

Chapter 1

“Do the capybaras get any of these?” I asked, scraping the seeds out of the fourth pumpkin and passing it to Jeff so he could do the carving. I liked the messy jobs best.

“No, their keepers aren’t as much fun as we are,” Chris said, setting another jack o’lantern on the dumbwaiter.

“Can I have these pieces?” Jeff asked Chris, pointing to the chunks of pumpkin eyes and mouths on his cutting board.

He nodded. Jeff took them and said, “This one’s for the chinchilla. I’m going to give it chinchilla ears and a tail.”

Jeff was too cute. If he wasn’t way too young for me, I would totally have a crush on him. And if I wasn’t already preoccupied with a certain other coworker of mine.

Speaking of whom, Chris looked at the clock and said “I’ve got to go. I’ll be back around noon.” Chris is senior keeper at the Small Mammal House, so it’s his job to go to the boring meetings. “I have total confidence that you two can handle this.”

I watched him go up the stairs and then turned to Jeff and made a silly face. “Poor us.”

“Yeah, how come we don’t get to go with him instead of carving pumpkins,” Jeff said.

Our work as animal keepers was more fun than sitting in meetings, even though we didn’t usually spend the day carving pumpkins. But tonight was the special Halloween event with trick or treating at the zoo. The office staff and volunteers decorated the hallways of the building, but only we could do the insides of the exhibits. Pumpkins were safe to put in with the animals, who either ate them or ignored them. Or if they were little enough, they ran in and out of them, which was cool.

I watched Jeff biting his lip in concentration, carving a notch in the pumpkin to fit a chinchilla ear-shaped piece into. He had been working here for about three months now, and he was still so impossibly young and enthusiastic. I felt kind of protective of him, despite how silly it was to feel like that toward someone a foot taller than me. Although since everyone was taller than me, what difference did that make?

He put the ears on the chinchilla o'lantern and held it up.

"Oh, that's cute," I said. "Maybe I should make one with Radar ears." Radar is a fennec fox. Fennecs have very big ears.

"Oh yeah." He started to rummage around in the pumpkin pieces strewn all over the table. "But none of these pieces are big enough."

This was getting a little too fancy to possibly count as work. We both probably should have been upstairs cleaning up poop. But Chris had told us to carve pumpkins, and he outranked us. So there was nothing we could do about it, right?

"I could start a new one and cut really big eyes and use those pieces," I said. "Or maybe I could use something else?"

I dug into the bins of food that we'd be using if we were doing our real job of preparing the diets for the animals. "Look, we have turnips. I read that they used to carve turnips at Halloween in Europe before they got pumpkins from the New World."

Jeff looked skeptical. "That wouldn't be nearly as good."

I nodded. I took out some big sweet potatoes and contemplated whether they had fennec ears inside them. Nobody on earth had a better job than me.

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The dumb waiter was full of jack o' lanterns, and it was time for lunch. It had been a very

productive morning in a certain way, but the pumpkin art had put me way behind on my routine work. Poop needed to be cleaned up and animals needed to be fed every day, no matter what else happened. You couldn't put it off to tomorrow. It was too nice out, though, not to take a little bit of a lunch break, when soon it would be too cold to sit outside. So I'd have to stay late, but what else was new?

My favorite spot to sit was behind our building, where the lemurs had access outside. I could sit on the low brick wall opposite their exhibit and watch them, or I could lie down behind the wall on a nice private patch of grass, where no one could see if you fell asleep for a few minutes. It looked like I would never really get used to getting to work at seven a.m., but I had found ways to deal with it.

I ate my lunch on the grass and then decided to watch the lemurs for a few minutes before going back inside. I stood up and looked at the wall. There was a big flat rock on my favorite spot. Even though the wall was in a public place, I kind of felt like it belonged to me. Some kid had probably put the rock there, I thought irritably as I moved it. I don't know why I assumed it was a kid instead of, say, one of the landscapers who had needed to move it out of the way to work in the flowerbed. I'm sure it had nothing to do with the fact that there were often way too many kids at the zoo and a lot of them were way too annoying.

Underneath the rock were a bunch of those little roly-poly bugs. I remembered how those bugs had always reminded me of trilobites when I was a kid. I don't think trilobites could roll up, and I can't explain why trilobites in particular had caught my fancy, but I liked the bugs for that reason. Now I found myself sitting and staring at them like I was seven years old again. I forgot all about the lemurs and was transported to the pill bug world for I don't know how long.

The sun came out from behind a cloud, and a shadow fell over the bugs. I looked up.

Chris was watching me. He was standing there in a relaxed way like he'd been there for a while.

I stared back at him. I could interact with him normally for hours on end, but then I'd suddenly notice again how blue his eyes were. Or how his hair, sandy blond and always a little too long, would blow in his face with the wind. Or worst of all, he'd smile at me in the way he did now, the way that made me feel like my insides had turned to armadillo gruel. Don't worry, by the way, that's gruel that we feed to armadillos, not gruel made from armadillos.

I realized I had bent over so far that my nose was only a few inches from the bugs, and I felt silly and blushed for a number of reasons at once.

"Hey," he said cheerfully, "looks like you need a microscope."

I thought he was just teasing, but then he brushed some of the bugs into his hand and said, "Let's go," like he didn't know what I was waiting for.

I got up and walked along with him, and when we got to the door of the Invertebrate House I realized where we were going. There was an exhibit in there where kids could put things under a microscope. But you were supposed to use it to look at the stuff they already had in the building.

I stopped at the door. "Are we allowed to do this? We wouldn't like someone bringing some small mammals into our building."

It was surprising that no one had ever tried that, I realized. People had dumped pet birds and reptiles that they didn't want anymore at those houses. It was only a matter of time before some idiot left their chinchilla or ferret at ours.

Chris put his bug-filled hand in his pocket. "Don't know what you're talking about," he said and pushed open the door.

