

A NOVEL

# NATURAL SELECTION

ONE OF *BOOKLIST*'S TOP TEN NOVELS OF THE YEAR

"Combines the best of  
*Jaws* and *Jurassic Park*."

DAVE FREEDMAN

# NATURAL SELECTION

Dave Freedman

 HYPERION

*New York*

Copyright © 2006 David Freedman LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023-6298.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freedman, Dave

Natural selection / by Dave Freedman.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-4013-0209-2

1. California—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3606.R4383N38 2006

813'.6—dc22

2005057429

Hyperion books are available for special promotions, premiums, or corporate training. For details contact Michael Rentas, Assistant Director, Inventory Operations, Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, 12th floor, New York, New York 10023, or call 212-456-0133.

FIRST U.S. MASS MARKET EDITION

Mass Market ISBN-10: 0-7868-9392-3

ISBN-13: 978-07868-9392-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# **NATURAL SELECTION**

*for PB*

# **NATURAL SELECTION**

## PROLOGUE

**M**ONSTERS AREN'T real. . . . *Are they?*

Outer space. Toxic radiation disasters. Mad scientists' labs. These are the places monsters come from. Or so we've been told . . .

But aren't dinosaurs, crocodiles, lions, and sharks really monsters? Of course they are. And they come from right here on earth, and evolution made every single one of them.

So could evolution make *another monster? Today?*

It might be difficult for some to picture. Evolution is arguably the most powerful force in the earth's history, but paradoxically, it is also irrelevant to daily human life. Although the expression *survival of the fittest* is still used colloquially, the literal meaning no longer applies. For the human species, *real* life-and-death struggles, where the strong survive while the weak perish, have long since vanished.

This is not so in nature. Nature is an entirely different world, where there are no easy meals. When an animal in the wild is hungry, it must find, catch, and kill its prey, or risk dying itself. This harsh and brutal reality plays out daily, and evolutionary adaptations are a natural result. In just the past hundred years, literally thousands of such adaptations have been recorded: house finches in the Galápagos growing longer beaks, army ants in Brazil doubling their body

weights, blind gourami fish adapting "feeler fins" in place of eyes, just to name a few.

But these are all examples of *minor* evolutionary change. What about major change? Or even spectacular change? Will we ever see a true "evolutionary leap," the equivalent of, say, the very first amphibian to crawl out of the ocean or the first tiny dinosaur to fly like a bird?

We will indeed. Only this time, the evolving species won't be a salamander or a bird. It will be a predator. In fact, it will be a phenomenally dangerous predator unlike any ever known. Previously, the species' entire existence was confined to the one place on earth still inaccessible by humans. But now a cataclysmic series of events is under way. One that will force the species out of its world and into ours for a violent first encounter.

The adaptive process is gradual and only a single animal, or perhaps a small cluster, will initially make the transition. Others might follow, but in the short term, human society will barely be affected.

Soon a small group of men and women will come face-to-face with a living nightmare. And then, even the skeptics among them will realize not only that monsters are real, but that evolution has just made the most horrifying one of them all.



# PART I



## CHAPTER 1

**C**HAD THOMPSON took a breath of the fresh sea air. Oh yeah, he thought, this is why I became a lawyer—to buy myself this kind of freedom. He took another breath and let it out, long and slow. Chad was thirty-two and had just purchased a new forty-foot cabin cruiser. Along with his wife; his pal, Dave Pelligro; and Dave's new girlfriend, he was cruising out to Clarita Island, off the coast of Los Angeles, on this sunny June day. They were forty-five minutes into the one-hour trip from Newport Beach. The sea was fairly flat, tiny waves here and there, and they'd arrive soon. They had already passed the better-known Catalina Island, and Chad could see their destination in the distance. The plan was to work on their tans, then settle down for some lunch, though Chad was getting a little hungry already.

"Get me a sandwich, will you, Gabby?"

On a molded seat, his wife gave Chad an angry *I'm not your maid* look. But she tossed him a Saran-wrapped turkey and mayo anyway. "Here you are, Your Majesty."

He chuckled. "Thanks, Gab."

"Nice, huh?" Dave Pelligro said to his date, Theresa Landers.

In a tight sky-blue top, white shorts, and too much makeup, Theresa surveyed the water. "Beautiful." She turned to her host. "Thanks for having us, Chad."

"Glad you guys could make it. I'm sure I would have been bored if it were just me and Gabby out here."

Theresa shook her head. She didn't like Chad much. He was an arrogant preppy in a red polo who didn't wear sunglasses. But it was his boat, and she'd never "lunched" off Clarita Island before. She looked forward to getting there.

