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THE DRAGON KEEPER

A NOVEL BY
MINDY MEJIA

AUTHOR OF *EVERYTHING YOU WANT ME TO BE*

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The Dayaks of Borneo worshipped Jata, the Watersnake goddess.
Together with the Hornbill, Mahatala,
she destroyed the Tree of Life and created the world.

— from *Ngaju Religion: The Conception of God Among a South
Borneo People* by Hans Scharer

Hatching Day

Meg Yancy kept a picture to remind herself where she and Jata began. The picture wasn't of either one of them; it was of the history of the relationship between Komodo dragons and humans.

Only a hundred years ago, the first white men started sailing the Indian and Pacific Oceans to Komodo Island in search of the dragons. They called themselves adventurers, without any irony, and they were on a King Kong mission to capture the biggest lizards in the world. Zoos all over Europe and America had just heard of the Komodo dragon, and everyone wanted a piece of the action, all of them trying to outbid one another for the first exhibit in the Western hemisphere. In other words, it was the typical feeding frenzy Meg always read about whenever some new, crazy species splashed onto the pages of the trade journals.

What made this story different was that the Komodo kings—those much-hyped, little-understood predators—didn't go quietly into that dark cage. They beat the men who hunted them, and no one saw it coming.

When the men landed on the island, the dragons didn't attack them. Despite what recent headlines suggest, Komodos don't regularly eat people. Humans taste bad—ask any shark. The dragons

didn't run or hide either; it wouldn't even occur to a ten-foot-long, three-hundred-pound dragon to hide from some smelly, chattering mammals.

The men baited them with bleeding goats, trapped them, made the local villagers bind their jaws and legs, and measured them to make sure they were the longest, most impressive specimens to send back to the Western zoos. They loaded the dragons in wooden cages onto their ships, then kicked back in their cabins, sipping whiskey, polishing their guns—totally oblivious to what happened next.

The dragons broke free.

They smashed their cages to boards and splinters, ran past the shocked crew up the stairs to the main deck, and jumped, leaping overboard with a splash that must have sounded like “No fucking thank you,” and dove through the dark waters to swim home.

They couldn't have made it. The dragons had escaped in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight. All of them died of hypothermia or sheer exhaustion, but Meg knew that wasn't the point. The point was that they died free. They died unbeaten.

Eventually the humans got smarter and found ways to contain the animals during the long trip and deliver them to all the zoos. Jata's ancestors were among the captured ones. Now, as a keeper, Meg tried to make the cage bearable for the ones who weren't lucky enough to escape and die free.

As she opened the outer door to the Komodo dragon exhibit at the Zoo of America and walked inside, Meg went straight to the picture she kept taped up on the wall. It was from around 1910, as near as she could figure, and it was a snapshot of one of the first Komodos in an American zoo. The dragon sat in a small, metal enclosure with no food, no water, and no chance for escape. After weeks at sea, that bare cage was his final destination. It was a hopeless picture, the kind that always made Meg mad, until she turned to the main exhibit door

and saw what a hundred years could do.

Through the viewing window, Meg could glimpse a sliver of the ten-foot rock wall that circled the habitat. A large swimming pond took up the far side of the space, and various trees and shrubs dotted the sandy ground. Two large, flat boulders were powered with internal heaters to keep their surfaces toasty warm, perfect for afternoon basking. The area even boasted a cave for some privacy. At five hundred square feet, the exhibit was bigger than Meg's first college apartment. It was exactly the kind of environment that a Komodo dragon should live in, if it had to live in a zoo—except today Meg's job was to get that dragon out.

She unlocked and opened a window on the holding room's restraint box—which was basically a reinforced coffin with airholes—and dropped in the backside of a chicken, minus some feathers and guts. Re-locking the window, she walked to the other end of the box and lifted a steel lever attached to the wall. A low, creaking motion inside the wall signaled that the door had opened, connecting the exhibit to the restraint box. Curtain up. She paced back to the main exhibit door and lifted herself up to her toes to peer through the lead glass. The metal cooled a circle into her stomach through the uniform, and her breath fogged the window. One second, two. There was no reason to step inside to call her when the chicken would do all the work. Komodos could smell carrion two miles across the Indonesian savannah; a forty-foot distance would be like shoving a piping hot pizza in Jata's face.

The pool and basking rocks were empty, so Meg focused on the cave, which wasn't really a cave. The rock outcropping that supported the visitor's viewing platform hovered over the exhibit a couple feet above the dirt floor. It was a crevice, if anything, just a thin, black cavity tucked underneath the constant stream of visitors.

That's where Jata appeared.