It was dark and cool and calm in there, as it always was. We stopped and looked at the

cuttlefish. The cuttlefish looked back calmly today, without flashing colors at us. We continued past the tanks of the nautilus and octopus. I loved this building, but I was glad I didn't work here. They had even more freaking glass to clean than we did, all easy for people to reach and get their sticky fingerprints all over it. I hated cleaning the glass of my exhibits so much that I would sometimes briefly consider asking for a transfer to work with some nice, outdoor, unenclosed-by-glass large mammals. So far, though, I'd always stopped when I was reminded—usually by walking outside for a minute—that our wonderful mid-Atlantic climate is unbearable for about nine months of the year, and that one of the reasons I was lucky to work at Small Mammals was that it was indoors.

Chris sat down at one of the microscopes in the corner and put the bugs on the counter. He picked one up and put it on the slide and adjusted the eyepiece. As the other bugs unrolled, I poked them a little so they'd roll up again and not run away. After a minute he got up and said, "Go ahead," and took over the bug-poking duty.

I looked in the microscope. "This is hopeless. All I can ever see in one of these is my own eye."

He leaned over and put his hand on my shoulder. "Move your head a minute." He looked into it, crouching down to my height, fiddling with the dials. "Okay, try again." He moved aside.

Now I could see. "Oh, that's cool." I sat there enjoying watching the bug roll and unroll and the feeling of Chris's hand that he had left on my shoulder while he herded the rest of the bugs with the other hand. Some people really know how to have a good time, I thought.

Just as I was thinking how I would be content to sit there forever, I heard footsteps behind us and Chris stepped away from me. I figured we were about to get in trouble about the bugs, but then I heard a large and cheerful voice that didn't belong to an Invertebrate House

keeper.

“Chris, Hannah. How nice to see you.” I turned to look.

“Allison,” said Chris flatly.

Allison was the director of the zoo. She was larger than life, the kind of person who always seemed to have a spotlight focused on her. Which made it all the more striking when she turned her attention your way. For that moment, it felt like the universe revolved around you. Chris was one of the few people who seemed to be resistant to the effect.

“Hannah, how are the pugs?” she said.

Like a politician, she always remembered everyone’s name and some detail about them, even if she had only met them once for half a second. I found this amazing, since I swear I only remember my own name because I have it written down in a lot of places. She knew I had pugs because the first time we met, at a big event for new zoo employees, she had remarked on my pug earrings. It was kind of a trick, I knew, to be able to do these things, but somehow it still made you feel special.

“The pugs are great.” Normally I could talk about my pugs for hours, but I reminded myself that she was just being polite. She was the director of the zoo and I was no one important, after all.

“It’s so nice to see the two of you getting out and enjoying the zoo. So many people get into a rut and lose their passion, don’t you think? I’m so glad to see that’s not happening to you. Well, see you around.”

She sailed away, with heads turning as they always did after her long mane of golden hair and her air of owning the world.

But I looked at Chris instead. He didn’t like Allison. I didn’t know why. I knew they’d

known each other a long time, that she had been curator of our unit when Chris started as a keeper. She didn't act like she disliked him, but I suspected she could act any way she wanted no matter how she really felt, so that didn't mean much. What I did know was that she had spoiled the mood for him.

"Well, better get back to work," I said, trying to sound cheerful, and started to scoop up the roly-poly bugs.

He looked worried and distracted for a moment. But then he looked back at me and smiled. "Yeah." He seemed to forget about her again, and we walked back to Small Mammals together in a quiet little bubble of Invertebrate House serenity.

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At the end of the day I ran home to shower and take care of the pugs so I could come back to work the Halloween event. I got back to the Small Mammals building and was passing through the vestibule to the public area when a dark figure in a black cape jumped at me from behind and covered my eyes with its hands.

"Ray," I said.

"Oh." He made a big show of sounding disappointed. "Am I so obvious?"

"No one else would do it so well," I said soothingly.

He took his hands off my eyes and turned me around. Then he grabbed me by the waist and bent me over backward and started to bite my neck.

"Ray, I'm sure there's a federal regulation against sucking my blood while I'm on duty."

He stopped. He looked at me, a pleased expression on his face. "You never let me have any fun," he said, letting me go. He did make a good Dracula, there was no doubt. He had slicked back his black hair and trimmed his beard in a way that made him look even more

sinister than usual. And yet simultaneously attractive, to an extent that it was better to try not to think about.

“Are you working tonight or just being a nuisance?” I said, feigning annoyance. I knew he’d be disappointed if I didn’t.

“You must come over to Reptiles and see my coffin,” he said, ignoring my question. “It’s the highlight of the evening.”

Was he serious? That would be going to new heights even for Ray. “You have a coffin? Yeah, right.”

“Well, only rented,” he admitted. “If you owned a coffin, then you’d feel obligated to dress as Dracula every year. You know I hate to be tied down.”

This was something I’d have to see to believe. “I have to work, but I’ll come over at the end of the night. Get out of here now, okay?”

“Yes, your highness,” he said, making a dramatic exit.

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My job was turning out to be easy, because nearly everyone was too busy running around getting candy to stop and look at the animal I was supposed to be talking about. I think the kids mostly went by so fast that they didn’t even notice I had a tenrec in my hand. They had their priorities clear.

On the other hand, I had to admit I wasn’t exactly shouting at them to stop or anything. I was happy to sit there holding Clark and watching everyone rush past in their costumes. No one wore cheap plastic masks anymore like when I was a kid. They had full-length plush dinosaur suits and other amazing getups.

“Hannah, how’s it going?” I heard someone say as I stared in wonder at a stroller full of

triplet babies dressed up as pumpkins.

It was Victor, who was in charge of public relations for the zoo. He was wearing his usual business suit, but as a concession to Halloween he had little tiny horns on his head, peeking out of his fox-colored hair.

“Hey, nice horns,” I said.

