

CLOAK and JAGUAR

A Journey into the Life and Death of American Jaguar, Macho B

by

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Prologue

Yellow canines gnashed at the thick metal cable. Saliva flew from the mouth of the jaguar as he growled in frustration. At sixteen his top canines were still sharp enough to puncture and crush the bones of deer and javelina yet they could not pierce the cable that kept him tethered to a mesquite tree. On one bite his upper left canine snapped off at the root. The jaguar didn't notice until his next bite which crushed the exposed nerve endings against the foreign strands of taut metal. He roared in pain. His loud, deep voice akin to his distant cousins, the African lion, leopard and tiger echoed off the canyon walls. In his rage he jumped up the tree he was anchored to slashing at its bark with his claws and biting at the tree with one less canine. The pain from the broken tooth, dulled a bit by the adrenaline flooding his body, was ebbing only to be replaced with shock as the temperatures outside his body dipped below freezing and the temperature inside his blood, organs, and tissues began a steady decline. He jumped down from the tree and tried to leap from the cable. His front, left wrist remained immobile in the snare as he tried to escape his tether by propelling his body away from the trap with powerful hind legs. He did this over and over leaving a gouge in the earth from his efforts. Exhausted, he sat down to rest. He panted. His eyes were open; a storm of rage and desperation that glared a frozen blue in the full moon light. His ears pricked up when he heard a familiar grunt coming toward him. It was a

javelina, known as the desert pig (really a peccary). The jaguar focused in on the animal that had terrible eyesight but could smell incredibly well. With sharp, curved tusks the beast could do real damage to the jaguar that had no way to escape a confrontation. The wind blew through the jaguar's nostrils bringing him the musky scent of an animal that should have been his meal, but was now a threat to his safety. The javelina drew closer, snout to the ground sniffing the fine dirt of the game trail unaware of the trapped jaguar. The jaguar growled when the javelina was close but instead of running away the lone peccary took advantage of the vulnerable jaguar and attacked. The jaguar jumped back into the tree climbing with three legs as far as the cable and his leg anchored at the base of the tree would let him. He was feet above the javelina with bristled grey, wiry hair high on its hackles, clacking his jaws and tusks in defense. The jaguar growled, roared, and tried to swipe at the javelina. The javelina dodged the lethal paw and ran in for an attack biting at the jaguar's long, muscular tail that reared up in the peccary's mouth like a serpent. A tooth from the javelina was ripped out in the process. Blood pooled in the vacant tooth cavity spurring the javelina to flee the fight. Adrenaline encouraged the jaguar to continue his fight against the tree. Claws and canines gashed through the cambium of the mesquite. Blood flowed into his mouth. His black and white tipped copper hairs tore from his body as he climbed and jumped from the tree repeatedly. The tree claimed the outer skin of his claws and one claw tip. The jaguar was now drained. He lay down on the frozen ground, left forearm stretched above his head at a forty-five degree angle. The jaguar cocked his head to an awkward position in order to gnaw at an exposed root of the tree. He was nervous. In all his life he had never been unable to move. He had never been trapped.

This is how I imagined Macho B's snaring.

Several canyons to the west I sat on the stoop of an old mining house in the ghost town of Ruby, Arizona. Formerly a small but somewhat thriving mining town it had long been abandoned and its wood and adobe buildings were left to crumble back to dust. Ruby is now privately owned and open to the public for self-guided tours. The best feature of the property is the large colony of Mexican free-tail bats that take up residence in an abandoned mining shaft every summer. At dusk the bats emerge from the shaft in a frenzied cloud of shadow numbering in the thousands to feed for the evening. On occasion, a peregrine falcon can be seen infiltrating the fleeing mass as she targets a bat for an aerial snack.

But on this cold and clear winter night I drank a glass of red wine in an effort to provide some warmth to my shivering, petite body as I gazed at the full moon. It would be a busy night in the desert and I had just checked under the couch to make sure Sundog, Ruby's caretaker had left the revolver. Drug smugglers and immigrants liked to travel on nights surrounding the full moon because they could move faster and easier across the spiky and steep landscape that was naturally illuminated. Border Patrol knew this too and their increased patrol presence could be heard as their vehicle tires crunched gravel on the nearby Ruby Road. The gun was left for a "just in case" emergency but I would not use it. The thought of pointing a loaded weapon at another living being made me nervous; the power to kill terrified me. Behind the house where I was staying to feed and water animals in Sundog's absence a new acquaintance was probably making dinner in another dilapidated mining house. Thorry Smith, an Arizona Game and Fish wildlife technician was staying at Ruby while he checked snares that had been set out for a mountain lion (puma) and black bear project. He had been invited to camp at Ruby by my supervisor on a jag-

uar project and his co-worker on the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) lion-bear project, Emil McCain.

