

Return of the Condor

Excerpt

Chapter 1

The Last Condor

Jan Hamber faced an agonizing dilemma. The condor she had been tracking—the last member of its species to exist in the wild—had approached a trap site on remote Hudson Ranch just north of Los Angeles. It was late on a spring day in 1987, and Jan watched through her binoculars as AC9 (Adult Condor 9) landed near the stillborn calf that served as bait. The condor circled the carcass, keeping his distance, while a Golden Eagle fed on the calf. The sunlight accented AC9's intelligent eyes and bare, salmon-colored head. An ink-black ruff of feathers circled the base of his neck. AC9 stretched and refolded his wings, and as the sun sank lower over the chaparral-covered hills, he flew away without touching the calf.

Jan followed the bird in her truck, tracking his radio signal to a roost site on nearby Brush Mountain. She wore jeans and a bulky light-blue goosedown jacket to ward off the cool air settling into the canyons. A Mickey Mouse hat covered her gray-flecked hair. She had purchased the wool hat after her son's San Marcos High basketball team defeated a crosstown rival that had derided them by calling their school Mickey Marcos High. Winning the game turned the name into a source of pride, and the hat became her talisman.

Jan had first encountered AC9 in 1980, when he was still a downy young chick in his nest, and over the years she had watched him mature into an adult bird. By 1987 a mere twenty-seven condors were left in the world, and all but this one lived in captivity. The recovery effort Jan worked for represented the last hope for saving the species from extinction, and AC9 was crucial to their success.

The fading late-afternoon light forced Jan to make a critical decision. Years later, when she told me the story, the moment still brought back vivid memories. Having observed condors for more than a

dozen years, she could predict what would happen next. AC9 had seen the carcass, but hadn't eaten yet. He would surely come back the next day. Jan considered her next move. Should she notify her fellow condor biologists to set a trap for AC9 in the morning? Or should she simply turn her truck homeward, leaving the last wild condor his freedom? She realized that not a single soul in the world knew about this except her. She could call in the team to capture AC9. But if she didn't make that call, no one would ever know.

The hands of Jan's watch crept toward 6 p.m. Doing nothing was a decision by default—she needed to take charge, to make up her mind. Had any other human ever confronted such a quandary, she wondered: knowingly capturing the last wild member of a species? Despite the work of all the science panels and government agencies, tonight this decision was hers alone. Earlier in the day she'd listened as the call of a Red-tailed Hawk echoed down a nearby canyon; she knew her call would reverberate even louder and longer, quite probably through the rest of her life. She thought again: *This recovery effort is the last hope.*

She pulled her Mickey Mouse hat tighter on her head and drove to a small Union 76 gas station to phone Pete Bloom. Bloom, a condor trapper for the National Audubon Society, listened to Jan and told her he would make some calls. The next day was Easter Sunday, and Jan knew the odds of assembling the required team members were dicey. But Bloom's calls got through, and half a dozen scientists arrived at the site before dawn.

With mixed emotions, Bloom worked in the darkness with the other biologists to prepare the trap site. Bloom had spent his life trapping raptors, but he knew this morning's capture attempt would be different—and critical. He placed blasting caps and metal weights into four pipes buried in the ground. The weights were tied to a folded, sixty-square-foot net. When the blasting caps were detonated, the weights would shoot the net several feet into the air, arcing over the calf carcass and ensnaring the bird. Normally, Bloom test-fired the net to make sure it was correctly aligned—he didn't want one of the flying metal weights to hit a condor. But this morning, with AC9 roosting nearby, he didn't dare risk a test firing. He checked the setup a final time, then hid himself in a one-person underground blind to begin the wait. The rest of the team concealed themselves a few hundred yards away. Once Bloom pushed the red detonator button, he would race to the net and restrain AC9 until

the rest of the team arrived to help.

Easter morning dawned clear, cool, and breezy. Jan rose at 5 a.m. and drove back toward the roosting spot, passing alfalfa fields covered with veneers of ice from irrigation sprinklers. At 8:47 Jan's radio receiver came to life. *Click, click, click*: AC9 was stirring. Around 9:30 he headed toward the trap site, with Jan following. At 9:50 he landed fifteen yards east of the carcass. A few ravens picked at the calf. Jan observed through her spotting scope as AC9 danced toward the bait, then edged back. Knowing what was about to happen renewed her doubts. She wanted to send the bird a message: *Get out of there*.

AC9 inch closer to the calf and lower his head to feed. Pete Bloom detonated the explosives, and the net shot up from the ground and dropped over AC9. Bloom raced to the net, and within minutes the team had untangled AC9 and placed the bird in a portable pet carrier called a sky kennel. Jan's field notes from that morning are cryptic: *10:10, cannon fired. AC9 caught. The end*. The condor recovery program had crossed the Rubicon.

Jan wiped her eyes and exchanged an emotional hug with Pete Bloom. Like Jan, Bloom felt the magnitude of the moment. It was both the high point and the low point of his life. He had been hired to capture condors, but trapping the last one filled him with elation in successfully completing his job and great sadness at what it meant.

Jan thought how the firing of the cannon net changed her world. With AC9 now a captive, she mourned the loss of her career as a condor biologist. Her days of following the wild birds ended that morning with a puff of smoke and the odor of cordite. Later in the day, Jan drove the mountain roads back to the program's headquarters at the Condor Research Center in Ventura. After all the years she had spent working with the recovery team in this untamed backcountry, the route to Ventura became a road of memories. She passed Pine Mountain, and her eyes automatically went to the sky. No condors. She passed through the Los Padres National Forest. No condors. She continued into Ventura County. The horizon remained empty. For Jan, it was as if the sky had become devoid of birds. Something elemental was missing.

Jan arrived at the Condor Research Center to find the staff besieged with calls from the media. Her boss asked if she would help

field questions about AC9's capture. She had an instant, visceral reaction: *I can't do that today*. In an uncharacteristic move that surprised her even as she spoke the word, Jan said "no." That afternoon, she simply couldn't talk rationally about the capture. Instead, she sat in her office and let the emotions of the day wash over her. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, not a single condor flew over North America. The magnificent titan of the air that some Native Americans called Thunderbird had vanished from the sky.

Jan made herself a promise: *One day AC9 will again fly free*. But the promise filled her with trepidation, partly because the salvation of the condor now rested in other hands. Whether the U.S. government's Condor Recovery Program could achieve its ambitious goal of saving America's largest bird was unclear, especially when so much about the species remained a mystery. In fact, on that Easter Sunday, as the recovery team transported AC9 to the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park, they had yet to breed a single condor in captivity.