“What’s that?” he said. “Some kind of hedgehog?”

“No, it’s a tenrec. It’s called a hedgehog tenrec because it’s the kind of tenrec that looks like a hedgehog, but it’s not closely related. They live in Madagascar, and they’re the only insectivore family there, and you know, since it’s an island, the tenrecs have evolved to look like hedgehogs and shrews, because they use the same ecological niches.”

Victor nodded. He could have done PR anywhere, but he worked at the zoo because he loved it. If he were a regular visitor I would either have to go into a lot more detail or just forget about it, but Victor didn’t need a long explanation about convergent evolution. He knew more than he needed to know just to do his job.

I watched him peering at the tenrec. It was a lovely scene. Victor wasn’t my type—he was a little too perfect. But Allison really knew how to pick them, Victor being not only the PR guy but also the zoo director’s current more-or-less significant other. You kind of hoped she had a better reason for her relationship than the fact that he would look great in photos with her, but he sure did.

“What do they eat?” he said.

“The usual insectivore stuff. We feed them mostly cat food and mealworms. They forage on the ground and in trees too. It doesn’t look it, but they are pretty good climbers. I know this because of where they ended up the time I accidentally let them out of their exhibit.”

He smiled. I wouldn't have joked about something like that to most people on the office staff, but Victor was one of us. He didn't stay cooped up in the admin building any more than he absolutely had to. He was a lot like Allison that way. He was always looking for any excuse he could find to get out into the park and hang out with animals. He could say he knew more and could do his job better that way. It was a good rationalization.

"Can I touch him?" he asked.

I wasn't supposed to let the public touch the animals, but surely that didn't include him.

"Okay, as long as no one's watching."

He stroked Clark's spines gently with one finger. "Not very painful."

"He's relaxed. He's used to this. But they don't hurt as much as some spines. They're nothing like an African hedgehog," I said. "I hope all the predators on Madagascar have really sensitive mouths and gum disease and all, or these probably don't do much good."

He looked at Clark closely for a while. I left them alone. It was clear I wasn't there for them for the moment.

After a bit, Victor looked up and smiled. "Thanks. So how's it going? Everyone enjoying themselves?"

"Oh, it's great, but hey, what's with all the dried fruit and nuts we're giving out for treats? I really had to scrounge around for actual candy," I said, trying not to whine, since after all I was here to work, not trick or treat.

"It's part of Allison's rainforest conservation campaign. They're sustainably harvested."

"Yeah, but didn't you always hate the kinds of people who gave out stuff like raisins for trick or treat?" Really, that was one step up from giving out toothbrushes. It gave me a nostalgic urge to throw some eggs, except I knew that I'd be the one who'd end up having to clean them

up.

He smiled. "I'm not part of the decision process. I just represent the company line." He looked around conspiratorially. "I'm about to head out and stop in at all the other buildings. Can I look for anything to bring back?"

"Chocolate. Why isn't there any chocolate? Chocolate grows in the rainforest too, and you can buy all kinds of politically correct brands now. Organic and everything, all those small companies that work with local farmers instead of big plantations," I said. "We should support that kind of thing, right?"

"Well, yes. But no one's making fair-trade fun-size bars yet, unfortunately."

"I guess," I said, deflated. I'd been so swept away by my argument that for a moment I'd almost been convinced that my motives were purely environmental. Now I was suddenly desperately in need of a hit of caffeine and sugar.

"You know, though," he said, "I think we might have bent the rule. I'll be back if I find anything."

"Hey, thanks." Now I was smiling again. "See you around."

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I got suckered into helping clean up, so the park was almost empty by the time I managed to get away. I passed a last few straggling tyrannosauruses and Harry Potters looking overtired and a little queasy, their parents encouraging them, promising that they had almost made it to the parking lot if they could just go a few more steps. The door to Reptiles was locked, but I peered in through the glass and could see a caped figure leaning against something a little way down the hall. I knocked.

Ray strode down the hall with the cape flying behind him. He unlocked the door and

leered at me. “Welcome to the crypt of Renos Tsakanikas,” he said with a flourish.

“Ray, that doesn’t work. Horror movies are never set in Greece,” I complained.

He shrugged. “I have to work with what I’ve got. We can’t all be Transylvanian.” Then he smiled evilly again and held out his hand. “But please. Come right this way.”

I ignored the hand. “Okay, let’s see this coffin you promised me.”

I followed him down the hall, and there it was. It was black and shiny and lined in red silk with a red silk pillow. And naturally, it was also surrounded by reptile exhibits. This added to the creepiness in my mammal-person mind, which was full of all the usual reptile stereotypes.

“I’m impressed,” I admitted. I liked a person who knew how to do Halloween right.

He looked at me significantly. “Don’t you want to try it?”

“Try it?” I said, confused.

“We’ll all get to have one someday, but we won’t know what it feels like, will we? Here’s your chance.”

I laughed uncomfortably. “Um, thanks but no thanks, really.”

He came and stood behind me and put his arms around me so I was enclosed in the cape with him and rested his chin on my shoulder. His beard tickled my neck. “Don’t worry,” he said in his best worry-inducing tone, “you’ll be safe with me.”

Well, I had come over here instead of heading straight home, and I was impressed by such a serious attitude toward Halloween decorations, and what was the point if I didn’t go sit in his coffin for a minute. Right? Anyway, I was getting a little too much enjoyment out of the way he was holding me, and I needed a reason to put a stop to it.

“Okay,” I said, “So let go and let me try it.”

“Mmm,” he said, lightly biting my neck as he released me. He stepped over to the coffin

and opened it all the way with a dramatic gesture.

Now I was a little sorry. The whole thing was a bit too eerie. But I couldn't look scared of a silly wooden box full of pillows, could I? I was a tough little zoo-keeping woman. I had been bitten by ravenous chinchillas. I could leap tall piles of animal poop with a single bound. I shoveled shit and carried bales of hay and handled live crickets with my bare hands. Well, okay, mostly at Small Mammals we hosed the shit, or swept it up with a dustpan, rather than actual shoveling, but that was beside the point. Nothing scared me, right?

