'

By then, Reggie was no more than half a metre away, and Ben saw the big mouth open wide, felt the hot breath;

then the canines, looking like ivory daggers, grasped his shoulder.

Ben closed his eyes as the teeth held him.

'You see, you've made a friend,' said his dad, laughing softly.

Ben stood absolutely still, hardly breathing, momentarily paralyzed, then felt the pressure on his shoulder being removed.

As he opened his eyes, Reggie was walking majestically away, tail knot swinging like a pendulum, and Ben would never forget the relief he felt; at the same instant, the thrill of finally having met the king of beasts face-to-face.

'But, believe me, Ben, not all lions are like Reggie. We'll probably have some here that won't be friendly at all.'

FIRST DAY

Los Coyotes Preserve

As if jabbed with a long needle, Benjamin Jepson jerked awake to screams of peacocks. Heart slamming for a few seconds, he sat bolt upright, looking outside toward the abrasive, metallic sounds.

Who's out there? What's bothering them? he thought as the high-pitched screaming continued.

Trying to collect his senses, Ben scrambled out of bed, remembering his dad's warning never to turn on room lights when alarms rang. Any alarms, including the stupid peacocks. Night vision might well be needed out in those deep shadows around the trees and bushes and in the sandy paths along the animal compounds.

His dad, Dr. Peter Jepson, was director of Los Coyotes Preserve, their private zoological resource specializing in big cat study. They had both the *Panthera*, large roaring cats such as lions and tigers, and the *Felis*, smaller purring cats such as cougars.

'Ben, you just never know what the danger may be till you're facing it. Sometimes that's too close, much too close.'

Always sleeping naked, winter or summer, Ben groped around for his clothes – worn Levi's and a wash-whitened denim shirt; cowboy-style boots,

scuffed and dusty; his Zacatecas straw hat, one like Willie Nelson sometimes wore, treasured gift of chief handler Alfredo Garcia. Straw hat over straw hair, shading an ordinary freckled face, the feather-banded hat was as much a part of Ben as the dusty boots. He wore it constantly.

The din kept up, and he could feel the presence of Rachel, their large house cheetah, but couldn't see her. Just the same, he was certain that she was sitting up, also hearing the raucous shrilling, amber eyes searching the darkness.

Four of the gaudy birds paraded around outside during the day, common males with long green and gold erectile tails. None too bright, frequently noisy and aggressive, they rested peacefully most nights in the lower branches of the tall cottonwoods.

The silly peacocks were sometimes the best alarm, witless as they were about most other things. Often better than the electronic system on the two main gates, or the sensitized, barbed strand at the top of the perimeter fencing.

They were certainly better alerts than any of the unreliable compound animals. When intruders came around, the sly, suspicious tigers usually stayed dead silent, waiting in the murk for a victim. So did the leopards and jaguars. But the more excitable lions would sometimes roar at nocturnal invasions of either humans or hapless small animals.

Sometimes crazies, total wackos, total loonies, travelling along the lonely Orange County road, would decide to pay a visit, climb the 4-metre-high chain-link perimeter fence, then scale the individual

compound fences to drop down into the cat pens like fat geese, playing with death.

Wackos! Loonies!

Two years ago, a drug-blitzed girl of fifteen had jumped down on two lionesses on an incredibly dumb dare. Sobering up instantly, she climbed an oak. Ben's mother, a light sleeper, heard the screams. Had the pink-haired girl chosen the next compound over, Dmitri, the huge Siberian tiger, would have been waiting.

Good-bye, punk rocker from El Toro.

Another stupid, wacko crazy out there, Ben thought, wide awake now and angry at the intruder, pulling up his pants, letting his shirt fall free. He didn't need a jacket. June in the southern California back country was always warm enough for shirt sleeves, even at night.

Just what made people do it? Some insane challenge to the cats? He couldn't imagine any more painful, traumatic way to die. Lacerated by 8-centimetre teeth. Eaten alive. The cats didn't know any better. They were absolutely innocent. Meat was meat, animal or human, and there was no remorse, his father said.

Ben saw a shadowy Rachel go over to the window, looking out.

'Who's there, Rachel?' he asked, hooking his belt, hearing his own voice wound up tight, feeling a ticking in his throat, speeding of pulse, dryness of mouth.

He glanced over at the blue face of the nearby clock. Four-fifteen, Tuesday morning. Ten days since they had gone.