At first she was just a bust, some kind of sculpture made out of copper running to green. Her square snout protruded out from the shadows, and she tasted the air with a flick of forked yellow, confirming what had woken her from her nap. Chicken. It flashed from her tongue to her eyes, which darted immediately to where the mini-door opened into the restraint box. Climbing out of the cave in two giant lunges, Jata broke into the open space in dead pursuit of a free lunch.

This was the best part, watching Jata walk. Did those European explorers feel the same awe when they caught their first glimpse of a Komodo dragon? Jata walked diagonally, one foot in time with the opposite hind leg, in a sweeping, swaggering motion. Her tail pumped out behind her like a three-foot-long, bone-encrusted rudder, stirring up dirt and leaves and even a few wadded-up napkins in her wake. Sweep, swagger, she walked. Sweep, swagger, and even though her head bobbed up and down in time, her eyes never moved; they had locked in on the restraint-box door. She passed underneath Meg's window and out of sight, and then from inside the box came the clicking of claws on wood, the rustle and brush of scales against the walls, and, finally, after a beat, the juicy rip of chicken. Meg slammed the lever down. She had to be quick. Even sleepy, Jata liked to grab the bait and wriggle back out before she was trapped.

There was a thump in the box near her ankle, a disgruntled tail.

"Sorry, sweetheart, but this won't take long." Patting the box near an airhole, Meg picked up a flashlight and a shovel and let herself into the exhibit.

The few visitors strolling down the Reptile Kingdom path cocked their heads and waited to see if Meg would do anything interesting. Behind bars, humans were just as fascinating as animals. Without breaking stride, Meg scooped up the napkins and chucked them up into the walkway. At least napkins were biodegradable. Freaking people used the turtle pond as a wishing well, and then they had to

do surgery to pull \$1.85 out of the turtle's stomach. The visitors, a couple of teenagers holding hands, rolled their eyes and kept walking to the exit. No one else appeared around either corner of the path, so after a quick double-check of the keeper's entrance to make sure the coast was clear, Meg clicked off the radio on her belt, turned on the flashlight, and wriggled into the cave.

As a juvenile, Jata had scampered in and out of this place freely, but as the years passed and she grew to more than six feet long and 180 pounds' worth of scale and muscle, the cave became a tight fit, and she'd started burrowing. At first, Meg hadn't even realized it—the whole place was so hidden—but then the dirt started mounding up at the sides of the rock, along with all the loose bits of gravel and sand, just like an avalanche waiting to happen. It was natural enough for a Komodo to make a burrow. They used them to conserve heat and sometimes slept in them, but tunneling wasn't exactly one of their best skills, and every once in a while on Komodo Island someone came across a dead dragon that had suffocated under the weight of its own ingenuity.

Meg crawled into the cave, military-style, and began packing the top layers of dirt back with the shovel so the walls flowed down to the floor in an easy slope, eliminating any chance of a cave-in. It was quiet work, not too bad for anyone who didn't get that buried-alive nightmare. From here, it was hard even to hear the humming of the building generators. The world shrank down to just the dull thwacks of the shovel, the smell of mossy soil, and the sweet curl of sweat trailing from her temples to the corners of her mouth. She worked her way around the cement circle and was checking the perimeter one last time when something broke the silence.

“Yancy!” The voice was distorted and distant. She switched the flashlight off.

“Yancy, I know you're in there. I can see your keys on the ground.”

Shit. She must have dropped them before crawling inside. The voice was male but definitely not her boss. It had more *oomph* than anything Chuck could belt out.

There was just enough room to scoot around so she didn't have to back out ass first. After she inched back out into the exhibit on her elbows and knees, the light burned her eyes. She paused at the exact spot where Jata had stopped earlier—head out, considering and wary.

“What the hell are you doing under there? I didn't even know that was open space.”

Antonio Rodríguez's voice came from directly above her, so she flipped to her back and leaned on her elbows. Ten feet of rock, concrete, and steel towered over her, a bumpy landscape that seemed to stretch all the way into the white beams of the roof, except for the round splotch breaking the horizon of the railing like a black sun. Antonio was just a silhouette, totally eclipsed by the light streaming in from the arching skylights.

“Yeah, it's open under here. Is that all?”

“You look like a prairie dog.”

Dirt sifted out of her hair and landed on her nose as she shrugged, but she bit down on the sneeze. No need to hand him any more satisfaction.

“You playing tourist today, Rodríguez? What do you want?”

“Don't you have someone watching your back under there? Or a safety harness or something?”