I sat down uncomfortably on the edge of the coffin.

"Oh, that won't do," he said. He climbed in in his nimble catlike way and lay on his side smiling mischievously. "I made sure to get the biggest one."

He tugged on my ponytail just a little bit, and the next thing I knew I was sitting inside the coffin leaning awkwardly against him. My efforts to rectify the situation, not entirely unaided, ended up with us both lying stretched out in the coffin on our sides facing each other.

"Isn't that better?" he said softly.

I couldn't decide if this was funny or scary, like I often couldn't decide if Ray was scary or just putting on a show. I also couldn't figure out how I'd ended up with his arms around me. Again. But lying down this time.

"This isn't a very realistic preview, is it? I said, flustered, trying to keep my mind on the topic of the coffin.

"Ah. The grave's a fine and private place, but none I think do there embrace. But," he said with a cheerful look, "this is a coffin, not a grave, isn't it?"

"Um," I said, eloquently.

He considered. "Dracula's coffin wasn't in a grave. It would have made it dreadfully

inconvenient to get in and out of it every day, don't you think?" He raised his eyebrows. "I think he just kept it in his bedroom, don't you?"

He pulled me closer, and I stared into his eyes. Even this close they were so dark, you couldn't really see where the pupils ended and the irises began. It was probably why it was so hard to read his expression sometimes, aside from the fact that he made it hard on purpose.

He looked back at me with a wicked little half smile and then kissed me lightly on the lips.

I closed my eyes and wondered what I should do if he did it again. I felt my heart racing. Everyone knew there was something irresistibly sexy about a guy in a Dracula outfit, I rationalized. It didn't mean anything. There was no need to worry about whether he'd locked the front door behind us.

I sat up abruptly.

"Right," I said.

It would really be better if Ray and I were to keep on being just good friends, I told myself. But if that was ever going to change, it was certainly not going to happen in a coffin in the hallway of the Reptiles building.

I climbed out. He stretched out and put his hands behind his head and crossed his legs, totally relaxed, like he lounged in a coffin every day. He looked content, which I noted because I couldn't decide whether I was sorry that I'd gotten out or not.

"Ray, thanks for a memorable Halloween, but I really have to get going now," I said a little too loudly.

He just nodded and closed his eyes and smiled. He's going to sleep here in that coffin, isn't he, I thought. Or he wants me to think he is. Well, I won't spoil his fun. I walked quickly

down the hall and out of the building.

Ray was the sort of person who had no trouble sleeping with people who were just friends, I thought as I trotted down the path. I'd gathered this from various remarks he'd made, although it had taken me a while to realize that the topic probably didn't come up by accident. I wasn't sure I was that kind of person. Anyway, I wasn't the kind of person who'd do it in a coffin at work, for Pete's sake. Which he surely knew. So it was all just kidding.

Who was I saving myself for, though—No, shut up, not Chris, I said with irritation to the part of my brain that always insisted on bringing him up in this context. No, it would be stupid to get involved with someone I worked with every day. I loved my job. He loved his job, too. What if it didn't work out between us? Imagine how awful it would be if one of us had to leave. Imagine how awful it would be if we both stayed and tried to act like it didn't matter. It was a perfectly terrible idea.

I should probably turn around and climb right back in that coffin, I thought. But I didn't. I waved to the zoo police who were standing guard at the back gate and headed out toward home.

Chapter 2

I had a restless night. Don't blame me for your dirty mind if you think it was because I was dreaming about sex in coffins. I'm sure it was just all that dark chocolate that Victor found for me. So I was, amazingly, at work early, trying to get my counts done. We all have to count our animals every day, because they are little and not easy to find. If a bear was missing you'd notice it right away, but if you have five squirrels that look almost exactly alike in a big fake forest with lots of hiding places, you have to work to keep track of them.

The Halloween decorations were gone from the hallways but the pumpkins were still in the exhibits, most of them now looking gnawed-on to various degrees. Which just made them even better as far as I was concerned. I was admiring my jack o'lantern with the fennec fox ears when I heard footsteps, brisk confident steps that covered the ground like the whole planet was her private domain.

"I love your Halloween pumpkins," Allison said. What was she doing here at this hour? Who knew? She could be anywhere at any time. "I adore the Halloween event. What could be better than combining trick or treating and a trip to the zoo?"

"Yeah." I nodded. I had to agree. Candy and animals: did it get any better than that?

"I thought when I came through last night that you are all doing such a nice job, but this building needs some attention. You haven't had anything new in a long time, and the collection is a lot less diverse than when I was the curator here. Maybe you could give me some advice about what we could do."

Somehow, under the magic touch of her attention, I didn't think of how strange it was for

the zoo director to be asking advice from someone as lowly as me.

“A wombat,” I said dreamily, almost to myself. I knew we’d never get a wombat. I’d had this conversation with Larry, our curator, dozens of times. A wombat was a lousy exhibit. It would sleep all day and take up a lot of space with nothing interesting for visitors to see. A big snoozing mound of fur that might as well be a stuffed animal. “Waste Of Money Brains And Time,” Margo had sneered.

But I loved wombats. I longed for a wombat the way other women longed for babies, as far as I could tell about how other women felt. I had clearly somehow imprinted on the wrong species as a newborn. I had no idea what it felt like to want a baby. But, oh, how I imagined a sweet little round wombat pup in my arms.

“A wombat!” Allison exclaimed, jolting me out of my marsupial reverie. “What a splendid idea. We don’t have anything quite like that.”

