

Read some extracts from “Can Snow Leopards Roar”

Extract from Chapter 1:

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‘Thanks, Jay. Please tell us about the Centre and the fundraiser,’ said Anu. ‘We know it’s called the *Kinnaird Wildlife Conservation Centre*, KWCC for short; it’s situated in the Cairngorms, you have a breeding programme for endangered species, and we get there by helicopter.’

Jay looked around the table thoughtfully and said, ‘There’s a lot going on just now, so I’ll begin with the basics. KWCC is six years old, and we’re fortunate in our founder and patron, Robert MacCale, a wealthy philanthropist who’s passionate about conservation. Ten years ago, Robert put forward a proposal to the government, and they leased him a large area in the Cairngorms, which already had several buildings and a boundary wall – mostly in excellent condition. It was teeming with wildlife: birds such as ptarmigan, dotterel, golden eagle, snowy owl, capercaillie, Scottish crossbill; and animals like the red deer, roe deer, mountain hare, pine marten, red squirrel, wildcat and otter, as well as reindeer – to name a few of the species.’

‘Does Mr. MacCale live at KWCC?’ asked Amy.

‘No. He’s handicapped – lost an arm and a leg in the war and has various other problems which necessitate him having to stay in town, near a hospital. He’s amazing and you’ll enjoy meeting him.’

‘It’ll be an honour,’ said Umedh. ‘How did he set up KWCC?’

‘He brought in experts, and once it was operational, Robert paid all salaries for five years, until KWCC was stable and in a position to support itself. He persuaded several large corporations to become involved and, together, they donated two helicopters and cover the running and maintenance costs. Robert’s very keen on educating the world about the critical need to save our planet, and that’s another strong focus for us.’

‘What types of educational programmes do you run?’ asked Anu.

‘All sorts,’ said Jay. ‘We encourage child participation from an early age. Groups of young people from schools love coming over to live in tents during the summer months, and in the buildings in the winter, and depending on the age group, they stay from a week to a month. In living the experience, by pure osmosis, they absorb a great deal of information about conservation and environmental issues. We involve them in caring for the animals, show them videos, and hold classes with fun, practical lessons and games. We also want to specialize in breeding endangered species, under carefully controlled conditions – we’ve only been doing this for two years.’

‘Also, at the upcoming fundraiser, we’d like you to speak to the young people about your group, the JEACs.’

‘We’d love to do that, Jay,’ said Amy, and the others nodded.

‘Your branches are currently in India, Canada, Australia and Sri Lanka, and your website is www.jeacs.com, right?’

‘Correct,’ said Rohan.

‘Tell us more about the breeding programme,’ said Nimal.

‘The proper name is “captive breeding”, and although there’s some controversy about trying to breed animals out of their natural environment, as we know, it’s sometimes the only way in which some of the endangered species can breed and survive. Once KWCC was well established, Robert and Dan, inspired by the success of other conservation centres, explored the feasibility of starting up a programme at KWCC. Then, at a conference in Glasgow, Dan met Luag Abercrombie, who was an expert in the field, and invited him to take charge of our captive breeding programme – and that’s how we began.’

‘Which animals do you breed?’ asked Nimal.

‘Well, one wildlife conservation park succeeded in breeding Asian short-clawed otters and the red panda, so we decided to start with those two species as well. So far, we’ve managed to breed two otter kits – which are nearly three months old, and one red panda cub, who’s a month old.’

‘Oooh – they must be so cute,’ said Gina, clapping her hands.

‘Will we be able to play with them?’ asked Mich.

‘The otter kits and baby panda are being bred for release when they’re older, so you won’t be able to play with them, but you can see them. However, our biggest success is with the *Panthera uncia*, commonly known as snow leopards, which, unfortunately, brings me to the problems surrounding them.’

‘What problems, Jay?’ asked Rohan.

‘Snow leopards are an endangered species,’ began Jay.

Just then a waiter entered the room to clear away the dishes and Janet Larkin, looking at her watch, said, ‘Good grief – it’s nearly 11 o’clock. What time do we leave tomorrow, Jay?’

‘By five, to avoid traffic,’ said Jay. ‘We must get some sleep.’

‘But you were going to tell us about the problem with the snow leopards,’ protested the older JEACs, who were eager to learn more.

‘Sorry, folks – I’ll explain on the plane,’ said Jay.