He now wished they, illustrious globe-hopping

father and mother, were home in Los Coyotes, especially his dad. He didn't take guff from anyone, wackos or not. Neither did his mother, in fact. But it was a totally useless wish. They were in Africa, somewhere deep in the Serengeti, that vast wildlife park in Tanzania, doing a magazine piece on poaching.

They'd left Alfredo Garcia to run the preserve. But two days ago a truck crashed head-on into Alfredo's old Buick on El Toro Road, and the chunky Latino was now in intensive care, expected to live but badly injured. Fractured skull, left leg broken, some internal injuries.

Like it or not, Ben Jepson was suddenly in charge of Los Coyotes. In three weeks he'd be fifteen.

There had been only a small piece of fading moon earlier that night when Ben had walked the pathways along the compounds with his girlfriend, Sandy Gilmore. Now it was black as the inside of a burial vault out there. Darker the night, quieter the animals, always. Spooky, sometimes.

The cats didn't need light, and bright illumination only drew road attention to the preserve. Besides, it was too expensive, his dad said. But Ben at this moment was wishing, also useless, that the place could be lit up like a baseball park, erasing all shadows. Out there were shadows upon shadows, all in evil shapes, threatening webs and patches and blurs.

Pulling his boots on, Ben realized he was delaying going out. *I should be moving faster!* No guts.

'Why did it have to happen now?' he said to Rachel. 'Why? And why did Alfredo have to wreck?'

The last crazy had been more than a year ago. Cackling, nutty old man cut a hole through the perimeter fence, then through a compound fence. A cub was what he was after, he told Deputy Sheriff Metcalf.

There were no cubs at Los Coyotes at that time.

‘Certain screwy people are capable of almost anything,’ said Deputy Metcalf.

Maybe a human crazy wasn’t out there, after all. Maybe it was just a brave raccoon snooping around the aviary? That had happened, too. Everyone relaxed and laughed.

Ah, *mapache*. Sneaky raccoon.

Telling Rachel to stay put, he went through the bedroom doorway, on through the dining space, out through the living room, stopping for a second by the front door to reach down for the long-barrelled twenty-thousand-candle-power flashlight. They always carried it when going out into the night, both for illumination and as a weapon against human prowlers. It would be useless as a feather against an already charging cat.

The peacocks were still screeching from their roosts when Ben got outside, obviously scared silly over some alien presence. But, oddly enough, not one of the big cats was roaring. Not even the lions. That in itself was ominous to Ben. Did they know something?

Shining the light toward the aviary, to the left of their old three-bedroom house, Ben’s boots were almost soundless in the loose, soft sand of the preserve roadway. It was indeed velvet black out there at twenty-five after four, making the beam precise and brilliant.

There was movement off to the right, barely perceptible, and he swung the torch over there, gasping as he picked up two large, round, coppery green eyes in the glow; then the tawny body of a big cat, frozen in the brilliance of the beam.

He stopped dead still. Frozen, too.

No drug-blitzed rocker staggering around this warm June night. No *mapache*!

'God,' he said, reverently, almost in a whisper.

He was in absolute awe.

'God, they're out!'

Nothing more chilling could be said around any preserve or zoo.

From 20 metres that one looked like Missy, a middle-aged, mellow cat. She lived in Number Three compound with Daisy and Helen. Yes, it was Missy, he was certain. All three were mostly mellow. But where were the other two? He knew them by their distinctive faces. They knew him by voice and sight.

Gentle, motherly Helen and ageing Daisy were among his favourites. They were animals you could hug, put your cheek against their warm necks, see the affection in their eyes when you paid attention to them. Around the preserve they were called 'The Sisters,' always grooming each other.

'It's me - Ben,' he said loudly, knowing Missy was blinded by the intense light.

First-name basis to a lioness might sound silly, if not downright ridiculous, but to stay alive and healthy in Los Coyotes a close family-type relationship was absolutely necessary. Friends! Good friends. Nice kitty with the big teeth.

Shooting the light over to Number Three, Ben

saw that the gate stood half open. No animals inside. Next he moved the powerful beam to Number Two, some 30 metres away. Three lions usually lived there. One of them was his own Rocky, always sweet and loving to him but treacherous nowadays with other people.

Where was Rocky?

Number Two was also half open. They'd never bothered to use padlocks.

Who'd done this? And why?

There were twenty-eight compounds, a half to 2 hectares each, each holding up to eight cats. Up in Number One was Dmitri, a loner, and if he was out, Ben knew exactly what he was going to do: go hellbent for the house, get inside, lock the door, and wait for dawn.