I looked at her dumbly for a minute, waiting for her to laugh at her joke, but she didn’t. I surreptitiously pinched myself. Surely this was some kind of crazed zookeeper fantasy dream, where the director swoops down and gives you the animal you’ve always longed to work with. I was sure that in a minute I’d wake up and go into work and tell people about it, and I’d find out that everyone had had this dream, like we’d all had the dreams of our animals getting out, or those moments where we woke up in the middle of the night, positive we’d left some shift door in the wrong position.

“Um,” I said, “but . . . won’t it sleep all day?”

“I’m sure we can figure out a way to deal with that. We can make sure its den is visible to the public. That way you’ll always see something even if it’s asleep. After all, that’s better than an animal that’s hiding all day when it’s awake, isn’t it?”

“Where will we put it? Where can we get one?”

“Details, details,” Allison said. I seemed to be awfully good at dreaming that particular cadence she had, the tone that assured you everything would always go her way. “Don’t worry, that’s why I have a staff. If we want a wombat, we’ll have a wombat. Do you know which species you want?”

I’d never thought about it. The idea had never gotten anywhere near close enough to reality for it to matter. “I don’t know. Can I go and do some research?”

“Of course. Just email me when you decide. I’ll come by again soon, and we can talk about what renovations we need to do to house it.”

I gazed off toward the pygmy marmoset exhibit in a daze. The plant wall needed watering, and tons of mossy stuff had fallen down and needed to be replaced. I decided I wasn’t dreaming after all, because in my dream Small Mammal House, the plant wall in that exhibit waters and re-mosses itself, instead of me having to crawl in there and hit my head and get soaking wet and covered with moss.

“But you know,” I said reluctantly, “wombats aren’t from the rainforest. It doesn’t really fit with the master plan, does it?”

“That’s no problem.” Obviously my attempt to think of problems was going to be thwarted at every turn. “You’re always going to have animals from all different habitats in this building. We can do other things with the publicity for this. Don’t concern yourself. The animals are your job. I have a staff for all those other boring things,” she concluded with a brilliant smile.

She said goodbye, and I watched her stride down the hall toward the exit. I felt like I’d just jumped on a speeding train. Didn’t we need to ask Larry? He was supposed to make acquisition decisions. I didn’t mean to be going over everyone’s heads like this. She’d asked me

a question, and I'd just been daydreaming in answer. Suddenly I'd set this whole thing in crazy motion. Wasn't everyone going to be mad?

But then I found myself wondering if I should have asked for more while I had the chance. Maybe I should have asked for an anteater too. If I ran the zoo, we'd definitely have anteaters, even if they would only eat custard with a sauce made of mustard and required full-body massages twice a day. We'd have a giant anteater and a tamandua at minimum. And then . . .

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I dreamed of wombats through the morning meeting. I had finally learned how to usually get to work more or less on time, but the morning meeting was still a challenge. Sitting still and listening to people talk was not one of my talents. Nor was being fully awake at that hour. The fact that Chris ran the meetings didn't help. When I did manage to focus my foggy morning brain on him, I usually found myself thinking how perfectly beautiful he was looking, and how it was too bad that I really couldn't do anything about it.

But today I was completely off in the wombat dimension. Even Chris's blue eyes couldn't compete. So I was startled when Margo helpfully elbowed me at the end of the meeting to wake me up. Margo's that unbearable type of person who gets up at five a.m. even on her days off and generally beats me to work in the morning despite having to drive all the way from Baltimore. She's perpetually entertained by my tardiness. I guess to her, watching me try to get to work on time is like watching the dog try to get a box of biscuits open without the advantage of opposable thumbs. I used to think that was funny to watch, too, until I thought of the comparison.

"And where were you this morning, hon?" she said as I followed her into the kitchen and

started to get my food pans out of the fridge. “Not in the usual place, it looked like.” She smirked. “So it must be something special.”

I ignored her second remark. Margo lost no opportunity to tease me when I was gazing dreamily at Chris, or apparently, even when I wasn't.

“Wombatland,” I answered, sighing contentedly.

“What does that mean?” she said, scowling a little.

“Allison just sailed through the building this morning and promised to get me a wombat.”

I tried not to grin. Margo would also tease anyone who got too excited about a particular animal.

“What?” she said. “You mean here in Small Mammals?”

“Well, yeah, not to take home with me,” I said, trying to sound jaded and cynical, while my heart was jumping up and down going WOMBAT WOMBAT WOMBAT!

Margo shook her head hard, tossing her wild red curls into even more of a mess than usual. “Well, that's typical of her idea of collection planning. Any inspiration or brainstorm she might have becomes the next big thing that everyone has to drop everything to work on. She was serious?”

“She acted like it. Why would she pretend?” Really, the only reason I could believe the whole thing had happened was that it would be too strange a joke for the director to play on a lowly keeper.

“That woman,” Margo said with exasperation. “She thinks she can do whatever she wants.”

“Well, she is the director,” I said uncertainly. I wasn't sure I wanted to defend Allison, since she seemed to annoy so many other people. But she was getting me a wombat. She was getting me a *wombat*. I felt there was some possibility that it would be appropriate for me to kiss

her feet.

“She’s the director. Not the queen. She makes the rules, but then she doesn’t have to follow them. Oh, don’t get me started,” Margo said, heading up the stairs with her food pans. “We’d be here all day, and I have work to do.”

* * * * *

I got my food pans and dropped them off behind my line and went back to trying to count my animals. I couldn’t find the agoutis. I was too busy thinking about what parts of the building we could redesign to hold a wombat. Inevitably, I guess, I couldn’t think of any of my own animals that I wanted to replace, so I found myself contemplating what space I could usurp from boring animals on other people’s lines. Like those shrews of Robin’s that never came out of hiding. And even if you explained that they were almost the only large tree shrews left in captivity, the public still thought they just looked like uninteresting little brown jobs. What was the point? Couldn’t I have that exhibit for my wombat?

I was pretty full of myself. I thought life couldn’t get any better. Then I heard Chris’s footsteps coming down the hall. Of course, that’s what could be better. How could I forget?

