PREDATOR DOMINION

THE SHADOW DIRECTIVE, BOOK 1

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Welcome to Sanctuary Kingdom!

Here at Sanctuary Kingdom, our mission is to safeguard the future of our planet's most endangered species.

We are dedicated to the protection, conservation, and rehabilitation of wildlife through innovative breeding programs, cutting-edge research, and global collaboration.

Our goal is to create a sanctuary where endangered species can thrive and be nurtured back to health, with the ultimate aim of reintroducing them to their natural habitats.

We strive to educate and inspire our visitors about the importance of biodiversity and the critical need for conservation efforts.

Together, we can restore the balance of our ecosystems and ensure a sustainable future for all living creatures.

Thank you for joining the fight and have a wonderful visit!

CHAPTER 1

Flicking a glance over the group in the conference room at the Amphibian Axis Building on the grounds of Sanctuary Kingdom Park, Darby Ellis noted that there was not a single seat available. In fact, a number of reporters lined the sides of the conference room and a few stood along the back wall.

The packed house was not a surprise. Sanctuary Kingdom now rivaled both Disney and the Universal parks for daily attendance. Anytime Sanctuary Kingdom held a press conference, people clamored for news.

Nerves danced along Darby's skin as she stood to the side of the small stage at the front of the room. It was an effort for her to avoid running a self-conscious hand over her dark hair. She'd hurried here this morning and hadn't had a chance to look in the mirror before she'd had to begin the presentation. As one of the reporters aimed his camera her way, she tried not to grimace. The park uniform of a dark navy blue polo shirt with the Sanctuary Kingdom logo and the boxy navy blue shorts was not exactly her favorite look. The yellow RFID park bracelet was her only jewelry.

Luckily though, she was not the main attraction. No, that was the large twenty-foot screen that allowed all the reporters in attendance a perfect view of the latest addition to the park's entertainment offerings: Axolotls.

Although in reality axolotls were only twelve inches long, this axolotl filled nearly the entire screen. With webbed feet, a dorsal fin, and a tail, the adorable white axolotl with pink feathery gills that sprouted from its head looked as if it was smiling.

The photo was not a manipulation or the cartoon image the park would be using in its marketing and entertainment endeavors. No, this image was just how the axolotls looked: perpetually smiling.

Axolotls were truly adorable-looking creatures. They were unusual in that they were frozen in time in the teenage stage of development, giving them a cuter, sweeter appearance. Or at least that was the case with the ones in captivity. The ones in the wild were brownish-gray. Still cute, but not quite as cute as the white-and-pink version.

Tapping on her microphone, Darby smiled at the image as she spoke. "Not only are we thrilled to announce the opening of the Axolotl exhibit, but I am beyond pleased to announce a new addition to the Sanctuary Kingdom's *Fantastic Friends*: Abby the Axolotl."

The image on the screen shifted to a cartoon version of the Axolotl. Giving everyone a beat to take in the image, Darby continued. "Abby Axolotl will be joining the rest of the *Fantastic Friends* next season before she stars in her own spinoff series."

The screen shifted again depicting the well-known image of the *Fantastic Friends*. There were seven of them: Eddie Elephant, Leo Leopard, Teddy Tiger, Jillie Giraffe, Sandra Panda, Pascha Polar Bear, and of course, little Ping Pika. Each of the animals had been carefully hand-drawn with large expressive eyes set in adorably friendly faces.

Fantastic Friends was a runaway hit for the park. It had been created by the park's co-founder, Gabe Sullivan years ago as a book series, which then had been turned into a massively popular cartoon. The series told the tale of a group of young animals who banded together to save the environment. Abby was the latest addition, and she was the beginning of a new series that would focus on water animals.

The whole park was based around the characters. Almost every exhibit depicted at least one of the characters. The merchandising of the series was by far the most lucrative revenue stream within Sanctuary Kingdom, both at the park, online, and in stores.

Another image flashed on the screen behind her. A light chuckle

rumbled through the crowd. Darby flicked a glance over her shoulder and couldn't help but smile at the cartoon image of Abby on the screen behind her wearing a Sanctuary Kingdom hat. A carousel of images from the *Fantastic Friends* then flicked across the screen along with a short clip of Abby meeting Ping Pika, one of the most popular Friends.

As the last image slipped from the screen, Darby strode to the lectern in the center of the dais, an image of the *Fantastic Friends* grouped together behind her. "Of course, we're not just adding a new cartoon character."

"Although that will make the park a lot of money," someone called out good-naturedly.

Darby grinned. "True. But as you also know, that is not the primary objective."

There were a few good-natured laughs from the group. She raised her hands. "Or at least not the only objective. Axolotls are the latest addition to the breeding program.

"There are only about a hundred adults still living in the wild. The rest can be found in zoos and private homes around the world. They are critically endangered, and Sanctuary Kingdom is working on breeding them and repopulating their habitat. So far, we've been able to spawn axolotl eggs."

The screen behind her shifted to the real photo of the smiling axolotl as Darby answered more questions about the program.

There were lots of questions.

The press on the new Axolotl exhibit had been hugely successful. The public had embraced the idea.

That was not a surprise. It was almost easy to get support for cute-looking animals. Less cute endangered animals, like the Proboscis monkey with its massive elongated nose or the Madagascan aye-aye with its creepy eyes and claws, were much tougher sells.

A hand raised in the front row. Darby gestured to Chip Holster from the *Tennessee Tribune*. He stood up. "So we've heard that you guys are getting into genetic engineering with that secret research center of yours." Chip wiggled his rather impressive eyebrows.

Darby chuckled. "If you're looking to get a visit out there, Chip, I'm afraid the answer is still no. Many of the animals residing there, as you

guys know, aren't used to humans. We need to keep the interactions to a minimum until we can get them acclimated."

"Yeah, yeah," Chip said. "But how do we know you're not re-engineering? Are you trying to turn this place into another Jurassic Park?"

"I assure you, there will be no baby T-Rexes running around," she said, grinning at Chip's word choice. "We are not trying to reanimate any long-gone species. But I am allowed to tell you that we are contemplating genetically engineering some species that have recently gone extinct in an effort to bring them back."

There was a stir among the audience.

Darby continued. "As you all know, the extinction rate is currently one hundred times the natural rate, in large part due to human activities. Sanctuary Kingdom's goal has always been to help the environment. Our scientists are currently examining which species' loss has most negatively affected the environment and are looking into what bringing them back could do."

"But won't they just go extinct again?" a reporter asked from somewhere toward the back. Darby was unable to make out exactly who it was.

"That's why the animals we create are going to be heading to one of our preserves located across the globe. We have seven—wait, sorry, I mean eight. I keep forgetting there's a new one." Focusing on her laptop, she pulled up a slide and sent it to the screen behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, her chest tightened at the name: The Joel Sullivan Animal Preserve.

Joel had died six months ago, the husband of Sanctuary Kingdom's co-founder, Gabe Sullivan. It had been a tough blow to Gabe. He'd gone into seclusion and then busied himself being anywhere but at Sanctuary Kingdom.

Shoving her own grief aside, Darby turned her attention back to the reporters. "The preserves have been established on six continents and will be used to help assimilate and build the numbers of these incredible animals. Technology is partly responsible for the disappearance of these creatures, but now technology can help bring them back."

Scanning the room, she leaned forward over the lectern. "There's a great deal of good that Sanctuary Kingdom has done and will continue

to do. We know that animals being removed from the natural life cycle of the planet has had incredibly damaging effects.