Though his mother had bottle-nursed Dimmy as a cub, fully grown the Siberian tiger was terrifying. Four sleek, gorgeous metres from the tip of his tail to the tip of his wide nose, he weighed 330 kilograms. He'd scalped her once when he was three, laying the bloody mat of hair and skin over her forehead. He was six now, set in his ways, a hermit.

Throat dry, mouth parched with sudden fear because of the Siberian, heart slamming again, Ben moved slowly ahead until he could see the tiger's compound.

Dimmy was always fed on the end of a shovel, red muscle meat and innards inserted through a 15-by-25-centimetre slot in the bottom of the fence. When he was moved to another compound, a welcome change of scenery in the usual rotation of

living quarters, it was inside a squeeze cage with 3-centimetre steel bars.

Despite his ferocity, or perhaps because of it, Dmitri was a favourite of Ben's father. He alone could go in with Dmitri, hugging him, rubbing his neck. The great Siberian would moan with pleasure. But only Peter Jepson could do that and live to walk out.

Ben stopped by the gate of Number Two compound, shining the light over toward the tiger's residence, knowing he could jump inside Number Two, bang the gate shut if Dimmy was loose; stay there until daylight and hope the tiger wouldn't take his wrath out on the lions. But there he was, striped head staring curiously from his hut, greenish eyes impaled by the beam.

'Thank God.'

Whoever had released the other cats had enough good sense not to unleash Dmitri.

Ben let out a long sigh of relief and ran in the opposite direction, toward the trailers where the two other Latino handlers lived.

Oh, did he need Alfredo at this moment! He needed his calm strength, needed his know-how.

Knocking on the handlers' door, Ben spoke rapidly in Spanish, '*¡Gata fuera! ¡Gata fuera!*' *Cat out!* Even groggy with sleep, Luis Vargas and Rafael Soto didn't need to hear anything else. They were up instantly.

Ben spoke some limited Spanish, having learned from Alfredo. He added needlessly, '*Andale! Andale!*' *Hurry! Hurry!*

Thinking about Rocky, he ran back toward the

aviary, where the peacocks were still caterwauling in the trees.

Shots in the Night

Luis and Rafael stumbled into the darkness carrying flashlights and 1-centimetre chain leads with steel rings on either end, one large, one small. As they ran up the pathway to the forward part of the preserve, joining Ben in the search, Luis quickly asked if he knew which cats were loose. Wiry, hard-muscled, mustachioed little Luis Vargas spoke English, having been raised in New Mexico, though born below the border.

Spreading out, they moved slowly, cautiously, through the brush, now and then catching glints of liquid green in the beams.

Ben said, 'Dmitri is still in his compound.'

'*Muy bueno*,' said Rafael Soto, *very good*, grunting a nervous laugh as Luis translated. Soto spoke no English.

Yes, it was very good that the vicious Siberian was still in his space, behind steel.

'But Rocky's out,' Ben warned.

'Oh, oh, *muy malo*,' said Soto, *very bad*, as Luis translated again.

'*Sí*,' said Ben, *yes, you're right*.

The frightening thing at night was lack of immediate identification. Did those coppery eyes

belong to Helen or Daisy? They would come along without resistance. Or did they belong to Rocky, who might charge if someone was with Ben?

Rocky: Ben's self-appointed protector, very much a one-man cat. Ben had raised him from infancy, a rejected cub.

'Talk as you walk,' he told the Latinos. He wanted the cats to hear familiar voices.

They began to jabber.

Then, just ahead and off to the left, was Rocky, unmistakable, big-eyed head and liquorice-black spikes of mane visible in the ivory circle of light. He was staring toward the advancing humans but didn't seem poised to charge. He was just standing there, puzzled.

'Luis, come over on the right side of me and drop back,' Ben said, trying to hide the uneasiness in his voice.

'Drop back, Rafael.'

Luis and Rafael were relatively inexperienced and knew little about big cat mentality. The lights were confusing and blinding Rocky, but his hearing was finely tuned and accurate. He could hear leaves fall, the beat of hummingbird wings, a feather hitting the ground.

Rocky knew they were approaching.

'Good boy, Rocky, just stay right there. Ben's here!'

The lion roared suddenly, shifting his weight, moving back and forth on his front paws nervously, rocking his huge body, obviously trying to decide whether or not to charge at Rafael and Luis. He flicked his tail up in the air, an early warning sign. If it went horizontal, he'd already be charging.