Smith had stopped by earlier in the day to say hello and inform me he had not snared any animals. A cold front had come in bringing freezing rain and snow and he figured the animals were lain up keeping warm. I hoped that would remain the case for the last two days Smith planned on keeping the snares open before closing them and heading back to his home in northern Arizona for another break. So as I stared at the moon I willed the jaguar to remain far away from this portion of his home range so the AZGFD snares had no chance of capturing him. I also questioned myself as to why I had not set the snares off this day to ensure the jaguar could not be caught. I was practically alone in the vast borderland wilderness and could have easily gone to where the snares were after Smith had checked them in the morning. But I pushed the thought aside. The jaguar had been in this part of his territory just a few weeks prior and I believed from the photographs captured of him over the years that it was too soon for his return. Besides, he was a jaguar and had proven for at least sixteen years that he was capable of surviving on his own without any help.

That night I struggled to sleep. The fire would not stay lit in the wood burning stove. The cold from the outdoors crept in through the cracks of the crudely built wood house chilling me to the bones. The three house cats got upset every time I tossed in bed, meowing in annoyance as they rearranged their bodies next to mine for warmth. The four of us couldn't keep warm despite body heat and a literal mound of wool blankets that enshrined our fetal prone bodies. I felt nervous and anxious and couldn't stop thinking about the jaguar, Macho B.

Finally the night ended. In the morning I brewed coffee on the camp stove and listened to a broadcast from a community radio station out of Tucson. The sound of other voices and music helped to ease the knot that had grown in my stomach overnight yet it did not erase it. Something was wrong. I went out in the front yard to watch the sunrise and saw Smith drive away in his AZGFD truck. For a moment I considered stopping him and asking if I could join him in checking the snares. But, I also had work to do this day. I would drive close to two hours away to the Patagonia Mountains and check the remote cameras placed in the Coronado National Forest. I was a field technician for the Borderlands Jaguar Detection Project(BJDP) and needed to retrieve the cameras' memory cards to see if a jaguar had been captured on film. I watched Thorry leave Ruby and for the rest of the day my mind fixated on the AZGFD truck and the sinking feeling in my stomach that accompanied that vehicle.

As I waited for the water hose to thaw so I could give Sundog's ducks fresh water for their pool Smith and his AZGFD co-worker, Michelle Crabb walked up a canyon trail and saw fresh jaguar tracks, Macho B's tracks. They followed his tracks as he walked through a snare trap they had set two weeks prior yet it did not capture him. The snare had been tampered with by people and did not deploy. This canyon, Penasco is a few miles north of the United States and Mexico border and was a travel route for north bound immigrants and drug smugglers. Smith presumed that immigrants had found the snare and disabled it. Smith and Crabb continued down the trail following the jaguar's tracks and then discovered him lying still at the next snare. The jaguar heard them approach and barely lifted his head in recognition that he was no longer alone. Nervous and excited, Smith readied the dart rifle that he would use to shoot the immobilizing drug into the jaguar's left, back leg. He had made a special trip just a week prior to get this piece

of equipment so he could shoot the dart at the jaguar from a farther and safer distance. He had been told by McCain that jaguars were ferocious when approached in a snare and for everyone's safety it was best to have some distance between the animal and the biologist with the immobilization weapon. The drug loaded into the immobilization dart was Telazol. This anesthetic is stored in the body's fat and can re-enter the bloodstream at a later time inducing hallucinations. This side effect is referred to as re-narcing.

When the dart hit Macho B's rear, left leg he snarled and twirled around to face Smith and Crabb. After Macho B was knocked out from the drug his body was examined and his temperature was taken. It was discovered that Macho B was missing his top, left canine but they were unsure if it was an old or new injury that was causing all the bleeding. His bottom left canine was described as "worn." His temperature was 94.8 degrees, four lower than what it should have been so they moved him into the sun to warm him up. Iodine and topical spray were applied to the scratches on his snared leg and other abrasions on his body but the dart's injection site was not cleaned, despite them knowing the exact location since Smith had pulled the dart out of Macho B's leg himself. Smith tried to draw blood from Macho B. It took him several tries to get just a small sample. And despite Crabb consulting with her graduate advisor, University of Arizona conservation geneticist, Dr. Melanie Culver just a week prior about proper storage of an animal's blood sample the directions were not followed. Weeks later when the blood sample was needed to help determine Macho B's health at the time of his capture the sample could not be used. The blood had been compromised because it had been stored incorrectly, frozen and the sample was too small. Macho B was under sedation for close to six hours! He was fitted with a GPS tracking collar specifically meant for him and a yellow ear tag. When Macho B finally

came to he stumbled several times trying to get away from Smith and Crabb. Coming out of the drug his hind end would be the last part of his body to gain full mobility. There is video of Macho B taken by Smith documenting his attempts to rise from the earth only to come crashing back down to the ground, legs splayed and belly up. At some point Macho B was said to have roared like an African lion.

Macho B finally escaped the capture site and settled in for the night about a mile away. The next day he walked less than two miles to a canyon that was to become his final resting place.

References:

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