"By reintroducing them, we can hopefully ameliorate some of those effects. Just look at what the introduction of wolves in California did to the ecosystem there. That's what we're aiming for—to simply make the world a better place."

The journalists jotted down notes on their computers, their heads bent. As they did, Darby caught sight of a woman standing at the back of the room: Wendy Miller, the assistant to the head of special events. Wendy gave her a nervous smile. Darby's stomach dropped, and it was an effort to keep a groan from slipping past her lips.

Oh no.

CHAPTER 2

THE LARGE, CAVERNOUS, 2,000-SQUARE-FOOT WAREHOUSE WAS QUIET AS Kevin Young slipped into his chair in front of his console. He flicked a glance at the giant hand-painted banner hanging from the rafters: NATURE'S JUSTICE, OUR MISSION. The EcoAct symbol—a globe with a pawprint on it—had been painted in blue and green in the bottom-right corner.

The warehouse was located just a few blocks south of Syracuse University in a commercial area. It had been unused for a few years before EcoAct took it over.

Kevin wasn't sure what it had been used for before. The oil stains on the ground suggested it had been a garage of some sort.

There was a small office in the back that they'd set up as a kitchen. But the main space held only eight six-foot tables, four with computer monitors. The others were used for non-computer work and as places for people to eat.

Normally, the room was full of EcoAct members, but today most were on site down in Tennessee. Kevin was the only one working from the warehouse. As he sat, he glanced uneasily over his shoulder. He hated being in the middle of a large space. It was a stupid setup.

A few other members were still in town and could be called if Kevin needed help. They would arrive in a couple of hours to start breaking down the space. Until then, it was entirely his.

Rolling his shoulders, he contemplated dragging one of the tables closer to the wall but finally decided against it. He'd have to take apart and reassemble his whole setup if he did that.

Besides, quiet is good. I work better in the quiet, he reminded himself. Plus, it was true. He liked to work without distractions.

Joining a group was unusual for him to say the least. He was not someone who sought out company. In fact, for the four years prior to joining EcoAct, he'd spent almost all his time in the basement of his parents' home. His mother had finally said that he needed to get out. She didn't care where he went, as long as he left the house.

Feeling the ticking clock of his parents' growing annoyance with him, he'd started looking for something to join as his resentment simmered. His parents had never recognized the genius that was their son. He was special. He wasn't meant to be like other kids with a nine-to-five job. No, he was meant to live inside machines, to manipulate them, to unlock doors that others wanted to keep closed.

I am the locksmith, he thought as he reached for his energy drink and took a swig.

Only a week after his mother's final ultimatum, complete with an employment application for a local fast food place, a random social media post led him to EcoAct. He'd never really been into animal rights. Honestly, he didn't care about animals at all. But EcoAct was looking to up their game, and that interested Kevin.

Of course, he hadn't jumped at the offer immediately. He'd done his research. The group had been all talk with a few small protests every now and then. They were definitely small ball.

But their leader, Todd Sharp, had been researching how to move to the next level. Kevin had investigated other terrorist groups that sabotaged equipment, contaminated water supplies, destroyed energy utilities, and even deployed biological agents. When Kevin had met Todd, he saw the same need to make something of himself, to be recognized, in Todd's eyes that he saw in his own reflection.

After a few conversations, Kevin saw the potential. From that day on, Todd, Kevin, and a few other higher-ups in EcoAct had worked tirelessly on today's plan.

But I am the reason it is going to work.

Cracking his knuckles, he tucked his head toward his keyboard and ran some quick diagnostics. He'd already run them, but he was filled with nervous energy. He needed to do something. He flicked a glance at the clock. Almost time.

Smirking, he sat back. *Well, Mom, looks like I'm finally doing something.*

CHAPTER 3

As Gabe Sullivan drove along the long road leading to Sanctuary Kingdom, his mind was once again blown by the fact that he and his sister had created all of this. Years ago, they'd had a simple sanctuary. It had belonged to their grandparents. He'd loved visiting and then living there.

Once he was old enough, Gabe had started doing lots of social media about the sanctuary. Slowly, he'd built a following.

And then one of his videos had gone viral, and that was it. A short time later, he'd created the *Fantastic Friends* and the popularity of the sanctuary had skyrocketed.

But his sister Martha, who'd never really cared too much about the sanctuary, had been the one who saw how to take Gabe's modest fame and turn it into an opportunity. She knew that combining education and entertainment was the key to making money.

Now they brought in over thirty billion a year through not just Sanctuary Kingdom but their line of hotels, a water park, and their latest addition, a movie studio. He remembered searching his couch and car for coins when he was in college, needing money to eat, and now Latham Parks grossed nearly twenty million a day.

And all because I wanted to help keep animals safe just like Grandma and Grandpa.

He smiled, wondering what they would think of all this. His grandmother would no doubt say there was too much fuss, although she'd be beyond proud of them. His grandpa would beam and probably lead the park's daily parade every chance he got.

Although the image left him feeling both nostalgic and amused, the amusement soon faded. They were long gone. And Joel . . .

No, don't think about Joel, he warned himself, turning his attention back to the road as he took a shaky breath.

Easing the car down the tree and flower-lined row, he tried to get back some of the excitement he used to feel. He used to love making this drive. Now, it just left him feeling unsettled.

Passing through the private entrance at the eastern gate of the Sanctuary Kingdom Park, a hollow fluttering erupted in Gabe's stomach. Placing his hand on it as he made his way to the VIP parking lot, he pulled into the spot reserved for him. There was only one spot closer to the walkway that led to the Dominion private entrance, and that spot was taken by his sister's white BMW.

Turning off the engine of the Mini Cooper, Gabe made no move to get out of the car. Instead, he sat with his hands on the steering wheel, staring out over the park.

Beyond a small retaining wall a few feet from the parking lot, the land sloped toward the Euphrates, the man-made river on the southern end of the park. The river teemed with life as electronic sensors and unseen nets kept the populations within it carefully contained.

Beyond that was the Dominion, the crown jewel of this particular property. It housed all the corporate offices, but also the high-end shops, restaurants, and a five-star luxury resort. It was set on an island in the middle of Sanctuary Lake. Somehow it was the perfect blend of wide, vast windows that overlooked the water and parks and yet also generated of feeling of an ancient temple.

Dominion had been his sister's idea. Almost all of this had been his sister's idea. She was the one with the head for business. Gabe was the one with the heart for animals. Together, the two of them had built this incredible destination. People traveled from all over the world to see the animals and enjoy the attractions.

He'd never foreseen any of this. He'd just wanted to help endangered animals and continue the legacy of his grandparents. Martha, though, knew that the only way to help was to make sure they had enough money to make a difference.

And now they did.

Gabe knew that they were doing a lot of good, much more than even his grandparents had been able to do with their animal sanctuary. But sometimes it all just felt so wrong, as if they were commercializing rescue efforts.

Letting out a breath, he shoved away the thoughts. No. They were doing good. They gave billions to animal relief efforts across the globe and had eight animal sanctuaries where animals were safe from the encroachments of the modern world. In fact, Gabe had just come back from opening their latest one.

And a large part of him wished he was still there. It had nothing to do with the park. Part of him was just looking for a reason to put the car back into gear and turn around.

As he pulled his hands from the steering wheel, he noted they were shaking. Rolling them into fists, he took a deep breath. This place was so full of memories, and he did not want those particular memories. He flicked a glance to his right. The parking spot for his husband, Joel, had had its placard removed.