She pulled herself the rest of the way out of the cave and stood up, arms crossed. Antonio was the head veterinarian, a tall, dark, handsome pain in the ass. When he wasn't working his Latin heart-throb angle on some hapless intern, he was using the zoo as his personal laboratory to grab as much industry attention as his endless studies could get. Now, lounging over the railing, he looked as if

it were Sunday afternoon at the horse track and he had a winning ticket tucked in his front pocket. He grinned, flashing teeth that were whiter than his lab coat. He knew he'd caught her, the bastard.

“Do I look like I report to the veterinary department?” She grabbed her keys from the ground and started walking back to the keeper door. “Go piss off. I’ve got an irritated Komodo to release.”

She fumbled with the ring, looking for the key with the sticker of a Chinese parade dragon, the tiny tumble of yellow and red that stood out from all the other keys, and hollered over her shoulder. “Aren’t you supposed to be working? Injecting monkeys with microchips or analyzing bat shit or ...” Found it. As she slid the key into the lock, he stopped her with a word.

“Meg.”

They weren’t first-name people. She was always *Yancy*—or *Yance* in a hurry; *the dragon keeper* around newbies; *Miss Yancy* when he was being a smart-ass; and *Queen Bitch* when she was the smart-ass and he thought she was out of earshot. Any of these names, fine, but not Meg. Never Meg.

She spun around, her jaw dropping. The knowledge punched her in the gut with a breath-robbing, giddy certainty. Antonio leaned farther over the railing, practically dancing now. He looked as if he might leap the thing and fly into the exhibit.

“Really?”

He nodded. “Just now. I had to tell you in person. Come on, let’s go.”

Opening the door, she ran to the restraint box and knelt next to the wood that sent out the sweet stink of blood and rancid, post-feeding dragon breath. Jata rustled, rapping her tail on the box once, getting impatient. Meg leaned over the airholes, holding her cheeks to keep the smile from breaking her entire face apart.

“They’re hatching.”



Meg had never seen so many people jammed into the nursery before. The room was no bigger than her kitchen, and at least a dozen bodies lined the walls. Every keeper and vet intern she'd ever seen in the hallways wanted a piece of the party, all of them clamoring above heads and around shoulders for a look at the incubator and the three Komodo eggs that lay inside. Meg tried not to turn around often. Looking at all the faces was too much like being on exhibit herself—a particularly surreal, fishbowl kind of nausea.

When she and Antonio had arrived, it was already crowded, but he'd just grabbed her hand and slogged through the crowd straight to the back of the room. A couple of chairs were set up around the machine, but she couldn't sit. She stood with her arms crossed, rocking on the balls of her feet, eyes fixed on the incubator.

"Hey, down in front," someone said.

"Piss off. Where were you for the last eight months?" She didn't even bother to see who it was. They were all bandwagon freeloaders, lazy kids fresh out of college who'd rather play voyeur than take care of their own exhibits.

Antonio, who sat next to her jotting notes in his charts, poked her leg with the back of his pen. "Play nice."

"Why?" she grumbled. "None of them rotated the eggs or monitored the temperature and humidity of the environment. They didn't lie awake at night worrying about hatchling diets and exercise stimulants."

"I wouldn't admit that in public, Yancy. People might get jealous of your fascinating life."

A few people snickered behind them.

Gemma Perkins, Meg's fellow reptile keeper and the only one who apparently still had exhibits to tend, radioed in on their mobile com units. "How's it going in there?"

"The same," Meg replied, without glancing away from the incubator. When her eyeballs started to itch and water, she rubbed them with her wrist.

The egg that had started the entire circus was at the front point of the three-egg clutch. Hairline slices ran diagonally from its base up to the apex, where the leathery surface of the shell waved open into a tiny sliver of black. All eyes in the room, some with more success than others, strained to focus on that one slice of space. Meg could practically feel a dozen people's breaths pulsing around it, like some creepy fan club waiting to witness what some of them insisted on calling a miracle.

As the minutes ticked by, no more slices appeared in the shell. The tiny Komodo remained invisible underneath the crack in the egg. The initial excitement and laughter that had buzzed around the room slowly quieted, and the chatter fell to murmurs and shuffling feet. Meg tried to ignore the worry circulating in the air behind her.

"Why did he stop?" someone murmured, but no one answered.

It was the second time today that Meg had stared into a black void, but this was no cave. She couldn't crawl inside and make it safe or do anything that would ease the hatchling's way into the world. For this journey, he was on his own. Somewhere inside that blackness he'd grown a single, serrated tooth for this sole purpose—the shell tooth. Once he struggled free of the shell, the tooth would fall out, spent.

