

Chapter 1

The Birth of Cody

Deep in the Maasai Mara National Wildlife Park in Kenya, two events are quietly preparing to unfold. Dawn stretches across the land, sunlight spilling over endless grass, warming the earth as if it has arrived early to witness something rare. Beyond a cluster of scattered trees, a herd of horses gathers in a loose circle.

At the center lies Maggie. Her chestnut coat glistens under the rising sun, darkened in patches from sweat after a long and exhausting night. A narrow white stripe runs down the center of her face, cutting clean between wide, alert eyes that now carry both strain and determination. Her powerful frame, built from seasons of running and survival, trembles as muscles tighten and release beneath her. She is done waiting, done enduring. This filly needs to come out now.

The herd shifts around her, restless but watchful. Large stallions with thick necks and scar-marked legs stand guard at the edges, their ears flicking toward every distant sound, their bodies angled outward in a protective ring. Younger horses step carefully, unsure, their smaller bodies tense with curiosity as they keep just enough distance to feel brave without being in the way.

Maggie pushes, then pushes again. Her body strains, every effort pulling more from her than she has left to give. Her strength drains slowly, like water slipping through cracks. She pauses, drawing in deep

controlled breaths. Her nostrils flare wide, pulling in the cool morning air as she forces her body to steady.

A flicker of movement catches her attention. Not far away, a family of meerkats stands upright in the grass. Small, slender bodies balance on their hind legs, sandy fur blending almost perfectly with the earth beneath them. Their dark eyes are wide and locked in, their tiny heads tilting in quick, sharp motions as they observe. One shifts slightly to the side for a clearer view. Another leans forward too far and has to quickly regain balance, stiffening as if nothing happened. A third slowly lowers itself, settling in more comfortably, clearly committed.

Maggie watches them for a brief moment, her focus slipping despite everything. Then a sharp kick from within, strong and demanding, snaps her attention back. Her body tenses again. No more distractions. She gathers what strength remains, braces herself, and drives forward with one final, powerful push.

Cody enters the world.

For a moment, everything is overwhelming. Too bright. Too open. Too alive. Cody lifts her small head, her damp coat clinging tightly to her slim frame. Her coat is a soft sandy brown, lighter than her mother's, with faint hints of cream along her legs. Her ears twitch weakly as she adjusts, her dark eyes barely open as the sunlight floods in. She wobbles, unsteady, trying to understand the space around her. The sun feels enormous. The sky feels endless.

Within minutes, instinct takes over. She tries to stand, and it goes poorly. Her long, fragile legs tremble and bend in ways that do not seem helpful. She pushes up, only to collapse back down into the grass in a slow, awkward defeat. Maggie watches closely, her body tense despite her exhaustion. Every attempt feels dangerous. Every second stretches longer than it should.

Cody tries again. This time, she rises. Barely. Her legs shake beneath her, thin and uncertain, but they hold. She freezes, taking it all in. The world stretches endlessly in every direction. Waves of grass ripple under the breeze. Horses move across the land, some massive and powerful with thick muscles rolling beneath their coats, others smaller and quicker, darting through open space. Her nose twitches as scents flood in, earth, grass, animals and life.

Then she sees something strange. In the distance, figures shaped like horses but covered in bold black and white stripes move together across the plain. Cody tilts her head slowly, confused, watching their patterned bodies shift against the light. Above her, birds glide across the sky, wings spread wide, cutting effortlessly through the air. She watches them, completely drawn in, her head lifting higher as they drift farther away.

A breeze rolls through, brushing against her coat, stirring the grass around her. The world feels like it is moving, calling to her. Cody certainly wants in on this new, exciting world. She takes one step, then another, each one slightly more stable. Her hooves press into the ground, firm and real. Something about it feels right. Exciting.

Without warning, she lunges forward into a clumsy trot. Her legs move unevenly, out of sync, but she does not care, the motion alone is enough. She pushes faster, then faster again. Her body begins to believe it knows what it is doing.