No new one stood in that spot. Instead, there was a "No Parking" sign. Gabe stared at it, his heart feeling heavy. *I miss you, Joel.*

The maudlin thoughts started to creep across his mind, but once again, he shoved them away. No. It had been six months. He'd locked himself away from the world for that time, jet-setting from different animal sanctuaries, opening the new one, doing everything to keep from coming back here, to keep from remembering the day-to-day with Joel.

But it was time.

In fact, today was probably the perfect day to return. Darby was here giving a press conference this morning, and then she would be giving a private tour to Mama Sue and Linc. He couldn't think of a better way to face his first day back at the park without Joel.

Mama Sue, Linc, and Darby might not be blood, but they were family. A little bit of family was exactly what he needed.

An image of his sister flashed through his mind. Well, his chosen family at least.

CHAPTER 4

The large display at the front of the conference room showcased six mottos:

Reviving Nature's Wonders
Conservation in Action
Bringing Back the Wild
Together We Can Save Them
The Future in Our Care

At the bottom was Sanctuary Kingdom's current motto: *Your Visit, Their Survival*.

Stan da Vinci, in his usual bow tie and round glasses, gestured toward the screen. "We explored all possible variations of the motto, but our current one still performs the best. The second most popular was *Reviving Nature's Wonders*."

Martha Latham studied the mottos as Stan continued to talk, discussing the demographics of the focus group and the need for more diverse groups for future research, but Martha had already tuned him out. She knew that their original motto would be the most successful.

Her eyes focused on the last possibility: *The Future in Our Care*. She could have told them that one wouldn't work. It smacked of guilt and worry about what was to come.

You didn't want people coming to a vacation spot thinking about climate change and deforestation. You wanted them thinking that they were saving the world, not focused on what was wrong with it. It was a very fine line to walk, one that Martha had learned to traverse with expert care.

Sanctuary Kingdom was a vacation destination, but it was one that people could feel good about visiting. A portion of all proceeds from the park went to conservation efforts. In fact, prior to the park's opening, she had worked out a deal with the Tennessee state legislature and the federal government so that all expenditures were considered charitable donations. It made it so that people could literally write off their vacations on their taxes.

That tax benefit had been a huge boon to their ability to compete with the major parks. Now they were on par with Disney and Universal, and Martha intended to surpass them in the not-too-distant future.

Sensing that Stan was winding down, she returned her focus to the conversation as he said, "So we'll keep doing the research, and I do think we can incorporate *Reviving Nature's Wonders* into some of our in-park advertising and evaluate the effect while we explore additional variations on the motto for a larger advertising effort."

With a non-committal grunt, Martha looked over at Shandy Johnson, the director of conservation efforts. Shandy was thirty-nine years old, smart, and perpetually harried. She lived and breathed animal conservation.

"How are the axolotls acclimating?" Martha asked.

"Very well. Hopefully, within another two weeks, we'll be able to get the full number into the exhibit. For right now, though, we have six that are good to go."

Stan hit a button, and a picture of the axolotls appeared on the screen. Even Martha had to admit that the marine animals were cute. They were absolutely begging to be turned into a cartoon. And that was exactly what they had done. "Stan, how's the response to the spinoff of *Fantastic Friends*?"

"Great. Adding a water line has been phenomenal and really opens the door." Stan reached forward and pressed a button on the remote. An image of the *Fantastic Friends* appeared on the screen. With their large expressive eyes and sweet expressions, they were a merchandising gold mine.

Next to it was a group of another six animals, all water-based. The newest group was still in flux: a dolphin, a seahorse, a crab, an eel, an octopus, and an axolotl were depicted. There was also a whale, an octopus with massive cute eyes, and little frogs.

Martha tilted her head, studying it. "Not quite as cute as the original cast members, are they?"

"No, this is still in mockup. Abby Axolotl looks great, though, and Ollie the Octopus as well."

They'd been mixing and matching different animals, trying to find the right combination. Her brother hadn't been around to add his thoughts. This is where he was missed. Creatively, he had no equal.

The image changed, and now it was only Abby Axolotl. Martha grunted her agreement. The axolotls were cute with their perpetual smiles.

"Okay, keep playing around with the other options. Abby's good to go, Ollie's close, though have someone adjust his coloring a little bit. Let's work in an episode where the *Fantastic Friends* interact with the two of them, and then we'll see where we go with the other ones."

Stan made a note on the legal pad next to him. "Sure thing."

There was a younger man in a suit and tie at the end of the conference table who piped up. "Is it really necessary to create a spinoff?"

Everyone in the conference room went silent as they turned their heads to the man and then back to Martha. She focused on him, narrowing her eyes. "Remind me again, who are you?"

"Jeff. Jeff Kling from the marketing department."

Martha's eyebrows rose. "You're from the marketing department and don't understand why expanding *Fantastic Friends* is necessary? People come here because their kids insist that they come here. People come here because *Fantastic Friends* is the most popular cartoon in the world. So yes, expanding *Fantastic Friends* is necessary."

"I get that. But shouldn't we be helping the animals more? I mean,

shouldn't we be focusing on the most endangered, like the black rhino?"

Martha drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "And how do you propose we do that? Grab some picket signs and take turns guarding them on the animal preserves? How would you suggest that we save the black rhino?"

"Well, I mean, there has to be a different way that we can—"

Barely pulling back her annoyance, Martha cut him off. "Do you know how much money Latham Parks provides to conservation efforts?"

Looking around the table, Jeff searched for allies. Everyone kept their eyes averted. Finally, he shook his head.

"Two billion dollars every year. That number is always growing. That does not include the required donation for anyone using our name or images of any of our characters through Sanctuary Kingdom. Literally billions of dollars are generated for conservation efforts across the globe. So tell me, do you think we should play around with a winning formula just because you think a rhino should be on a poster?"

Jeff winced. "No."

Martha nodded. "All right, that's it for today. Everyone's got their assignments."

A collective sigh and a few nervous smiles erupted across the table as everyone grabbed their things. As Martha stood, her gaze pierced into the man at the end of the table. "And what was your name again?"

"Jeff?" he asked, nervously halting halfway to standing.

"Well, Jeff, you're fired."

CHAPTER 5

The journalists were set to get a tour of the axolotl display in the Amphibian Axis Building following the press conference. Darby had planned on leading that tour, but Wendy's appearance meant that was probably unlikely to happen. As the journalists filed out of the conference space, Darby met Wendy at the back of the room.

"Everything okay?" Darby asked.

Wendy gave her a nervous smile. Despite being only forty-four years old, there was something incredibly grandmotherly about Wendy. She had a nervousness about her and a need to ensure that everyone was taken care of. She was a very kind woman, which made the fact that she was the assistant to Claire Askins, the special events coordinator, all the more surprising. Claire could be described with many terms, but "kind" was not one of them.

"Oh, yes, yes, of course, Darby. Well, actually, no, there is a small problem. Claire needs you to give a VIP tour this morning."

This morning was supposed to be a one-off. Technically, she wasn't supposed to be working at all on Mondays. "I'm not working today. I agreed to come in and do the press conference, but that was all I was supposed to be doing today."

"I know, I know. But she's got a very special client and she really needs them to have a great tour. Sian was going to do it, but her

daughter went into labor last night, so she's been at the hospital with her since then. Poor thing's been in labor going on twelve hours now."

Wincing, Darby felt a great deal of sympathy for Sian's daughter. She sighed. "Ansell can't do it?"