The shell tooth was at the front of the hatchling's mouth on his top palate. Meg's own tongue now pushed at the same spot, focusing the tension toward the only point in the entire world that mattered right now. The pressure in her mouth spread into her skull, seeped

through her temples, and pounded against her ears, filling them with the rushing void of a seashell that silenced everything else inside the room. It brought the Komodo kings back to her mind—what the roar of the sea must have sounded like as it rose to meet them, then the cold press of water that welcomed them into the nether region between life and death. The hatchling was crossing paths with them now, trying to find his way out of his egg and into the world, fighting to be born.

At that moment, the crack in the egg ripped open.

The entire room shouted. Meg's jaw stung from the sudden release, and she grabbed someone's hand, squeezing the palm into pulp.

A long slice of shell, the size of a carrot, fell off the egg and revealed the underside of a wet jaw and part of a foreleg. The jaw moved, glistening under the incubator lights like a pearl, and thrust itself up through the hole. Suddenly his whole head was visible, a yellow and green crown no longer than two inches, and his slatted eyes blinked open.

"It's a boy!" someone said, and a giddy excitement filled the room. People laughed and hugged one another, pushing forward for a better look at the zoo's newest baby. Meg took it in, dumb with surprise. Were these the same people who grumbled alongside her every day, bitching about management, long hours, low pay, and the humiliation of being replaced by little pieces of plastic? It was as if they'd collectively shed some itchy, brittle skin and slithered out into the summer sun, as unrecognizable as the crazy pounding of her own heart.

Without warning, Antonio swooped over to wrap her into a huge bear hug and twirl her around. The antiseptic on his clothes stung her eyes and pricked tears into their corners. She protested and shoved him off, grabbing the chart out of his hand so she could look away

and dry her eyes.

“April ninth,” she said as she wrote down the date.

Antonio looked at his watch. “Five-fourteen.”

For a split second, they both paused and stared at each other. It was there—in that flash of knowing between them, the first time in the history of the Zoo of America that Meg Yancy and Antonio Rodríguez shared a moment in which neither of them sneered or poked or flat-out tripped the other one for the hell of it—that time split open. Only a handful of people in the world had ever witnessed a birth like this. It was the beginning of a life that shouldn’t be. No one inside or outside of this room was ready for Jata’s babies, but here they were anyway, severing everything in her life into the distant, messy before and the impossible, triumphant now.

Meg and Antonio grinned at each other, then he grabbed his chart back, scribbling like mad. She bent down toward the hatchling, who’d shimmied out of the rest of the deflated shell and lay flanked by the two eggs that hid his sleeping brothers.

There was a hypnotic glaze over his black eyes, that cloudiness born from the inner war between determination and exhaustion. She knew that look. He was gathering his strength. He was getting ready to change everything.

5 Hours *after* Hatching

It was ten at night when the second egg started cracking. The zoo closed at six, and usually all the staff except for maintenance punched out by seven. Everyone had packed up and left the nursery while Meg watched with a fierce—but quiet—satisfaction, eager to finally be left alone. Zookeeping would be so great if it weren't for all the people.

At five foot two, Meg was a tiny blast of a woman who usually prowled the grounds with the military stalk of a disillusioned lieutenant assigned to a remote and hostile outpost. Most of the visitors shied away from her, though she could never tell if it was because of her attitude or just her face. She scraped her hair into the same severe ponytail every day and had never bothered with makeup in the twenty-eight years of her life. Appearances ranked somewhere below dental surgery and marriage on her priority list. Some of her coworkers avoided her, too, but Meg helped anyone who needed an extra hand with their exhibits—reptiles or not. If the keepers put their animals first, Meg made time for those keepers. Besides, the busier she was, the less time she had to dwell on the watching.

At the heart of it, that was all a zookeeper really did; she worked and she watched. The work ranged from feedings to cleaning the exhibits, writing logs, maintaining environments, administering medical treatments, and quarantining the animals when necessary,

even when that meant wrestling an eight-foot crocodile. Working was the easy part. Watching could drive you crazy. Every zoo in the world lived by the same biological clock that ticked back and forth between birth and death, birth and death, while all the keepers crowded in the middle keeping watch. Some of them watched in patient vigils; some watched through careless, meandering logs; others poked glances through their rakes and clippers; and even when they snuck out behind the aquarium filtration tanks for a smoke, they were still watching. No matter how hard they worked, how busy their days were, they always watched their animals with the same two questions in the backs of their minds—*Can they be born healthy in this place?*—and then—*How long can they stomach it?* Sometimes the zoo had as many as five thousand visitors a day, and Meg still felt as if she were the only person who ever saw her animals. The crowds pushed through in a gawk-and-go traffic pattern, on their own little clocks that ticked from interest to boredom in a millisecond, moving in and out until they were just a blur of faces. The keeper was the constant, the only real witness to the animals' lives and deaths.

