

Excerpt from *The Puma Years* by Laura Coleman,
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1 When I wake up, something is roaring. There's a lion in my room. I jolt upright, hitting my head on the beams. Light is creeping through the green window netting. Where am I? What the . . .

2 There's a monkey by my feet. It's not a lion. I'm light-headed with a moment's relief, then I realise: there's a *monkey* by my feet. On my sleeping bag! He's the one without the beard, and he still doesn't look happy, not happy at all! I edge away as quickly as I can until I'm smushed against the wall. I don't want to touch anything. Not the monkey, nor the mosquito net, the cobwebbed brick, the shiny rock-hard, lumpy mattress that's slick with my sweat, probably seething with bed bugs, fleas. The monkey pauses. His brown eyes are full—pity, anger, misery . . . I can't tell. He takes another breath, puffs out his chest and lets loose another gigantic howl. I put my hands over my ears.

3 "Don't worry. It's just his morning ritual. He likes to meet the new girls."

4 A head pops up. Bushy curls, a strawberry-blond beard, rugby player's neck. The face is startlingly pale, covered in freckles. Grey-blue eyes. English with a Mancunian accent. He reaches out to give the monkey a stroke, smiling. The skin around his eyes crinkles.

5 "Hola Faustino," he whispers.

6 "He should *not* be *in here!*"

7 We all jump. I peer through my net. In the middle of the room, a girl has her hands on her hips. Dark curls cascade from the top of her head, and her face is scarlet.

8 "Thomas!" She glares at the guy. "Get that monkey out of here. Damn it Tom." She points her finger accusingly at all of us, as if for some reason this is my fault too. The monkey just sticks his tongue out at her. She lets out a loud exclamation of disgust, then runs over to

a backpack leaning against the wall and starts rummaging aggressively. Her accent is thick, Eastern European, I think. "If he's been through my things again—"

9 "He hasn't, Katarina. He's not a thief, are you Foz?"

10 The monkey looks at Tom pathetically. Then he crawls into Tom's arms, and they both shoot the girl baleful looks as they leave the room, the door rattling as it closes behind them.

11 "Where *is* it?" Clothes are flying now.

12 "What have you lost?" I peek out from under my net.

13 The girl peers up at me, still scowling. "Oh, you're alive. We weren't sure." I blush as she goes back to the pile of clothes. "My bra. He's taken my fucking bra again."

14 "There was a pig yesterday. It had a bra. A red one." I laugh, suddenly aware of how stupid this sounds. But I want her to forgive me for the monkey intrusion. Her large brown eyes expand.

15 "*Panchita?*"

16 And before I can say anything else, she's hurtling out the door. Her accusatory yells spread across the patio. I lie back down, looking up into the rafters. I hope I haven't made a massive mistake. The last thing I want to do is piss off that pig.