Wendy gave Darby a look. She chuckled in response. Ansell was one of the other tour guides, but he was, to put it delicately, boring.

"It would be considered overtime, so you'd get time and a half for it," Wendy said hopefully.

It would be nice if that didn't make a difference, but sadly, it did. Money was extremely tight right now, and any extra she could make would definitely be appreciated. She sighed. "Okay, well, after I escort the reporters back to Dominion—"

With a wince, Wendy cut her off. "Actually, I brought Levi out to do that." She looked over her shoulder.

Darby could just make out the tour guide's tall frame in the hallway directing the reporters toward the axolotl exhibit. "So I can give you a lift back to Dominion," Wendy finished.

Trying not to snap at the poor woman, after all she was just the messenger, Darby shook her head. "No, that's okay, I'll walk."

Her eyes full of understanding, Wendy said, "Okay. And I'm sorry, Darby."

"I know. Thanks." Darby gave her a tight smile and turned for the exit, trying to tamp down her annoyance. Claire had been pushing more and more duties onto her. The extra money was good, but it was seriously eating into her time.

Oh shoot. Darby stopped and turned back. "Mama Sue and Linc are coming today. I was going to take them on a private tour."

"I'll make sure that I find someone to take them," Wendy said quickly.

Disappointment crashed through Darby. It was good her foster mom and brother would be able to see the new axolotls, but Darby had really wanted to be the one who took them. Her shoulders drooping, she blew out a breath, "Yeah, thanks."

Reaching the lobby, a few journalists turned her way. She plastered a smile on her face and straightened her shoulders. Passing a few of them with a professional smile, she headed for the exit.

Reaching the vestibule, she stopped to take a deep breath. With each breath she took, her resolve strengthened. *Okay. I'll take these VIPs on the fastest tour they've ever had. Then I'll join Mama Sue and Linc.* She could do these tours in her sleep, she'd done them so often.

So yeah, a quick tour and then she'd be done for the day.

CHAPTER 6

The restricted gate at the back of Sanctuary Kingdom was not labeled. To find it, you had to know it was there.

Commander Adrian Felix of the Defense Threat Reduction Force, a special program under the auspices of the Department of Defense, drove along the private driveway with complete confidence, even though this was his first time here.

His second-in-command, Sabrina Gutierrez, shifted uneasily in the passenger seat. Short with coiled muscle and close-cropped dark hair, the two of them looked like siblings and had been on more than a dozen missions together. He knew her well. Uneasy was not a look he saw on her often.

"Something up?" Felix asked.

Sabrina shook her head. "No. I just don't really like animals."

Felix barked out a laugh. "Then you might be a little unhappy on this mission."

"Yeah, well, as long as they stay behind their fences, I won't have any issues."

Felix grinned. "I'm pretty sure that's the entire point of a zoo. They stay in their place, and we stay in ours."

He flashed his badge at the manual security gate. His badge glowed green before the gates opened. As he drove through, his mind

focused on the mission ahead. His higher-ups were getting impatient and wanted an update on the program.

Initially, Felix hadn't been supportive of this particular project. He thought the government funds would be better spent on improving training programs to make soldiers more lethal. Specialized units were more effective these days than mass training, so the goal should be to bring everyone up to the special-teams level.

Of course, no one cared what a soldier thought about the battlefield. Decisions were made by armchair administrators who'd never actually stepped foot on a field of war and barely knew their ass from their elbow.

Felix had lost too many people in too many fights to believe the scientists would come up with a magic solution. But he didn't argue when given orders. Following orders was what made him an effective soldier.

And even though he wasn't a big science guy, he had to admit he was intrigued by this new line of research. The goal was to increase aggression in soldiers. That could be a game-changer. Special teams were already hardened and ready for combat, but the grunts? He'd seen more than a few of them turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble.

If they had a way to increase aggression in a fight, they could cut down training time dramatically. Part of the training was just getting them used to the violence they would face so that when confronted with it, they could react effectively.

Smaller, more lethal groups were the wave of the future, and if this research allowed the ability to turn aggression on and off, it would be revolutionary. Felix couldn't help but think of the berserkers from the old Norse tales. The legendary warriors were said to fight in a trance-like fury. The fearsome Vikings were supposed to be a terror to behold. They fought with a wildness and viciousness that was unparalleled.

They were impressive. If these experiments went well, they would have the means to create a berserker for the modern world. The ability would, in essence, turn off their humanity and focus only on the goal. Plus, with the problems soldiers faced when coming home, this showed promise in reducing PTSD and other integration difficulties,

because allegedly, memory was affected. The goal was for the soldiers to not remember what they had done.

He'd also read about the long-term hopes for the program. If all went well, they were going to offer the first stages of the program to inmates. They would give them some training, make them part of the program, and then drop them behind enemy lines to see what happened.

Felix smiled. He was all for it. He'd rather not risk the lives of good, patriotic soldiers. But using people who had already harmed the country? Yeah, he had no problem putting them in the crosshairs.

CHAPTER 7

Annoyance rolled over Martha's skin as she strode down the hall toward her office. Her assistant, Kelly Holmes, hurried along after her. Kelly was a few inches shorter than Martha's five six. With Kelly in flats, Martha's heels only accentuated the difference.

"Make sure everything is in place for the Japanese Prime Minister's tour tomorrow. Double-check that we have the correct golf clubs for the charity tournament this weekend."

Martha hated golf, but she was excellent at it. The golf course was, sadly, where many deals were made, and she always had to put on a good show. This weekend, she would be golfing with senators and other movers and shakers in the business world. She wanted to see if she could get a more beneficial tax structure put in place for the park and lay the groundwork of support for the aquarium.

She'd been pressing the senators for months now and knew they were on the cusp of giving in. Her marketing team, with the exception of the now-unemployed Jeff, had done an excellent job of playing up how well it would spin with the politicians' constituents. She was just going to push that angle a little more to seal the deal this weekend.

"Yes, it's all set. I'll have your new golf clubs waiting for you on site," Kelly said.

Stan called from behind, "Martha, got a minute?"

No, she thought sourly but found herself turning, nevertheless. Her

days were jam-packed from sunup to sundown. But she always managed to make time for the people who were actually good at what they did, and Stan was most definitely one of them, the hiring of Jeff not included.

Hustling down the hall toward her, Stan gave Martha a quick smile. "I was wondering if we could get Darby back for this campaign. With Jeff not here and—"

She cut him off. "Darby's where she's needed."

Picturing her brother's little pet, Martha tried to rein in her annoyance. He'd taken the girl under his wing and promoted her way too quickly. It was true she seemed to have a knack for marketing, but the truth was the girl seemed to have a knack for everything. Wherever she was planted, she bloomed.

Stan's face fell. "It would really be helpful."

Martha bit back her own annoyance. She wasn't sure what it was about Darby that rubbed her the wrong way. Maybe it was the fact that Gabe treated her like a little sister much more than he'd ever treated Martha. Or maybe it was the fact that the girl seemed to just land on her feet no matter what happened to her.

"I'll take it under advisement. Anything else?"

"No, no, that's it."

Without another word, Martha turned on her heel and made her way to the elevator. Three floors later, she was striding down the hall to her office. The doors opened as she approached. A small smile slipped across her lips. Everyone in the park wore an RFID bracelet, including the staff. Martha's was encoded so that whenever she approached her office, the doors would unlock and swing open for her. But they would do it only for her.