‘Okay,’ said Nimal, seeing Mich and Gina stifle yawns.

The others agreed, and everyone went to bed, eager to start their trip in the morning.

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Extract from Chapter 2:

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‘We obtained four pairs from Central Asia, which has the largest population of these beautiful creatures. These snow leopards, which had been preying on herds of sheep and cows, were captured at various times by a conservation centre in the region, who didn’t want them euthanized. The centre was only too willing to send the animals to us. Prior to bringing them over, Luag and his team consulted with experts, to ensure that we could provide a good breeding environment, and once the animals arrived, we observed them carefully and continually improved their enclosures. It was a lot of work, so you can imagine our joy when, nine months ago, one of the females delivered three cubs.’

‘They must have been adorable,’ said Amy.

‘They were. Then, a month and a half ago, another female gave birth to four cubs – we now had a total of seven cubs.’

‘Our programme was a success, and three weeks ago we had a huge celebration – everybody who supported KWCC was invited. The event was well attended, and we celebrated at Ruthven, which is where we have our events, and took groups of visitors to Burns to see the new cubs. However, the next morning we discovered that the three older cubs, and their parents, were missing.’

‘Oh, *no!*’ gasped everyone.

‘What happened?’ asked Rohan.

‘Unfortunately, nobody saw anything suspicious,’ said Jay. ‘The police arrived, but found nothing unusual around the enclosures – visitors had not been taken to see the older cubs. All the boundaries were checked, but there was no damage to the high walls surrounding KWCC.’

‘But . . . was absolutely *nothing* discovered about their disappearance?’ said Umedh.

‘Yes – but it was horrible,’ said Jay, tears glistening in her eyes. ‘Ten days ago, a man named Huang, travelling to China, was arrested at the airport. Craig – a senior airport official who’s one of our volunteers and bitterly mourned the loss of the snow leopards – happened to be in the office when a customs official called a co-worker to check about permits for snow leopard skins being taken out of the country. Craig called back the customs officer immediately, and instructed him to take Huang to a private room and keep him there. Huang’s baggage was to be sent to Craig’s office.’

‘What happened next?’ asked Rohan.

‘Craig, and a colleague, opened Huang’s bags and found the pelts of an adult snow leopard and one cub. The bag was ripped apart and they discovered a number of bones, sewn into a thick blanket, which, in turn, was sewn into the suitcase to look like part of the bag. Huang was brought into Craig’s office and questioned. But he was a tough character and merely said that he had bought the bag and pelts in Hackney, in East London. He refused to answer any questions about the bones.’

‘Huang was handed over to the police, who requested the airport management not to publicize this discovery just now, since there were still three snow leopards to be accounted for. The police contacted Dan and Luag, and the three of us rushed to the airport, where Luag confirmed that these were the pelts of our missing male and one cub – each snow leopard coat pattern is unique, like our fingerprints. It was quite upsetting, and we went to the police station, with Craig. Inspector Jeffries, who’s in charge of our case, requested us, at this stage, not to discuss it even with our staff. We reluctantly agreed.’

‘What next?’ asked Nimal.

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Extract from Chapter 4:

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‘I’ve seen pictures of a snow leopard covering its face with its tail,’ said Amy.

‘Yes, the tail is extremely thick and they often wrap it around their bodies and faces for warmth,’ said Brian. ‘Their fur is well adapted for the cold – long and sort of woolly underneath.’

‘Their nasal cavity is enlarged, so they can breathe easily in high altitudes,’ added Luag.

‘In pictures, they don’t appear to be very big, like tigers and lions,’ said Anu.

‘True – they’re medium size and the adults weigh between 30 and 60 kilograms,’ said Brian. ‘Sometimes their tails are almost as long as their bodies and can be nearly a metre long.’

‘Are they white?’ asked Gina.

‘Some of them are lighter in colour and look white, but mostly their fur is smoky-grey, with a pattern of darker grey, open rosettes. Because of their colouring, they’re barely visible against the rocks.’

‘What do they eat?’ asked Mich.

‘Other animals – like sheep, goat, hare, and some of the larger birds like the snow cock and chukor. Also, if they get a chance, they’ll attack animals in a herd. Then, naturally, the herders get mad and kill them – so we lose even more snow leopards, unless they’re rescued, like ours were.’