But as wrenching as it could be at times—and as many animals as she'd had on death watch in the last six years—these were the moments that made it all worthwhile. This was the birth watch.

She'd been debating whether to go home to get some sleep when the egg on the left side of the incubator started pulsing, as if to say, *Go, then, and miss everything you've been waiting eight months to see.* She leaned down against the machine, fingers splayed on the glass, and a greedy kind of joy surged through her chest because she didn't have to share it with anyone this time. The first egg had hatched with the entire freaking world watching; this one was hers alone.

This Komodo, unlike his brother, had no trouble slicing open his shell. The egg fell to pieces in soft splits and chunks, and Meg held

her breath, awestruck. It was as if he was bursting to get out. The shell crumpled into garbage, and a sleek head and spine—a head created without a father, a spine that shouldn't even exist—crawled out of the waste.

She'd seen dozens of births at the zoo, and they were all special in their own ways, but calling this birth special was like saying Minnesota got a little cool in January. Komodo dragons reproduced sexually. One male plus one female equaled a heap of baby dragons, which was fine—except the Zoo of America didn't have a male Komodo. Jata had never met a mate in her life. Her eggs should have collapsed into infertile waste, but instead they grew and flourished. The technical term was *parthenogenesis*.

In other words, Jata had a virgin birth.

Completely unaware of his importance, the Komodo hatchling climbed unsteadily over the broken shell on his way to the front of the incubator, as if he wanted to say hello. Pulling on leather gloves, Meg popped the lid and lifted the little guy out.

She held him up to eye level and let her eyes dance the new-mother survey. Four legs—check. Twenty tiny claws curled into the meat of her glove. One whipcord tail wrapped around her wrist. A head, tilted, sleepy. Two almond slits for eyes staring ahead, reflecting nothing. Everything inside her beamed at him. “You can't put evolution in a cage.”

He blinked and rustled weakly against her palm. Not a philosopher.

“What are you un-caging now, Yancy?”

She jumped and squeezed the hatchling too tightly, making him squirm.

“Jesus. You scared me.”

Antonio pushed away from the door against which he'd been leaning for who knows how long and walked over to pet the

hatchling's head with a fingertip. "Jesus saves, not scares."

"Jesus doesn't stalk either." She jerked her head toward the door.

"Are you kidding? Who do you think finds out if we're being naughty or nice?"

"Santa Claus."

He chuckled, a tired, rumbling laugh without a beginning or an end. "I didn't know anyone was still here."

"It's a good thing I was. Look what I found." She couldn't take her eyes off him. Every detail was so perfect, from the yellow streaks shot through his markings to the incubator dirt clinging to his tail.

Together they weighed and measured him and put him in the second tank, next to his brother's. He wobbled a little and took a few steps before plopping down next to a tree branch and closing his eyes. She'd set up three newborn incubators in a row that pumped heat through at a warm twenty-nine degrees Celsius, and she'd outfitted each with individual water troughs, foliage, and just enough room to recover from being born.

"I can't believe management's going to let you put them together in the exhibit. They'll tear each other apart." Antonio rested his forearms on the table, staring into the last empty incubator.

"I don't think we'll see any grudge matches."

"A little idealistic, aren't you? It's only a matter of time before they try to eat each other."

"Let them freaking socialize." She rubbed her eyes, trying to clear sleep and frustration. It was unbelievable, every time she turned around. "They'll be auctioned off in a few months and spend the rest of their lives in isolation. Then you'll all be happy."

They both shut up for a minute. There were a hundred good reasons to group the hatchlings together, but she was too tired to think of a smart way to say them. Yawning, she stretched out the cramping muscles of her back.

“Why don’t you go home and get some sleep?” Antonio asked.

“Why don’t you?” There was still one egg left and hell if she was going to let him get the first look at her hatchling.

Another minute passed. Finally he took a breath and pushed away from the table.

“Okay, I’m going to run home and grab a change of clothes, and then when I get back you can go.”

She glanced over at him, and he smiled hopefully. Why didn’t he just leave? He wasn’t their keeper; he was just a hotshot vet who wanted ... something. She wished she knew what. Another yawn bubbled up, but she bit down on it.

“Fine, but you’re bringing back coffee, too.”