At the center of the room stood a sleek executive desk, an impressive piece of craftsmanship in polished wood with subtle metal accents. Behind it, a high-back ergonomic chair, upholstered in rich black leather. The desk was impeccably organized, with dual curved monitors and a few essential items neatly arranged.

To the left, a modern conference area had been created, featuring a minimalist table surrounded by sleek pale gray leather chairs, all positioned to take advantage of the sweeping views outside. A large flat-

screen TV hung on the adjacent wall, ready for presentations and video conferences, while a smart-home control panel allowed for seamless adjustments to lighting and climate.

The decor was a masterclass in understated elegance. Abstract art pieces adorned the walls, their bold colors and shapes adding a touch of sophistication without overwhelming the space. A few select accent pieces—a sleek sculpture on a side table, a designer vase on a shelf—added personality and charm, or at least that's what Martha had been assured by her ridiculously expensive interior designer.

Striding inside, she hit a button on her desk and the doors swung shut. She let out a breath, annoyance still rolling through her as she pictured that little know-it-all. She was so sick of these environmental types telling her how to manage her park. People had no concept of what it took to run a place like this.

Of all the amusement parks in the world, 20% accounted for 90% of the revenue. Less than 5% of all parks made a billion a year. Essentially, there was Disney, Universal, and then everyone else—at least until Sanctuary Kingdom had come along.

What people also didn't realize was that in order to play in the big leagues, you couldn't just have a park. You needed everything that went along with it. You needed the merchandise, you needed the stores, you needed the entertainment, and you needed the hotels. Most importantly, you needed the kids.

Fantastic Friends had been her brother's brainchild. He'd created it fifteen years ago, and it had taken off like wildfire. Initially, her brother's thought was to take the proceeds and put them back into the small animal sanctuary that their grandparents had created. But Martha had seen the bigger possibilities. She knew that *Fantastic Friends* could be the springboard to making a true impact on the world.

Now they had twelve themed hotels, four dozen restaurants, half a dozen sports centers, a massive new research center, five different amusement parks, animal-themed movies, conservation areas around the world, small kid-themed parks, all with animal exhibits, and shopping areas.

So many shopping areas.

The park was set up so that you couldn't go from one exhibit to the

next without seeing something to buy. Anything that they could slap an image of the *Fantastic Friends* on, they did.

And it had paid off.

Journalists had often written about them as if they were an overnight success. Martha scoffed. There was nothing overnight or quick about their success.

Kelly buzzed in from the outer office. "Um, you have a call from Archer Fitzgerald."

Picturing the aide to Senator Freddie Markham, Martha grimaced. The kid was right out of central casting: thick dark brown hair, bright blue eyes, lean, Brooks Brothers suit. She didn't know his background, but she would not be at all surprised if a country club was a large part of it. Grabbing the phone, Martha slapped a smile on her face. "Archer, how are you?"

"Good, Martha, good."

She gritted her teeth. He was maybe twenty-two and always spoke as if he was on the same level as her. "So what can I do for you today?"

"I just wanted to let you know that the team will be arriving a little early. They're ahead of schedule."

Martha stopped flipping through papers. "How early?"

"They've already arrived."

Trying and failing to keep the snark out of her response, Martha gritted her teeth. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"No problem. Talk soon." He disconnected the call.

Hitting the intercom button, Martha said, "Get me Roger. Tell him I'll meet him at the cart."

"Will do."

Standing, her gaze flicked over to a picture of her and her brother on the corner of her desk. The two of them were eight, with their arms wrapped around one another, giant grins on their faces.

He would not approve of the DOD project. But Gabe wasn't in charge of the park. He handled the PR, the entertainment, the lighter side. It was Martha's job to keep the doors open and the engines running.

And that's exactly what she was going to do.

CHAPTER 8

Breathing deeply, Darby stepped out of the Amphibian Axis Building and made her way toward Dominion. When she'd put some distance between herself and the Axis, she couldn't help but flick a glance back at the new home for the axolotls. The building was designed to look like the entrance to a cave on the side of a lagoon. There were exotic colorful flowers winding around the massive doors.

Cute animals with big eyes peeked out from behind the greenery. The animals were part of a scavenger hunt for kids in the park. If they found all of them, they were given a commemorative cup. And, of course, each one made the park money.

In fact, every piece of the park had an angle to make people spend more money. To complete the scavenger hunt, parents had to stay at the park longer. The longer they stayed, the more they spent.

With a shake of her head at both the brilliance and mercenary nature of the ploy, Darby headed along Tigris Way. Each of the streets inside the sprawling Sanctuary Kingdom was named after a famous river. The rivers, in turn, were named after famous natural preserves. She glanced over at the Caledonia, which ran just behind the amphibious exhibit. She smiled as a trout peeked its head out and then disappeared again under the water.

The sound of the *Fantastic Friends* theme song played over the loudspeaker.

In a forest bright and green,
With a river sparkling, the air is clean.
There's a team of friends who love to play,
But when nature calls, they save the day.

The theme song played every thirty minutes, and although Darby should probably be sick of it by now, she had to admit that it was awfully catchy. She found herself humming along and then even softly singing the words of the chorus as it played.

"Fantastic Friends, Fantastic Friends,
Together we stand, together we care.
Fantastic Friends, Fantastic Friends,
For the Earth, we'll always be there."

She smiled. It still amazed her that all of this had come from Gabe's imagination. He was full of creativity. Although, Martha did deserve the credit for the park.

Darby's thoughts soured when she pictured the co-CEO. She was not as warm and friendly as Gabe. But without Martha, as Gabe always pointed out, none of this would have been possible.

Realistically, Darby knew that was true. But she couldn't make herself like Gabe's sister. Part of the problem was the woman really just didn't seem to like Darby, even though Darby had really tried with her.

Blowing out a breath, she shook her head. *No negative thoughts, focus on the good*, she reminded herself. She'd just started a new mental approach to the day to try and tamp down her increasingly anxious thoughts.

Okay, feel the air, feel the ground under my feet. Breathe in the moment, breathe out the stress.

It was kind of hokey, but it did seem to help. She turned and watched the blue water of the Caledonia River flow by. It ran along the western part of the park. There were four man-made rivers in the park and one man-made lake, Sanctuary Lake.

The landscape was lush and full of flowers, carefully maintained to not look perfectly manicured but natural. The ice cream kiosk was shuttered just up ahead. All the rides were silent as well.

Set in eastern Tennessee, Sanctuary Kingdom had become one of

the number one vacation spots for tourists from the United States and beyond. With the parks, the hotels, the water parks, the movie studio, it was quickly rising through the ranks of parks.

But that wasn't what Darby loved about it. She loved the fact that it did good. A portion of every single dollar taken in by the park went to conservation efforts. Solar and green energy were used throughout the park, which meant that it drew very little energy from the grid. Composting and recycling were all part of the park's process.

And honestly, it was just nice to walk around. The park was closed on Mondays until one, so no guests would be coming for hours yet. It allowed the park to do training, gave staff some time off, and allowed for VIP group tours. That particular policy had helped land them on Forbes Top 100 Companies to work for.

It was like a utopian city plunked down in the middle of what could be a dark and difficult world at times. Darby liked to leave her worries at the gate when she stepped in.

Today, though, that was proving a little more difficult. Her duties were becoming more and more demanding.

Prior to Joel's death, she'd worked with Gabe, and honestly, it had barely been work. When they'd met years ago, the two of them had hit it off. The park had not been the same without him.