It does not.

She takes a deeper breath and drives forward again. A ditch waits ahead. She does not see it. Cody vanishes into it, tumbling forward as her legs fold and her body rolls down into the shallow drop before landing in a cloud of dust at the bottom.

Above, the meerkats react instantly. Several lean forward in perfect sync, tiny bodies stretching to the edge of their balance. One nearly tips

over and flails briefly before stiffening upright again, pretending nothing happened. Another meerkat drops low, fully committed now, eyes locked on the scene below. They do not move. They wait.

Back at the herd, Maggie jolts upright. Every instinct ignites at once. Her head snaps toward the ditch, ears locked forward. Her body tightens as fear surges through her, wiping away all exhaustion. Newborn. Vulnerable. Exposed. From somewhere beyond the tall grass, a low rumble drifts across the plain, deep and distant, but real.

The herd stiffens. Heads lift. Ears turn toward the sound.

Maggie runs. Fast. Far faster than her body should allow. Her muscles burn as she pushes forward, closing the distance to the ditch with urgency that overrides everything else. By the time she reaches it, her body is braced for the worst.

Instead, Cody bursts up from the edge, covered in dust but completely fine. She shakes herself off in a quick full body motion, sending dirt and small bits of grass flying, then immediately launches forward again like nothing happened. No hesitation. No caution. Just energy, wild and unstoppable.

Maggie slows, her breathing heavy, watching as Cody runs in wide, uneven circles, legs still unsure but driven by pure excitement. Relief hits first, rushing through her in a wave. Then disbelief, as her filly continues to sprint like the ground cannot catch her.

Cody continues until her energy burns out just as quickly as it arrived. She slows, then stops, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She turns back toward Maggie, her steps smaller now, guided by something more instinctive.

Hunger.

She reaches Maggie and presses in close, searching, then finding what she needs. She begins to feed. Her small body finally still. Maggie

lowers her head, watching carefully. Cody is strong. Stronger than expected.

A sudden pinch. Maggie flinches sharply, her muscles tightening for a brief second before relaxing again. She exhales slowly. Her gaze softens as she looks down at her filly.

Worth it.

Every bit of it.

Off to the side, the meerkats begin to disperse. One lingers a moment longer than the others, standing upright, head tilted slightly as if replaying the scene. Another meerkat nudges past it, and the two briefly bump shoulders before separating. Within seconds, they are gone, slipping back into the grass and disappearing completely.

The plains settle. The herd relaxes. The wind continues its slow, steady sweep across the land. But something new now stands on uncertain legs, and the world, vast and unpredictable, has already begun testing her.

* * *

Chapter 2

The Birth of Joe

Not far from the open plains where Cody had just discovered gravity the hard way, another birth unfolds high above the ground, hidden within a maze of thick branches and heavy green canopy. Sunlight filters through the leaves in broken streaks, painting the forest in shifting patterns of gold and shadow. The air feels dense and alive. Something crashes far below, birds scatter, and then quiet returns, like the forest is holding its breath.

Up in the trees, the stillness does not last. Ukah is pacing. The large male orangutan dominates the branch beneath him. His long arms hang past his knees, powerful and heavy, brushing against the bark as he moves. His thick orange, brown fur is darker along his shoulders, matted slightly from sweat and movement. A broad face framed by coarse hair gives him a rugged, weathered look, and his deep-set eyes carry a restless intensity that refuses to settle. He moves back and forth, gripping the branch with wide hands, turning sharply each time like the wood beneath him might give way if he waits too long.

He glances toward his wife Tracy, then away, then back again. His jaw tightens. His nostrils flare. Fourth child. His body grows tense, restless, almost impatient. Behind him, several orangutans sit and watch. One older male, thinner and grayer around the face, barely reacts, lazily

scratching his side. A younger one clings to a nearby branch, leaning forward with wide curious eyes.