Ben was watching the news when she got home. His notebooks were spread out on the coffee table around a jumble of beer cans, reptile studies, *National Geographic* magazines, and empty plates crusted over with grease spots and petrified crumbs. He hunched forward in the middle of the sagging couch, legs splayed, thighs almost straddling the coffee table. At six foot two, Ben was often mistaken for an ex-college footballer going to fat, at least until he started talking. Even now, he had that puffy look of faded glory as the neon shadows from the tube flickered over his face, igniting his eyes with that for-the-win concentration.

Ben didn’t watch the news the way other people watched the news. He studied it and charted it as meticulously as Meg watched her animals. Filling notebook after notebook with major world events, he measured how each network presented coverage, looking for differences. If an earthquake hit Southeast Asia, how many

variations were there in the body count? Which stations concentrated on how many Americans were killed, and which ones sent a correspondent to the wreckage rather than regurgitate the twenty-second summary wired down from the AP? It used to be surprising to look over his shoulder at what he uncovered: There's something here, she'd thought, something important that lurked just under the surface of society, like a prejudice everyone had half-acknowledged but never looked at straight on. That was seven years ago, when they'd first met, and nothing had changed. Ben liked to talk about his manifesto—the paper he would someday publish to expose all the media injustices—but over the years Meg had accepted that he would never write it. This was just Ben's hobby, like the guys who collected stamps or space dolls. Each discrepancy he found was a little triumph for him, but all he ever did was reach for the next blank notebook and crack another beer.

Tonight he flipped back and forth between different recordings from the prime-time news while scratching notes with a gnawed ballpoint pen. Glancing up, he saluted her with a beer.

“The second one just hatched.” She'd called earlier, high on the celebration of the first birth, but his phone had gone straight to voice mail, and he hadn't called back all day.

She was shoving clothes into her backpack in the bedroom when Ben appeared in the doorway, lounging against the door frame and scratching his belly through a black T-shirt. His floppy brown hair was uncombed, and his skin had the rumped, waxy sheen of someone who'd sat in a dark place for a long time.

“I just got your message. Sorry I didn't call, but I figured you were all out partying like animals.” He waited. He always dragged it out two beats too long, waiting for the expected laughter. She didn't oblige.

“How's it going?”

“Fine.” She swiped some deodorant under her arms and chucked it into the backpack.

“Babies are healthy? Breathing fire and fighting knights?”

“What?” When she finally looked at him, he was grinning. Grins always scooped the bulk of Ben’s cheeks up and stretched them wide, like pears turning into apples. Once, that grin had been contagious. It promised some kind of childhood she’d heard about in books and TV shows. She’d opened to it, warmed underneath it, forgave things because of it—but it was funny how all the years’ worth of crap had piled into that grin and eventually flipped everything inside out. Now he grinned and she wanted to slap it off his face; it closed her, made her cold.

“Oh. Sure.” She zipped up the bag.

The floor squeaked as Ben lumbered up behind her and laid a meaty hand on her shoulder. He squeezed her tendons and bones together, kneading the knots farther up her spine and piling them, one on top of the other, into her skull. The looser his fingers got, the tighter her neck.

“I found another story for you. This one’s coming from Omaha. Hammerhead sharks.”

One night right after Jata had laid her eggs and the two of them were chilling on the couch—Ben watching the news, taking his notes and mumbling, while she read up on virgin births—she’d told him about the genetics behind parthenogenesis. It was more thinking out loud than anything, trying to get the whole concept straight in her mind. She hadn’t even thought he’d been listening, but something must have hooked him in. He’d started mining the news for virgin births, tracking them down on TV, on the Internet, and in newspapers, and handing them to her like gifts she didn’t know how to unwrap. He’d found a succession of tree frogs from Mexico and, of course, the three preceding Komodo cases in Europe, all within the last few years.

She shrugged away from his hand. “Not now, Ben. I have to get back to the zoo.”

“It’s almost midnight. Babies can take care of themselves for a few hours, can’t they?”

“What the hell do you know about it?” It was out before she could stop it.

He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t call you back, okay?”

Shaking her head, she slung the backpack over her shoulder and left the house, but it was a long time before she felt the weight of his hand lift off her neck. The guilt of it burned her skin all the way back to the zoo. They didn’t fight. It took too much energy to fight, just as it took too much energy to return a phone call or to understand why now, two years after that night in Minneapolis, he was suddenly fascinated by birth.



Coffee and champagne had two things in common. They were both wet, and they were both drugs. It was almost impossible to mistake one for the other, unless maybe you were a blind, taste-impaired mammal with a careless keeper.

“We need to celebrate” was Antonio’s only explanation when he pulled out the plastic cups and blew the cork across the nursery. They’d grabbed a couple of folding chairs and set up camp in front of the incubator, surrounded by bags of potato chips, backpacks, and ... champagne.