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey, yourself,” I said, peering into the exhibit.

“Do you need . . . ?”

“Your agouti-spotting superpowers? Maybe.”

He sat down on the floor, leaning against the bench I was sitting on. Just like you had to go into a phone booth to turn into Superman, he said you had to sit on the floor to turn on your agouti-spotting powers. Because where he got them in the first place was sitting on the floor of a forest for a whole summer looking for agoutis in the wild. I thought this was pretty amazing

every time I thought about it. I was better at keeping still while looking at animals than keeping still any other time, but I couldn't imagine having that kind of superhuman patience.

I glanced at him as he sat serenely beside me and thought he was really more like a Zen monk than a superhero. I was so restless, I'd never even get to be an apprentice to that Zen state. I could only envy Chris sitting perfectly still and centered in the middle of the forest, or the middle of the Small Mammal House, at one with the agouti universe until it provided enlightenment. But I was lucky that at least I got to be here with him and share it sometimes.

Something brown flashed by. "There's the male," he said. This was why I needed him. I couldn't have told which one it was without a better look.

"I saw the baby earlier, so now we just have to see the female."

Yeah, I would have found them myself eventually. And if I wanted help, it would have made more sense for us to sit at opposite ends of the exhibit so we'd cover the whole thing effectively. Really it was just that it was soothing to sit with him, like it was soothing to feed oranges to the sloths. It was one of the things I liked about my job. Did it all have to be about the animals?

Just then there was a flurry of activity high up in the exhibit.

"Hey, cut that out," I said, pointlessly, at the golden lion tamarins chasing each other around. Primates. Why do they have so much trouble getting along?

Chris got up to look more closely, then, satisfied that the GLTs were just being their usual noisy and quarrelsome selves, sat down on the bench beside me.

We had the building to ourselves, so there was no reason not to lie down, stretched out on the bench. I put my head on my hands. The top of my head was almost touching the side of his leg. I could feel the little hairs on the top of my head touching him, even though I knew my hair

didn't have nerve endings. I repressed an urge to rub my head against him like a cat.

"Hey," I said after a few minutes.

"Mmm?"

"How did you grow up to be a zookeeper? Like, what did you do with animals as a kid and all?"

He looked at me. "You might not want to know," he said with an odd little smile.

"What does that mean? Your family ran a slaughterhouse or something?" I couldn't imagine what there could be that had to do with animals that I wouldn't want to know.

"Not that bad, but it did involve dead animals."

He was dragging this out on purpose to tease me. Not that I really minded.

I wrinkled my forehead. "Of course now I have to know," I said crossly.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

I just waited. The lemurs started to call on the other side of the building. With the building not open yet, it was quiet in the public area, the only noises coming from the animals. Mostly the primates, as usual. We were the noisiest order at Small Mammals, no question about it.

"My grandfather was a taxidermist for the Smithsonian," Chris finally said. "He worked on the old Hall of Mammals."

I looked up at him and was about to say "eeww," but managed to stop myself just as he looked at me with raised eyebrows and said, "You were about to say 'yuck,' weren't you?"

"No!" I blurted. Which was, strictly speaking, true. "Well, okay," I admitted. "Kind of. I mean, wouldn't that just give you an interest in dead animals?"

He shook his head. "A good taxidermist has to know a lot about animal behavior. You

can't make a mount look realistic without knowing how the animal acts when it's alive—how it moves, what its expressions are, its typical behaviors. He went to zoos to observe and take photographs and sketches, and I got to go with him. Since he worked for the Smithsonian, we could talk to the keepers here and get up close to the animals.”

Wow. I was overcome with envy, even though it was years ago.

He continued, “Also, sometimes when it was a small animal, we'd get to keep a live one for a while for him to observe, and it was my job to take care of them. Some of them we kept as pets. We had a chinchilla for a long time, and a couple of kinds of armadillo, and a kinkajou.”

Now I was so jealous I wasn't sure I could be his friend anymore. “Wow, you were really lucky. It was a big deal I had a guinea pig.”

“Really?” He looked surprised.

“Yeah. I was born in New York and went to the Bronx Zoo all the time when I was really little. But then we moved to Boston, which hardly has a zoo to speak of. And my parents were kind of uncomfortable with animals. I had lots of stuffed animals and plastic animals. I didn't have any dolls, just animals. I can still remember some of them, like a little plastic lion cub. And a black horse that I took outside with me to shovel snow, and I lost it in the snow and never found it. I was so heartbroken. Oh, and I was so mad after I went away to college and my mother found my old box of plastic animals and threw them away! I never forgave her for that, really.”

I glanced up and saw that he looked as fascinated by my exotic story as I'd been by his.

“Anyway, I hardly got to spend any time with real animals until I left home, and I had those summer jobs at the pig sanctuary and the wildlife place—well, you know, that stuff. It's all there on my résumé.” I finished, “So I guess I'm making up for lost time, now I get to be around real animals all day.”

He turned away and focused on the exhibit again. "Experience teaches you a lot," he said, half to himself. "But some of it, you have to be born with."

I felt a little shiver all down my back. What he meant was that I had it. The thing you had to be born with to be good with animals. He thought that about me. I felt so happy, I was afraid I was going to float off the bench into the air. I put my hand out and held on to the side just in case. It was a good thing he changed the subject.

"They're taking down most of my grandfather's work now, with the renovation of the Hall of Mammals."

"Oh, that's kind of sad."

He shrugged. "They don't last forever, any more than live ones do. There's only so much you can do."

I lay there quietly for a while, still glowing from the idea that he thought I was pretty good with animals for someone who had had mostly plastic ones as a child.

"I guess it sounds boring that I've never worked anywhere else. Not for a real job, anyway," he said. "You've lived in all those different places."