Ukah suddenly swings around and storms past them, brushing one aside with a heavy shoulder. The smaller orangutan scrambles to regain balance, clinging tightly now, deciding very quickly to stay out of his path. Ukah returns to pacing.

Then a sound reaches him.

Small. Sharp. New.

He freezes. Every muscle in his body locks in place. The forest noise fades behind that single cry.

Ukah moves instantly. He surges forward across the branches, gripping, swinging, pushing through anything in his path. Leaves shake loose and drift downward as he forces his way to Tracy.

She rests against a strong fork in the tree, her body low, her breathing slow and heavy from exhaustion. Tracy is smaller than Ukah but solid, her frame built with quiet strength. Her fur is a softer shade of orange, almost golden where the sunlight touches it, and darker along her arms where it thickens. Her face is smoother, her eyes large and steady, carrying a calm that contrasts sharply with Ukah's intensity. Even now, drained from labor, she looks composed, grounded.

Ukah slows as he reaches her, the tension draining from his shoulders. He leans in, wrapping one long arm around her carefully, his head lowering beside hers in brief stillness. Then curiosity takes over. He pulls back slightly, eyes dropping to the small form in her arms.

Tracy watches him. There is a pause, just long enough to build anticipation, then she lifts the newborn and gently places him into Ukah's waiting hands.

Ukah stills completely. His massive frame, so restless moments ago, becomes careful, controlled. He brings the infant closer, tilts his head,

looks. A shift passes through him, subtle at first, then unmistakable. His chest expands, his posture rises, and energy surges through him like a sudden burst of fire.

He throws his head back and releases a powerful call that tears through the canopy, deep and booming. Birds explode from nearby branches, wings beating wildly as they scatter into the sky. Ukah lifts one arm high, gripping a branch as his body sways with the force of it, the entire tree seeming to react.

Around him, the orangutans erupt. They answer with loud, excited calls of their own, voices overlapping in a chaotic wave of sound. Some swing closer, others climb higher for a better view. One misjudges a grab and nearly drops before catching itself at the last second, clinging awkwardly as it regains composure. The energy spreads through the trees, alive, uncontained.

Ukah lowers his gaze back to the infant.

Joe.

Small. Fragile. New. His fur is darker than his mother's, still thin and slightly damp, clinging to his tiny frame. His limbs seem too long for his body, his fingers curling tightly with instinctive precision. His eyes remain mostly closed, his face pressed inward as if the world is still too large to face.

Ukah nudges him gently with one thick finger, studying him with intense focus. His movements are surprisingly precise, almost delicate. Joe reacts immediately. Not with curiosity. Not with excitement. He reaches. Tiny fingers grasp, searching, finding something familiar.

But it is not Ukah.

Tracy leans forward, extending her arm. Joe latches onto her instantly, gripping her fur with surprising strength for something so small. She pulls him close against her chest, securing him in a position

that feels safe, warm, protected. Joe settles. No struggle. No exploration. Just stillness.

Tracy's large hand moves slowly along his shoulder in a steady, reassuring motion. Her breathing begins to even out as she watches him, her focus locked entirely on the small life pressed against her. Ukah watches closely. His excitement softens into something quieter. He lowers himself onto the branch beside them, his large frame finally still.

Around them, the others gather closer, forming a loose circle along the surrounding branches. The earlier chaos fades into low movement, shifting weight, soft rustling, the occasional curious glance. Everything settles, peaceful. High above the ground, wrapped in leaves and filtered light, the world feels distant, safe.

But far below, the forest tells a different story. Through the tall grass and shadows, something moves. Low. Silent. A shape slips between patches of light, barely disturbing the ground beneath it. Ears twitch. Eyes fix upward briefly, watching, calculating, then it disappears again, swallowed by the undergrowth.

Above, Joe clings tighter to Tracy without knowing why. The trees sway gently. And the forest, patient as ever, waits.

* * *