WITH THE exception of a small tourist area with restaurants, docks, and a beachside bar, the bulk of Clarita Island was undeveloped, overrun by trees and thick shrubbery. Clarita's western shore, mostly jagged black rocks, was downright desolate. Miles away from the clattering human noise of the island's eastern side, it was barren of people, the only sounds from the wind and tiny breaking waves.

Gliding on a current of air, a seagull appeared from behind the trees. A couple hundred feet high, the bird flew over the dark ocean and looked down, scanning for fish.

It saw absolutely nothing.

And yet something was there. The bird had missed them. They were perfectly still, just below the surface, watching it.

The gull spotted something and dove down. It plunged quickly, but then, just yards from the water, veered off. It had seen a strand of kelp, long and greenish brown, and mistaken it for a fish. Carried by momentum, the tiny flier ripped across the water, unknowingly passing a single pair of black eyes. Then it passed a second pair. Then a hundred. But still, nothing moved. The eyes simply shifted as the little feathered body tore past. They were all watching it.

CHAD THOMPkins cut the gas, and the boat came to a bobbing stop. They were a few hundred yards from Clarita's main docks, where the mammoth Clarita ferry had just deposited the latest batch of tourists, mostly families with obnoxious kids. To the right of the docks, Chad eyed a beach slightly larger than a Wal-Mart aisle, jam-packed with out-of-shape sun worshipers. He found it unappetizing, to say the least. "You guys don't want to stop here, do you?"

Gabby, Dave, and Theresa all shook their heads.

Chad nodded. "My thoughts exactly." The lawyer hated crowds. As

he started up the boat, he looked forward to the solitude of Clarita's always-deserted western shore.

THERE WERE more of them. Another hundred had crept up from below, joining the ones that were already studying the seagull. They still didn't move. They just watched the bird glide above the waterline.

Then their eyes shifted. From behind the trees, two dozen more gulls flew out over the water, also scanning for fish.

Looking down, the birds saw nothing but empty seas.

Then one of the creatures below them moved. From ten feet down, it swam toward the surface, a winged ray, flapping much like the birds themselves. A second creature rose, then a third. Then a hundred.

They ascended quickly all at once, shot clear out of the ocean, their bodies flapping frantically in the air.

There were so many that they were difficult to make out precisely. They were thick little animals, larger than the gulls, jet-black on their tops, gleaming white on their undersides. In the air, their wings moved much faster than in the water, their flapping rapid and uncoordinated. They rose to various heights, none more than ten feet, then belly flopped right back in. Then they leaped out again. Then again and again and again.

As the gulls watched them, their tiny hearts were beating faster than normal. They were birds and had bird brains, but on an instinctive level what they were seeing made them nervous. The strange creatures from the sea were trying to fly.

"WHERE THE hell is it?"

Chad Thompkins had been to Clarita's western tip before, but he still didn't see the familiar rock outcropping.

Dave Pelligro smiled at his date. "We'll get there soon."

Theresa nodded, eyeing the tree-lined shore. "I'm not in a rush."

But Dave *was* in a rush, or at least his stomach was. Gabby had made some special salami, ham, and cheese sandwiches just for him, and he couldn't wait to devour them. He squinted behind his ninety-dollar sunglasses, trying to see the western tip. "I think I see it." It was just off the black rocks, right near the pack of seagulls.

But then Dave saw something else. Something leaped out of the ocean then flopped right back in. A single animal. He squinted anew. What the hell was that? A jumping fish? He walked to the bow and pulled off his shades. Only birds were there now. He decided not to mention it.

As they motored closer, Gabby eyed the seagulls herself. "Keep away from those birds, Chad. We don't want them pestering us."

"Yeah, I wish I had a gun." And the pseudoyachtsman meant this; the damn birds were in the exact spot in which he wanted to anchor. But as they rumbled closer, the birds scattered, and Chad didn't consider why. "Hey, Dave, get the anchor."

"OH MAN, I'm stuffed."

They'd just finished lunch, and Dave Pelligro was proud of how much he'd eaten. Standing next to Chad, he glanced at Gabby and Theresa, in bikinis now and stretched out on lounge chairs in the back of the boat. "I could go for a little sun myself."

Chad nodded. "Go ahead. I'll be there in a sec." He wasn't in the mood to tan yet. As Dave joined the women, Chad leaned over the guardrail and stared at the sea. It felt good to get away from the office. He blew out a deep breath and watched the tiny breaking waves. He didn't notice the wind pick up.