"No," I said, and I meant it. Why would you want to ever leave here? "You're really lucky. That's all much more exciting than anything I ever did."

"Really? You lived in New York. That must have been exciting."

"I guess," I said, flailing around unsuccessfully for something that was as good as keeping armadillos at home and watching agoutis in the rainforest. "We had, um, really good bagels," I concluded lamely.

We sat quietly for a while again, thinking about each others' exotic childhoods, I guess. I gazed down the hall to where the chinchillas were popping around on the rocks in their exhibit.

Chris was looking for the agoutis, so it was okay if I contemplated some other nice rodents for a moment instead.

After a while I said, "Wasn't it odd to live with all those dead animals around?"

He shrugged. "It was normal for us. Although my grandmother did complain about him taking up space in the freezer."

I saw him looking at me expectantly. "Oh," I said, neutrally, in a tone as far away from "eeuw" as I could manage.

It was a little creepy, but interesting too. Growing up surrounded by dead things and the black art of making them come back to life. And you had to know all about life to know how to do it. Maybe that's where Chris had inherited the magic from.

I thought of something else. "Did your grandfather ever work on animals people hunted?"

"He did before he got the Smithsonian job. It's how most taxidermists make a living."

"Did that bother you?"

"I don't know. I was so young then. I think it was just unpleasant but normal. Animals kill other animals, and so do we."

A flash of brown dashed out of the underbrush and jumped over the stream.

"There she is," Chris said. Oh, too fast, I sighed, a little disappointed, until he continued, "Now we can go see the pumpkin stomping."

"Oh yeah! I almost forgot."

The pumpkin stomping was a Halloween tradition. Every year the elephants got a huge pile of pumpkins that were donated to the zoo. They played with them and ate them and, best of all, stomped on them. I must have been very distracted by wombat thoughts to have forgotten about the pumpkin stomp.

“Did someone tell Jeff?” Since he was new, I wasn’t sure he knew about the pumpkin stomping. We couldn’t let him miss it.

“He already went ahead with Margo.”

We left the building and started up the hill. Margo wouldn’t normally go to the pumpkin stomp, I knew. She probably wanted to get Jeff alone to pump him about whether he had a girlfriend or a boyfriend. We actually weren’t sure yet which it would be, which frustrated Margo to pieces. How was she going to try to match him up with someone if she didn’t know?

But this was no time to worry about Margo’s matchmaking problems. It was a beautiful fall day. I was full of leftover candy from yesterday that I’d had for breakfast. I was going to see the pumpkin stomping with Chris. I was going to get a wombat. It didn’t get any better than this.

Wait. I realized Chris didn’t know about the wombat. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t told him. No, I could believe it. Because I knew he wouldn’t like how it had happened. But come on. Even if he didn’t like Allison, surely he could only be thrilled about a wombat?

“Hey,” I said, “a weird thing happened this morning.”

He looked at me expectantly.

“Allison came by—wait, it’s a good story anyway—when I was in early doing my count. I don’t know why. But she said she thought we needed something new in the building and asked me what I thought. And the next thing I knew she said to email me about what kind of wombat I wanted, and she’d arrange everything.”

I watched him, worried about his reaction. It would spoil the whole thing if he didn’t think it was terrific.

“I know that’s kind of crazy,” I continued, “but a wombat would be so cool. And we really haven’t had anything new in a long time, right?”

He looked blank for a moment, like he was trying to decide which way to go. Then he smiled, reluctantly at first, and then for real. “You really love wombats,” he said.

“Oh, yeah. It would be so great. I know she just charged in and decided without consulting you guys, but—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he interrupted, “that’s how she does things. It’s nothing new.”

“I didn’t, like, try to talk her into it or anything . . .”

“It’s okay. It’s great. It’ll be fun.” He smiled like he meant it.

I tried not to jump up and down. And then we were talking about where we would put it, and how we could make interesting keeper talks about it even when it was sleeping, and he was telling me neat wombat facts that even I didn’t know. I was the happiest woman on earth.

* * * * *

“Do you see Margo and Jeff?” Chris said, looking over the crowd that had already gathered around the elephant yard.

“No.” Probably because I wasn’t trying. I didn’t care where they were. I was happy to be able to talk to Chris without Margo hanging on my every word and glance for something to torment me about in the ladies’ room later. I was going to enjoy the pumpkin stomp, and if part of that was enjoying having Chris to myself, it was none of anyone’s business.

We grabbed a place by the railing and waved to the staff hanging around in the elephant yard. It was warm for early November, with a blue sky full of unrealistically fluffy clouds, and there was a big crowd for a weekday. Elephants were so popular, people must take time off from work to see this, I thought. No one took a day off from work to see something happen at the Small Mammal House. And no one would send all these TV station cameras. Sometimes we felt a little second-class.

Still, a crowd of people who'd made a special trip to see animals do a cool thing were my kind of people. For today I would forgive them for liking the elephants better than small mammals.

The pumpkin stomp was always preceded by a lot of waiting. We leaned against the railing and watched the staff doing more or less nothing in the yard. There were a few pumpkins placed here and there, but we were waiting for a truck to come with more. There was no reason the pumpkins couldn't all be there ahead of time—it was a ritual left over from the days when a dump truck would come and dump a whole pile of them. But the vets had declared that unsanitary, so now a cute little farm truck came, just to make an event of it, and more pumpkins were unloaded by hand.

I only had a vague idea of who most of the people were. I knew Bruce, who was standing around the yard talking on his cell phone, because he was the curator in charge of the capybaras as well as the elephants. I mulled this fact over resentfully for the millionth time. Sure they were large for rodents, but surely capybaras weren't really large mammals? Really we ought to be in charge of them, and I ought to be their keeper. Probably Bruce should have been talking to the press, and I wondered if he was just avoiding them instead of making some vital last-minute pumpkin-related communication. Instead the reporters were all clustered around another guy. He was tall and blond, and he looked like he spent way too much time on his hair.

