

Excerpt from Chapter 1

Arriving at the cage labeled “Black Jaguar” Greg stood and gazed, but he saw nothing. That figures, he thought, with my luck it’s probably off getting shots or something. He was about to give up and walk away when he saw a slight rustling. Slowly he shifted his position, following the exterior of the black jaguar’s enclosure, which stood across a pathway from the enclosures of the other jaguars, trying to zero in on where he saw the movement. Following the enclosure he found, to his annoyance, it was butted up against that of another type of small animal. The sign on the cage read “Kinkajou” but Greg took no notice of it. He continued circling around and was relieved to find the extent of this other animal’s cage wrapped back on that of the black jaguar. It occurred to him there were just these two enclosures in a little isolated island-like space surrounded by pathways. Though the space was large, Greg realized if he carefully maneuvered around it looking high and low, he would eventually catch a glimpse of the black jaguar, even if he had to do it by looking through the other animal’s cage.

Greg’s patience paid off as he was slowly able to discern the outline of the large beast. When he did so he almost felt embarrassed. The huge animal lay in the shadows under some brush right at the corner where its cage touched up against that of the kinkajou. The jaguar was so close, he realized, that if he stepped over the small safety fence just a few feet from the enclosure he was pretty sure he could reach through the wire mesh and touch it. Not that this was something he would ever dare to do.

He did wonder, though, how could he have missed the beast when it had basically been right there in front of him. Then he recognized how truly amazing an adaptation the black jaguar’s camouflage was. Unlike its spotted cousins, it seemed to melt into the plentiful shadows of the forest floor. It was an attribute which allowed it to hide in almost plain sight. No wonder it’s the top predator in its realm, surprising there aren’t more of them, he thought to himself.

Entranced by this incredible beast, Greg leaned in to get a picture. Owing not just to the deep shade, but also to the lack of contrast between the big cat and its surroundings, his camera chose to do what any self-respecting electronic device would do at such a moment. It refused to function as Greg desired and would not take the once in a lifetime picture that was there in front of him. Cursing under his breath, he turned his attention to the misbehaving camera, trying not to make any noise that might startle the sleeping jaguar.

As he did this, Greg was himself startled by an incredibly loud and extremely vicious shrieking sound coming from the adjacent enclosure to his immediate right. He had been leaning forward, trying to take the

picture, and as his body jerked in reaction to the hostile noise so close to him it caused him to lose his balance, pitch forward, and fall over the safety fence onto the ground right in front of the enclosure.

Greg was not the only one startled. His tumble caused the black jaguar, who, as is the habit with all cats, had previously been slumbering with one eye half open, to instantly twist its lithe body like a coiled spring unwound. In a single motion the cat righted itself, while simultaneously lashing out with its muscular paw and sharp claws through the mesh of the enclosure and towards the place where Greg lay face down in the plants between the safety fence and the jaguar's cage. Seeing the sharp claws swiping at him, Greg in turn let out a blood curdling shriek, then hastily pulled himself up and scrambled backwards away from the jaguar. In doing so he subsequently fell once again, this time tripping over the low safety fence, finally coming to rest on his butt right in the middle of the footpath.