THE WINGED creature was fifteen feet below the boat, its horned head pointed straight up. Its eyes were wide open, but it didn't see Chad. It didn't even see the boat. It was blind. A mutant gene had led to the deficiency, just as it occasionally did in humans.

The creature was by itself now, every one of its brethren long gone, many thousands of feet away. This one hadn't leaped from the sea earlier because it hadn't been able to. With all the churning caused by the others, it had become disoriented and literally couldn't figure out which way was up. But it had a sense of direction now. It could feel the wind.

It began to rise. Slowly at first. Then much faster.

I HOPE the wind dies down, Chad thought, eyeing the ripples as a gust blew his collar back. He suddenly squinted. What is that? It was

something ten feet down. He leaned over the guardrail to get a better look.

It looked like a pair of beer bottles. Litterbugs, he thought. But then he saw the bottles were rising. Rather fast. Wait, they weren't bottles at all. Jesus Christ, they were eyes!

He jolted away frantically.

Noticing, Gabby rose from her chair. "What's wrong, honey?"

Dave stood. "You OK, Chad?"

Chad backed away as fast as he could when suddenly a thick winged ray shot out of the sea. It simultaneously caught the wind, then, out of control, blew straight toward him.

Trying to get away from it, Chad backed up faster but tripped and fell.

The thing rushed closer.

He tried to get up but couldn't.

It was going to land on him. . . .

And then it did. Catching his arm and the deck.

"Jesus!" He yanked his arm away but quickly realized he was all right. Breathing in gasps, he just watched it.

They were all watching it.



## CHAPTER 2

**D**AVE PELLIGRO thought it was a cool-looking creature, its entire body—horned head, torso, and wings—a single, seamless aerodynamic form. Flat on the white fiberglass deck, it looked like one of those black army planes he'd seen pictures of. What were they called again, stealth bombers? This thing was a miniature version, albeit with horns the size of shot glasses sticking out of its head. It had the rough dimensions of a fat Sunday paper, nearly as thick in its middle, its longest side across the wings, which tapered to cardboard thickness at their tips.

It didn't move. It simply lay on the textured white fiberglass.

Dave had never seen anything like it. "What the hell is it?"

Chad rubbed some slime off his arm. "Who cares what it is? Just throw it off my boat."

"I'm not picking that thing up."

They all slowly circled it, maybe ten feet away. Gabby stepped closer, peering down. It was a tough-looking little thing, muscular and solidly built, maybe twenty pounds. She surveyed its entire body when she noticed its eyes. They were the size of golf balls, cold and black, lodged in deep sockets at the base of the horns. They were horrifying eyes.

How come it's not moving? she wondered. Was it dead? She leaned



in even closer and studied the skin. It was jet-black and slick, like wet vinyl. "It's pretty cool-looking, isn't it?"

Then she heard something. It was making a noise of some kind, and she tilted her head curiously. "*What's that sound?*"

Chad felt nervous. His wife's face was getting close to it and he gently tugged her arm. "Just get away from it, Gabby."

Dave suddenly leaned down. "I think I hear it too." He stepped closer, listening. The creature was emitting a wheezing sound, labored but slow and steady, apparently coming from underneath it. Dave dropped into a push-up position and watched it from another angle. The little form was gently rising and falling. He studied it for several moments then stood, visibly stunned. "Jesus Christ."

Chad turned, annoyed. "What?"

"I'm not sure but it looks like . . . It's breathing."

"It's not dead. Why shouldn't it be breathing?"

Dave gave his friend a you're-a-moron glare. "Because fish don't breathe air, Chad."

"Maybe it's still removing oxygen from the water in its gills."

Dave turned to Theresa, surprised by the sophistication of her comment. "What?"

Theresa inched toward it. She'd been watching the creature more closely than anyone. "I think it's some sort of ray."

Theresa was the youngster on the boat, her college days only a few years behind her. A University of Southern California grad, she'd once taken a course called Introduction to Oceanography and Ichthyology. Oceanography referred to the ocean's physical geography; ichthyology, to the study of fish. The creature on the white fiberglass was definitely some sort of ray, Theresa knew. Rays were cousins of sharks. Most rays were docile except electric rays and stingrays. But Theresa was certain this animal was neither of those. She didn't see a barbed tail. Many rays looked like disks or tiny flying saucers, with varying degrees of thickness. They varied tremendously in size. Some were huge, literally as big as small planes, others smaller than a human hand.

I've got a pretty good memory, Theresa thought, congratulating herself. She didn't recognize this particular ray, but there were tons of different species. This one was certainly thick. Her eyes settled on the horns. Unlike those on a kid's Halloween devil costume, these horns