She felt guilty for begrudging Gabe his mourning time. She checked in with him every week and had spoken with him every other week. He was still grieving Joel, and Darby understood that. Seeing the two of them together was electric, and Joel's loss had left a huge hole in Gabe's life.

But Darby missed her friend. She really hoped he came back soon.

Her phone beeped, and she pulled it out. It was a message from Claire. *Ballroom. Ten minutes.* Shoving her phone back in her pocket, Darby repeated the mantra that she'd started two months ago when the demands on her had increased: *I love my job, I love my job, I love my job.*

Then she blew out a breath, thinking about her bank account and the bills the next couple of months were going to bring, and decided to switch it: *I need my job, I need my job, I need my job.*

CHAPTER 9

Kevin's knee jiggled, moving up and down quickly as his gaze constantly strayed to the clock. His smile deepened as he imagined what was to come.

The power right at his fingertips was incredible. He itched to just go and get it all started.

No, no. Patience. You didn't do all this work just to jump the gun. Do this right, and you are set. Your name will be legendary.

He smiled as he sat back, imagining where he'd be this time next year. In school, he'd been a loner and the target of more than a few bullies. They were all stronger, all more popular.

But now, Kevin was the strong one. In the olden days, physical muscle was king, the guy who could swing his sword the fastest or wield a sledgehammer or do something else that involved brawn had been the top dog.

In the modern age, though, it was the computer nerds who were kings. They could get into systems, they could create whole worlds. They could make the powerful bend the knee. Or, in Kevin's case, they could destroy them.

Today was the first step to being that destroyer. If today went well—and he had every expectation it would—EcoAct was going to take their reign of terror on the road. Todd's plan was to close down every zoo in the United States, and then across the world.

But that wasn't Kevin's plan.

No, once he'd shown what he could do, he was going to use Beowulf as his calling card full time. Beowulf, the slayer of monsters, just like Kevin slew the technological beasts arrayed against him.

Already he'd linked the moniker to his previous hacks. After today, that was how he would be known. Kevin Young was his past. Beowulf was his future. Once he pulled this off, people would line up for his services. Money would never be an issue.

Yeah, a year from now he'd be sitting on a beach surrounded by gorgeous women. The kid that everybody made fun of, the kid that nobody wanted to sit next to—he was coming into his own. And he was going to make sure that everybody respected him.

CHAPTER 10

Felix pulled to a stop in front of the door to The Fossey Center. Stepping out of the truck, he looked around. The research area looked a lot like the bases he'd been on over the years. There was a sameness to every building, all pale concrete with solar paneling along metal roofs. Only the words on the white signs by the front door were different.

He glanced back at the other members of his team, all former military and now on contract with the DOD. They took up the three rows of the Suburban. All were dressed in jeans and dark T-shirts that accentuated their tight muscles.

Noticing Bobby Proctor sitting in the second row with his head back and eyes closed, Felix nudged his chin toward him. "Santos, wake up Bobby."

"I'm awake. Just resting my eyes," Bobby said, cracking one eyelid open with a grin. "Had a late night. Definitely worth it."

"Yeah, I'm sure you and your hand had a great time," Santos said, opening the door.

Instead of taking offense, Bobby grinned as he followed Santos out of the vehicle. "He is my best friend."

Shaking his head at the banter, Felix stepped out and stretched his back. It had been a four-hour drive from DC, and they had only stopped once. His gaze roved over his five-member team. Bobby was a

former Ranger. Santos was former recon as was Urich Friedland, the quietest member of the group. At age thirty-three, Urich was tall and looked like a Tarzan actor. He probably wouldn't say more than one or two words the whole day.

Marissa Benson was the smallest member of their team, but she was solid muscle. It wasn't her muscles that had gotten her on the team, though. She was former Army intelligence and an absolute whiz at all things electronic.

Sabrina was his second-in-command and could be relied upon in a pinch. The team had been together for six years now and had been in more than a few dicey situations. He hadn't expected that when he and Sabrina created their private military group. Working for the DOD, he'd expected easier gigs, not harder.

This gig, however, had proven to be a cakewalk. They were little more than errand boys. For right now, that was fine. They needed a little bit of a break from the rough and tumble.

Stretching his heavily tattooed arms above his head, Santos grimaced. "This meeting going to take long?"

"Why, you got somewhere to be?" Felix asked.

Santos grinned in response. "Actually, I was hoping I could go check out the park once we're done. Never had a chance to visit."

Turning his gaze toward the amusement park beyond the research area, Felix raised his eyebrows. "Once we finish up the meeting, I'll get some guest passes. We can spend the day."

Bobby slapped Santos on the back. "Ya hear that? Boss is giving us a vacation."

CHAPTER 11

Dominion was set on the man-made lake on the western edge of Sanctuary Kingdom. Darby had always loved the look of the place. It had a strong Polynesian influence in its design, with dark wood and greenery everywhere, but it was also open with lots of windows letting in tons of Tennessee sunshine.

It featured high-end shopping, an exclusive hotel called the Kingdom, a beach, and an events center with the Emporium Theater. Darby passed the marquee display for Cirque du Soleil, which was currently in residence. A different entertainer was highlighted every three to four months. Entertainers were dying to get in here. There was a ton of good press, and the shows were always sold out.

Then there were the restaurants. There were a few casual kiosks for people who were just wandering through Dominion, unable to afford a room or shop in the stores. But then there were the high-end restaurants with celebrity chefs. Darby knew that part of Martha's plan was to get a Michelin-star restaurant here.

And Darby had no doubt that the co-CEO of Sanctuary Kingdom would accomplish it. If there was one thing she could say about Martha Latham, it was that the woman was driven. If she had a goal, she would find a way to make it happen.

Martha and her brother were polar opposites. Gabe always seemed to bring out the best in people, always *looking* for the best in people.

Martha walked around like a crocodile looking for weaknesses that she could prey upon. Darby had witnessed more than one browbeating that had caused a staff member, male and female alike, to burst into tears.

Thoughts of Gabe caused her heart to squeeze a little bit. After talking nearly daily, these last couple of months had been hard. She knew that Joel's death had completely destroyed him, and she wanted to be there for him. But he wanted to curl up in a dark space and shut out the world. She understood. Losing Joel, it hadn't been easy for anyone who knew him.

She'd been relieved when Gabe had agreed to go as the Latham Park representative for the new animal sanctuary. Him getting out in the world was exactly what he needed. Joel's death was absolutely tragic, a hit-and-run. Joel had been out for a morning jog. The car had come out of nowhere. They never found the driver.

Even more terrifying, Joel hadn't been meant to be running alone. Gabe was supposed to have been with him that morning.

Darby could've lost both of them. Even the idea of it sent a shiver up her spine. But Gabe was okay.

Or at least alive.

When he returned to Sanctuary Kingdom, she'd make sure that his first few days did not have a single hiccup. The other members of the staff, who loved Gabe just as much as she did, would help in that endeavor.

Smiling, she nodded. Yeah, when Gabe finally came back, she'd make sure that there was nothing upsetting that could derail his return.

CHAPTER 12

As the doors to Martha's private elevator opened, they revealed the head of Sanctuary Kingdom's head of security, Roger Collins. A former Washington, D.C. cop, he had a full head of bushy white hair and a similarly bushy mustache. No matter the time of year, he had the same ruddy complexion, which Martha attributed to an unhealthy drinking habit. As it never interfered with his job, though, she never commented on it.

As she stepped into the elevator, he inclined his chin. "Ms. Latham."

"Roger. Are we all set?"