“We need to stay awake,” Meg objected. The coffee vending machine came to mind but with a shudder. No matter what button you pushed, it produced the same weak lattes, half-cold and topped with rubbery, chocolate skins.

“You can’t sleep and drink champagne at the same time, can you?” Antonio poured two glasses and jiggled one of the cups in front of her face. Despite her knee-jerk temptation to dump the contents on him, the cup actually looked appealing; she wanted to toast Jata’s babies into the world—not for what they represented scientifically or religiously, not for their commercial value—just for the dragons they were. She took the cup and grudgingly tapped it against his.

He grabbed her arm when she tried to take a drink. “You can’t just chug-a-lug, Yancy. You have to say something. Haven’t you ever celebrated anything before?”

She frowned. Everything she felt about the hatchlings would sound like a greeting card when it hit the air. She had nothing—nothing she was willing to share with him, anyway. “I don’t do speeches.”

“What about what you said earlier—you can’t put evolution in a cage? That sounded like a speech, or at least a fortune cookie.”

“I don’t even know what that meant,” she lied.

“Yeah, well, I do.” He swirled his cup and walked over to the last intact egg. “If you could control evolution, I would have timed things a lot better. My sister had twins the week you found the eggs. I was supposed to be in Puerto Vallarta playing the good *americano* uncle, not to mention deep-sea fishing with my dad and napping on the beach. And I had a chance to go to the World Series this year, did you know that? These dragons have destroyed my social life, with all the conference calls and logs and research. Miracles are a lot of paperwork, which you might realize if you ever actually did any of it. I used to have a life outside of here, with women and hobbies and ... women. Not that you understand anything about having a life.”

“I don’t date a lot of women, no.”

“That’s actually somewhat surprising. I think I just lost some

money to one of the fish keepers.”

“If it’s Doug, he already knew I was straight because he tried to set me up with his sister three years ago.”

Antonio burst out laughing, and Meg grinned at the memory. Doug hadn’t known about Ben, of course, but he steered clear of her for months out of embarrassment after she’d filled him in. She wasn’t surprised Antonio had taken the bet. Not many people at the zoo did know about Ben. It wasn’t as if he came to see her at work or anything, and what was the point of talking about him? Ben was just Ben. Besides, bringing up a relationship always made people want to talk about marriage, mortgages, and children. She didn’t need to jump on that conversation train.

“That’s another thing,” Antonio said after his chuckles subsided. “Who would’ve thought we could ever actually work together? These eggs completely destroyed my dislike for you. Remember when we hated each other?” He rubbed his chin and gazed off to some faraway, beloved place. “That was great.”

“Speak for yourself. I don’t recall getting past that feeling.”

“You hate me about as much as you hate Gemma. Admit it.”

“Maybe if you ever shut up you’d start to grow on me. Like a wart, you know?”

“All right, all right.” He held out his cup again and waited. The corners of his lips quirked up as the silence drew out.

Man, he was annoying. “Fine,” she said. “But if we have to toast, then at least get it right.”

“What do you mean?”

She sat up straight and tried to figure out how to phrase it. “We think these animals are captive, right? They live in artificial environments, the deprived captive state and all that shit?”

He nodded.

“But it’s not like that. The walls only hold so much. It’s like ...”

She waved her cup in a circle, pulling the thought down. “That old bat who lives on the cul-de-sac behind the Mammal Kingdom. Every month, she complains to the city about the wolf exhibit and the howling. The walls can’t hold in their howls. The fences can’t keep them from smelling the deer in the river valley or the bonfires in people’s backyards. When I drive by that old bat’s house on my way home and I blast the metal station at her, do you think she can’t hear me just because she’s in her little box of a house and I’m in my little box of a car?”

“You need help, you know that?” he said.

“Some things can never be contained, that’s what I’m saying, no matter how hard you try or what kind of technology you have. We didn’t find Jata a mate, and she went ahead and reproduced anyway. There it is.” She pointed to the last egg. “You can’t put evolution in a cage.”

Without waiting for Antonio to say anything, she thumped her cup against his and drank. The bubbles fizzed down her throat like Alka-Seltzer with a dry pucker at the end. It was too sweet.

She slouched down in her chair in front of the incubator and stared at the last egg until its edges blurred into the surrounding dirt. One last boy curled up tight in his hot, little bed. She could hold it in her cupped palms now—an egg that shouldn’t even exist, like some dark magic conjured it here from nothing—and in a few short years, the dragon inside would be two hundred pounds with a tail that could swim channels and jaws of bone-crunching, poison-coated teeth. He would be the king of all lizards, but there wouldn’t be any other lizards where he was going. And what was royalty without a kingdom? Maybe evolution couldn’t be caged up, but a Komodo sure could. In the last hundred years humans had gotten pretty good at that.