‘Another reason why they’re endangered,’ added Luag, ‘is because snow leopards don’t remain in one area, but cover vast ranges – the influx of people and livestock breaks up their range, and when snow leopards become isolated, they can easily be killed.’

‘Do they move in groups – actually, is there a word for a group of snow leopards?’ asked Umedh.

‘No, to both questions – they’re loners,’ said Brian. ‘The only time you see a few of them together, is when there are cubs – then the females stay with their young until they’re independent of her.’

‘Tell us about the cubs,’ asked Gina.

‘They’re born just over three months after mating,’ said Brian, ‘and the female can have between one and five cubs at a time. By the time they’re one-and-a-half years old, or sometimes a little older, the cubs become independent and move away from their mother. At birth, they weigh between 300 and 700 grams, and they are adorable. It’s fun to watch our cubs, since they’re as playful as kittens or pups and make little mock growls.’

‘Will your cubs be released when they’ve grown up?’ asked Nimal.

‘Not this litter – they’ll remain in the captive breeding programme,’ said Luag. ‘Their mother isn’t producing milk – so we bottle-feed them, which, needless to say, Brian loves doing. You can play with them. They recognize Brian, and come rushing to greet him.’

‘Aren’t they scared of people?’ asked Gina.

‘They’re still pretty young and, since they were born here, they haven’t learnt to be scared of us,’ said Luag. ‘Also, like any cat – they’re curious. Nimal, Jay told me that all animals are attracted to you and quite unafraid. I’m looking forward to seeing you with the cubs, and also their mother, who is *not* tame. She’s a good mother and wants lots of interaction with her cubs. So we installed a “creep” in the enclosure so that we can get the cubs away from her when we want to feed them.’

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Extract from Chapter 8

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Rohan woke with a start and sat up in bed. What was that noise? He looked at his watch – it was nearly 2 a.m. on the eighteenth. He went to the window which had been left slightly ajar. Hunter jumped off Nimal's bed, growling under his breath until Rohan placed a hand on his head.

'What's up, yaar?' said Umedh softly, joining Rohan.

'Don't know,' said Rohan. 'I thought it was the storm, but it's dead calm outside, and the sky's clear.'

The sound increased gradually, waking Brian and Nimal, and Nimal joined the others at the window.

'It's a chopper – coming in this direction,' said Umedh. 'Do you think something's happened?'

'They'd call us – and if they were taking animals to town, this is the wrong direction,' said Brian, looking puzzled.

'I'm going out,' said Rohan.

'Us, too,' said Nimal and Umedh.

'Hunter, Tumbler – stay!' said Nimal.

Hunter looked mournfully up at Nimal, but obeyed, while Tumbler snuggled down beside Brian.

'Don't turn on the lights,' said Rohan hastily, as Umedh reached for the light switch. 'Just a thought,' he continued, as the others stared at him.

The boys hurriedly pulled on jeans and sweaters, and as he placed a couple of thick sweaters within the boy's reach, Rohan said, 'Brian, can you make your way to the lounge – without turning the lights on?'

'Of course,' said Brian, pulling on a sweater and using his crutches to get into his wheelchair. 'I'll have some hot chocolate ready – you'll need it when you return.'

'It's getting louder, chaps,' said Rohan, slipping a torch into his pocket. 'Let's go.'

They hurried out of the dormitory. Pulling on coats and boots, they left the building, closing the door behind them.

Outside was a fairyland! The snow lay in deep drifts along the walls where it had been blown, and everything was covered in pure white.

'Talk softly, keep together, and don't use your torches,' muttered Rohan.

'The sound's louder,' whispered Nimal, 'and it's on the other side of the wall.'

They made their way through the trees and stopped opposite the window of their dormitory. The pile of rocks and stones, which were the ruins of the previous castle, was further away, while the forest, which began a few metres away from the building, was extremely dense, and extended to the boundary wall, a hundred metres behind.

Hidden just inside the tree line, the boys listened intently.

'Where's it coming from? It's not coming *over* KWCC,' said Rohan.

'Look – a light flashed among the ruins,' said Umedh excitedly.

'And there it is again,' whispered Nimal, as they saw a light flash up into the sky and arc towards the boundary wall. 'Let's get closer to those rocks.'

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And look out for the action! Read the book and participate in their adventures!