He nodded but didn't say anything more.

The two of them descended to the first floor, and Roger got behind the wheel of Martha's personal cart. It moved a little faster and was a bit more comfortable than the carts available for the rest of the guests at the park. It had cost a pretty penny, but as the CEO, she figured she deserved it.

As soon as they pulled away from the Dominion, she turned to her head of security. "Cameras?"

"They've been shut down at the research center. No one saw the group coming in and no one will see them leave. Plus, the research area is on a skeleton crew. We should be fine."

That was true. A few people might have seen them, but they would

be dressed in plainclothes so no one would realize who they were. They'd entered through the north gate, which was highly restricted and required special permission to access. Weeks ago, she'd sent badges over to Archer to allow them entry.

It did not ease her annoyance at the fact that they had arrived early. Due to the classified nature of this endeavor, they needed to ensure that there was no record of their presence and no recordings. Knowing when they were coming, however, would have made that much easier.

As Roger drove, Martha did not pay attention to the landscape rushing past as they made their way down the perfectly designed path. Instead, she reviewed her notes for the legislation she'd be pushing this weekend.

Ten minutes later, as they approached the research center, Martha finally looked up from her phone. They were just passing the game section on the northernmost part of the park. There was a massive arch above the entrance to the area with the words MONKEYING AROUND! emblazoned across it. Some of the larger games had massive stuffed versions of the *Fantastic Friends* arranged along their booths, enticing players young and old to bring them home. Across from the game section was GEORGE'S PLACE, the orangutan house.

Each area had a massive placard announcing it's name. In fact, there were signposts pointing to each section of the park every hundred feet or so. Signage was critical in a park this large, as was branding. If something could have the name Sanctuary Kingdom slapped on it, it did.

But there was no park signage at the entrance to the Latham Park Research Center. Most of the park was designed to attract the eye, to entice people to approach. The exterior of the research center was designed to do the exact opposite. It had been designed so that people barely even realized it was there. Plain white buildings, no adornment, with high, yet uninspiring landscaping in front of the section rendered the area practically invisible.

Employees called the area "Oz" because it was where the magic happened. In the movie, Oz didn't have any magic. No, he had science. *Just like we do*, she thought with satisfaction as the guards opened the gates to allow her entrance.

Driving through, her gaze shifted to the one small sign on the right-hand side of the drive: Latham Park Research Center. The area consisted of twenty buildings: ten labs and ten buildings that were a mix of containment areas, offices, supply sheds, and even a cafeteria with overnight accommodations.

Access to the research area was carefully controlled. The subjects of the experiments were highly sensitive—not just the DOD's but all of them. Animals that had just been brought into the park spent time in the quarantine cells at the research center as they acclimated to the zoo environment.

In fact, the entire research center contained acres and acres of fenced-in land. It was a sprawling area, nearly the same size as the rest of the zoo. Animals new to captivity, once cleared by the scientist, were acclimated here before they were put on display.

Glancing at her watch, Martha debated for a moment and then decided that being the DOD hadn't bothered to tell her they were arriving early, they could wait a little bit. She gestured to the exhibit on the right. "Pull up there."

Roger did, and Martha stepped from the cart. She strode into The Leakey Building. Each of the buildings on the research center campus was named after a famous naturalist or biologist. The Leakey Building was for their high-altitude research. Inside, she stepped through the door, into a small foyer, with offices to the right and labs to the left.

But straight in front of her was a massive viewing window. She stepped to the edge of it and noted the mountainous terrain that had been replicated inside. The air inside had a lower oxygen rate than where Martha was standing, equivalent to the air found at 10,000 feet.

Scanning the scene, she spied the small creature that looked somehow like a hybrid of a bunny and a gerbil moving across one of the ridges with it's almost perfectly round ears.

There were more than 30 different species of Pikas, found from North America to the mountains of China. Climate change was quickly destroying the availability of habitable land for many of them, pushing them closer and closer to extinction.

But for some reason, they were denied categorization as endangered. Gabe made an executive decision to begin a breeding program

for them to help shore up their numbers so they didn't have to reach that critical point. He and Joel had been working on creating a habitat for them just before Joel's death. It had been opened just two months ago. This group here were the Ila Pika species, which would be added to the exhibit of Pika already in the park. They'd stay here until they'd acclimated to captivity.

Ping Pika was part of the *Fantastic Friends* exhibit and had been a huge hit. After Ping's introduction, interest in pikas had exploded, and so had the money donated to preserving them. That was good.

On the downside, however, a huge black market had been created for people who wanted pikas for pets. But pikas were not designed to be pets—not just because they were wild animals but because many of the species could not handle lower altitudes. Martha had read more than one horror story of a pika being caught and brought down to lower altitudes, only to die.

There was a full campaign in effect now around the small mammal, reminding people not to collect the pikas, that doing so would only kill them.

But Marthas interest in them wasn't simply altruistic. No, her view was decidedly more mercenary. Pikas had a unique biology. They could dial up or down their biology to adapt to the oxygen levels surrounding them.

As the planet heated up, pikas were moving to higher and higher elevations to compensate. The trade-off was that they were getting less oxygen, and genetic variations had been seen in those higher-level animals to allow it. This discovery stunned the scientific community: genetic changes were believed to take thousands of years. But the pikas indicated that they might take much less time.

Cracking that particular scientific nut would be beyond lucrative. If they could figure out how to speed up genetic changes, the options would be unlimited, and so would the money. Narrowing her eyes as the little pika burrowed into an opening and another one came to join it, she smiled. *You, my little friend, are going to be an absolute cash cow.*

She turned for the lab to get a quick update, and then it would be on to her next cash cow.

CHAPTER 13

The ballroom at the Dominion was located on the main floor just down from the Emporium Theater. Ten-foot-tall, golden-engraved double doors welcomed guests into the sumptuous space.

The room was vast, with a ceiling that soared forty feet high. Crystal chandeliers hung like majestic crowns, their golden light casting a warm, inviting glow over the entire space, making the intricate gold-leaf designs glimmer.

Rich, dark velvet fabric embroidered with golden threads depicting scenes of wild savannas, dense jungles, and exotic wildlife covered the walls. Lions, peacocks, and tigers seemed to come alive in the detailed tapestries, their eyes catching the light and giving them an almost lifelike presence.

In the center of the room, a grand dance floor stretched out, its surface an exquisite mosaic of golden tiles. The perimeter was lined with luxurious seating areas, each arranged around low tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold. Plush, deep-cushioned sofas and chairs, upholstered in fabrics of rich emerald green and sapphire blue, provided a comfortable yet stylish respite for those taking a break from the festivities.

During events, at one end of the ballroom, a raised platform would hold a magnificent buffet, the tables draped in white linen and accented with gold. Large, ornate ice sculptures of elephants and

giraffes would tower over an array of gourmet dishes, each more delectable than the last. The scent of exotic spices and fine cuisine would fill the air, mingling with the subtle, earthy fragrance of fresh flowers.

Currently, the room was being set up for this weekend's wedding. The animal theme was carried through even in the smallest details. Gold-rimmed glasses and plates bore delicate etchings of leopards, elephants, chimpanzees, meerkats, lions and bears. Napkin rings in the shape of coiled serpents held silk napkins embroidered with tiny golden bees. Even the waitstaff wore uniforms that hinted at the theme, with golden buttons and animal-print accents adding a touch of whimsy to their polished attire.