Antonio sat quietly next to her, rolling his cup from one hand to the other and staring at the contents as if he were having a silent

conversation with his drink. She took another sip of her own, and the bubbles burst sharply in her mouth. Maybe it was the stupid toast he'd made her say or the embarrassment of sharing champagne with him, but the longer she sat there, the more surreal the whole situation became. Antonio Rodríguez, corporate climber and self-proclaimed ladies' man, pulling an all-nighter like some mother hen clucking over her eggs? Not likely.

"Nobody asked you not to go to the World Series or see your father." She broke the silence. Meg's own father was halfway across the world, too, but she didn't go around whining about not being able to visit him. Then again, she and her father weren't the visiting kind, or even the talking kind.

"What?"

"What are you even doing here, anyway?"

"Same reason you're here."

"I don't think so. Is it the data? You need to gather that last bit of information to clinch your cover page?" The alcohol and lack of sleep made her words a little slushy, but she had to ask; it just wasn't possible for him to be here out of the goodness of his heart. Antonio didn't do something for nothing.

He swirled his cup again and sipped slowly, nodding. His hair curled down around his forehead, bouncing free from its slicked-back style.

"I want to make sure the hatchling is healthy, Yancy. It's the same thing I want for all the animals at this zoo."

"And microchips to match." She snorted.

He couldn't dare deny it. As the first vet in the country to chip the animals—injecting little bits of plastic and metal called Sero-Adrenal Microchips, or SAMs, into every land-dwelling vertebrate over five pounds—he'd drawn international attention. The chips radioed in to a central server every ten minutes, sending readings on serotonin and

adrenaline levels, heart rates, and GPS coordinates. While the rest of the world called them everything from “artificial keepers” to “brave new microchips,” management at the Zoo of America fell all over themselves congratulating one another as pioneers of the zoology field. SAMs allowed the animals to be managed with less human interaction, which meant lower overheads and reduced insurance rates. Antonio had become the overnight darling of management and had gotten his studies published in the most prestigious magazines. On paper, he was kind of hard not to hate.

“We’ll only chip whichever dragon the zoo is keeping. The other two will go to less-advanced zoos.” He took another sip, ignoring her second snort. “And if it weren’t for the SAM data, we wouldn’t be able to know the next time Jata lays eggs. The sero-adrenal behavior is completely documented now.”

“God forbid we just find the eggs like I did, without any help from I.T.”

He leaned in and leveled her with a black-eyed stare that rivaled Jata’s for intensity. “We both know what happened when you found the eggs. Do you really want to go there?”

She sucked in a breath, looking away, and, just like that, the anger was gone. Deserted her completely. The ghost of wet sand filled her head in its place, clumping in her ears and gritting between her teeth. It was frightening how easily he could send her back there.

“The SAMs will help. That’s what I’ve been trying to say for years, and none of you want to hear it. You’re so scared for your jobs.”

“I’m scared for the hatchlings.” It was easier to say it from under the sand he’d buried her in, from where everything was distorted and distant—the place that had haunted her since she’d discovered the eggs eight months ago.

She stared sightlessly at the incubator. “Everyone wants a piece

of them. They want their zoo space, or their marketing value, or their budget dollars. They want to bottle their fame and sell a miracle.”

“Forget about that for a minute, okay? None of those people are here now. It’s just you and me and a bunch of dragons in here.”

He poured her another cup of champagne.

“Truce?” he asked.

He tapped his cup to hers as if everything was fine again, as if the fight wasn’t just beginning. Maybe he didn’t understand yet, but to her it was absolutely clear. No more fuckups. From this day on, she had three more dragons to defend from Antonio, the zoo, and anyone else in the world who tried to claw his way between her and them.

Still insulated against all that, the last egg sat motionless and intact in the incubator. Meg and Antonio settled in for the night and watched it, sipping to the bottom of the champagne around one in the morning. By two, they were both drowsing. At three, Meg felt a nasty crick in her neck and, rubbing the shooting pain out of her spine, scooted over between Antonio’s sprawled limbs and dropped her head onto his shoulder, hoping he wouldn’t wake up and notice. It was only a warm shoulder, after all, just a body waiting by another body, exhausted from the endless watching. A keeper could only watch for so long before something had to happen. Birth. Death. The mess in between. Something was always coming, always looming around the edges of the next day; it was only a matter of when. She rubbed her cheek into Antonio’s lab coat and fell asleep.

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If you'd like a review copy, please contact Midge Raymond at
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