In the corners of the room, life-sized statues of animals in gilded metal stood sentinel, their eyes studded with precious stones that caught the light and added a regal air. A massive gold-framed mirror reflected the entire scene, doubling the grandeur and making the ballroom seem even more expansive.

Although it was early on Monday, the ballroom was abuzz with activity. A stage had been set up in the center of the dance floor, and on it, the *Fantastic Friends* dance troupe were rehearsing their number for the big wedding this weekend. The troupe was really talented, and their costumes were much more streamlined than the bulbous mascots that walked the park taking pictures with people.

On stage, Ping Pika was flung into the air before being caught by Leo Leopard before being tossed and caught again, this time by Pascha Polar Bear. Darby smiled at the athleticism and grace in the movement. All of the dancers were professionally trained, and it showed.

"No, no, no." A blonde woman stormed up to the stage and shook her head. "It's not big enough. She needs to go higher."

Stopping just inside the doors, Darby shook her head, watching Courtney Coughlin, this weekend's bride, standing with her hands on her hips. Long blonde hair, a perfectly made up face, she was stunning and absolutely horrible.

Following behind her was her fiancé, wearing his chinos, no socks, loafers, and a bright pink polo shirt with the collar up. He was looking down at his phone, which tended to be his usual stance.

Lance Seabrook was the heir to Seabrook Inc., the top yacht manufacturer in the world. His bride-to-be was an influencer who had struck gold with a makeup line that she sold through TikTok. Their wedding was scheduled for next weekend, and Courtney and Lance both had given new meaning to the term "bridezilla."

Courtney conferred with the choreographer while the dancers left the stage. Spying her, Leo Leopard headed toward Darby, pulling off his mask to reveal his dark hair and sparkling brown eyes. Juan Rivera grinned at her as he grabbed his water bottle and joined Darby.

"How's it going?" she asked, nodding toward the engaged couple.

Standing beside his betrothed, Lance's head was nodding even as he kept his gaze on his phone, while Courtney's hands were up in the air dramatically as she spoke with the choreographer.

Juan settled in against the wall next to Darby. "Remind me again why I do this?"

"For the applause and the big bucks?"

"No, no, that's not it," he mused.

"For the complete lack of recognition and the poverty wages?" she offered.

Straightening, he snapped his fingers. "That's it!" His grin faded as he looked down at his costume. "I had dreams of being my generation's Elvis."

"Elvis?" she asked.

He shrugged. "My mom loved him. I grew up listening to him and watching his specials over and over again." The grin slipped from his face as his eyes widened. "Uh-oh. Wicked Witch of the West incoming."

Darby flicked a glance over her shoulder. Claire Askins, the head of special events, was striding toward her. Her tightly curled black hair shone, and she wore a bright fuchsia suit tailored perfectly to accentuate her slim figure.

"Run away. Run away," Juan warned before he hustled back toward the stage.

"Maybe you should do the same," she called after him, eyeing Courtney, who still looked annoyed.

He grinned at her over his shoulder. "And miss all the excitement?"

Shaking her head, Darby turned toward Claire and plastered a smile on her face. "Hi, Claire. I hear there's a VIP tour you want me to give."

Claire stopped right in front of Darby and looked her over with a sneer. Darby looked down at her own outfit self-consciously. Nothing was out of place and there were no noticeable smudges or stains.

"Yes, yes. We have some special guests that need to be taken around personally," Claire said in an annoyed tone. Darby tried not to take it personally. Claire seemed perpetually annoyed with the world.

Flicking a glance at Courtney and Lance, who looked very busy with the choreographer, Darby let out a sigh of relief that at least she wouldn't be stuck with them for the day. "Great, so who am I taking?"

Dread pooled in Darby's stomach as Claire indicated the stage. "The couple who will be getting married this week. There's also another high-level guest who will be joining you." Claire gestured toward the man who stepped through the main doorway.

As he strode into the room, he stopped to talk with someone, a smile on his face that didn't quite reach his eyes.

And she would know that face anywhere: movie star Augustus King. She struggled to hold in her groan. *Great.*

CHAPTER 14

Although Felix was by no means a science guy, the lab at Sanctuary Kingdom looked seriously state-of-the-art. There was no smell of animals when you stepped inside. Everything was pristine, with dark tiled floors and bright white walls. The rooms they passed had wide observation windows and inside, the rooms were lined with pristine equipment. Nothing was out of place and everyone he saw was focused on their jobs.

Ahead of them, a nervous guy who'd introduced himself as Ned led the way. Ned looked like he'd never done a push-up in his life. In fact, just the appearance of Felix and his crew seemed to make him want to run and hide somewhere in a corner.

It wasn't an unusual response. Each of his people gave off a "don't mess with me" vibe, and Felix himself gave off the biggest one.

Stepping into the lab at the end of the hall, Felix noted that the scientist in charge was standing at a lab table, muttering to himself as he stared at a monitor. He'd never met Dr. John Cadman but had read up on him. The guy looked like the older brother of Ned, and apparently, they had the same workout routine. He was gaunt, on the edge of emaciated.

It wasn't due to a particular lifestyle choice, at least not a conscious one. According to Felix's report, the doctor got so wrapped up in his

research that he often forgot to eat; he even had to be rushed to the hospital for fainting twice.

Apparently, not much of a learner, despite all those degrees.

Felix dismissed the doctor immediately and focused on the two other guests. The tall guy with the bushy mustache was the head of security for the park. Despite that title, he was not the power broker in the room. No, that position belonged to the woman standing next to him. No doubt she had been the one who'd had them cool their heels in the lobby for thirty minutes.

Perfectly styled in a dark gray suit with her blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun, she had blue eyes that were a little paler than her brother's, and her features were a little too small for her face. She was a striking woman—not beautiful, but there was something arresting about her.

He walked toward her. "Ms. Latham? I'm Captain Adrian Felix."

"Martha," she said as she extended her hand.

He was surprised at how strong her grip was. He was a big believer that handshakes revealed a lot about a person.

"And this here is Dr. John Cadman and my head of security, Roger Collins." She gestured to the two other men.

Although Felix shook the head of security's hand, he merely nodded at the doctor. He was pretty sure that if he shook his hand, he'd break the bones in it. "All right, Doc. What have you got to tell us?"

With a sigh, the doctor picked up his tablet. Apparently, the man was a little put out at having to provide an update. "So, I'm going to assume no one here understands how aggression affects the brain."

Not waiting for a response, the doctor continued. "The brain chemical serotonin has been implicated in all types of aggression. Adding serotonin to fruit flies has resulted in increased aggression. The fruit flies will enter other flies' territories, either because they don't care or they don't recognize the boundaries."

Bobby perched his hip on one of the lab tables. "Don't really care about fruit flies, Doc."

Cadman glared at him. "You should. Humans or animals—studying these creatures has led us here today."

Taking a breath, the doctor continued. "We know that damage to the prefrontal cortex is associated with aggression, but since we don't want lasting damage, that's our focus. Now we're interested in the hypothalamus. Do you know what that is?" he asked Bobby smugly.

Felix let out his own sigh, mentally counting to ten. Then he stared the scientist down. "Located deep within the brain, the hypothalamus is the control center, keeping the body in homeostasis. It is also believed to serve a regulatory role in aggression."

"Yes, yes, that's right," the doctor stammered, some of his confidence shifting back into insecurity. "So, we have implanted electrodes in specific subjects to stimulate the hypothalamus and see if we can create aggressive episodes."

"How many animals?" Felix asked.

"Over a hundred, spread across species throughout the park."