“Hey,” I said, “I should know these people's names. Who's this guy who thinks he's a movie star over here?”

Chris, trying not to smirk, said, “That's Matthew.”

“Matthew, king of the elephants,” I said, making a face. “He's enjoying the attention.”

He only got it for another moment, though, because then Allison came sailing in like she

was the woman we'd all been waiting for. Matthew stepped aside more graciously than I expected. He knew who ran the show.

As if her appearance really had started everything moving, just then the pumpkin truck arrived and started to back up into the elephant yard. The reporters couldn't figure out whether to film the pumpkin truck or interview Allison, and it was funny to watch all of them in a bunch try to get around to the side where they could get both of them into the shot. It was a little feeding frenzy, like when you threw crickets into the meerkat exhibit and the animals couldn't decide which cricket to go after first.

The truck backed up to the far side of the elephant yard, and the driver got out. He looked like everyone's dream of a wholesome young farm dad. Probably like us zookeepers, he was usually all dirty and sweaty in real life and had cleaned up special for this. The truck was like an adorable toy farm truck, with a red cab and a perfectly clean wooden railing around the cargo part in back. Definitely no dump truck. Like so many things at zoos, this event had been cleaned up a lot, for better or worse. But it was still pretty cool.

A little girl got out of the passenger side and started to help the crew unload pumpkins. The way she was acting, you'd think she did this every day, and I wondered if she knew how lucky she was. Little girl, I wanted to yell, you are in the elephant yard! I would have given anything when I was a little girl to be in her position, right inside an exhibit at the zoo. I'd had to wait until I was all grown up!

The giraffe in the adjacent yard came up to the wall and looked over it, checking out the odd interruption. I wondered if she could remember the same thing happening in previous years. I wished I had a camera. I loved the Elephant House, one of the zoo's old-fashioned stone buildings. What a perfect picture it would be of the truck and the giraffe and everyone unloading

the pumpkins in anticipation, with the blue sky and fall leaves and the Elephant House in the background. The elephants weren't even out yet, and it was wonderful anyway.

It was a good thing I was having such a lovely time without any elephants, since there was still more waiting. The truck drove away, and Allison continued to talk to the press. The elephant staff milled around, and the curator was on his cell phone again. The zoo photographer fiddled with fiddly bits of her cameras. I momentarily thought about putting one of my arms around one of Chris's, but then came to my senses and just stared at the sky. The crowd waited patiently. They'd only spend ten seconds trying to find a small mammal that was hard to see in its exhibit. But they'd wait many long minutes to see elephants.

There was a disturbance in the little knot of staff standing around the yard, and everyone looked in that direction. Surely it was time for the elephants to come now? But no. Allison had to say a few words to the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming," she began. Chris gazed off in another direction, trying to look indifferent. I sighed and watched the clouds.

* * * * *

Finally the door opened, and the crowd oohed. Out came the mother elephant and the two-year-old baby, who was really the one everyone had come to see. Grownup elephant pumpkin stomping was one thing, but baby elephant pumpkin stomping was almost too much to stand. You could feel everyone tense up with anticipation of nearly intolerable cuteness as he trotted across the yard.

He ran to a pile of about half a dozen pumpkins and plowed right through them. I don't care if it's anthropomorphic, he looked totally pleased with himself. He kicked a few in different directions and then, the moment we had all been waiting for. *Stomp*.

Pieces of pumpkin flew all over. People laughed and cameras clicked. The zoo photographer moved around looking for a better angle. The curator kept talking on his cell phone. Everyone watched as the baby eyed another pumpkin with mischief in his heart. *Smush*. More laughter.

Hanging around in the back of the elephant yard was a tall blond Valkyrie sort of woman who looked a little like she would be able to wrestle an elephant to the ground. But her expression and posture were uneasy, and she seemed to avoid the other staff. Sometimes you could tell who the submissive animal in a group was, even when there wasn't much going on. She was big, but that wasn't enough to put her on top.

"Who's that blond woman in back?" I asked, leaning over to watch the baby elephant as he trotted off to an inconveniently distant corner of the yard. Why didn't they put all of the pumpkins right in front of me?

"That's Stephanie."

"Why don't they carve the pumpkins into jack o'lanterns first?" I suddenly wondered.

"That's a lot of pumpkins," Chris said.

I looked at the big pile, thinking of how it had taken us all morning to carve our jack o'lanterns while our other work wasn't getting done.

"Or it might be too gross," I said. "Too much like smushing someone's head."

Yeah, maybe stomping on pumpkins with faces on them would just be a much less wholesome family activity. Probably it was better to stick with the idea that they are squashing squash, even at Halloween.

The mom elephant was stomping on one pumpkin at a time, and then actually eating it. That was the grownup way. Baby was still running all over trying to find as many as he could,

getting dibs on all of them. He kicked one in a way that made him look just like he was playing soccer, and the crowd laughed again.

The curator was still on the phone. I guess he'd been to a lot of pumpkin stomps already in his time. "Do you think Bruce is ever going to hang up and pay attention?"

"Did you come here to watch the elephants or the staff?" Chris said.

"They're both just as interesting. Can I pretend he's unimpressed because he likes the capybaras better than the elephants?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

Bruce finally put his cell phone away and watched as baby stood both of his front feet on one pumpkin. *Splat*. I'm not sure why this whole thing was so fascinating and adorable, but it was, even though I didn't care about elephants that much. I guess it's partly just that there's nothing like a baby mammal, no matter what kind of mammal it is.

Then the baby finally seemed to notice the group of people standing around the yard watching him and got distracted from the pumpkins. He walked up to them and put his trunk out to the photographer. He was about the same height as the grownup people looking at him. The photographer put her hand on his trunk, and it looked like they were shaking hands. How nice of him to stop being a bad little boy and greet his admirers so politely.

"Oh my God, that's so cute," I moaned.

I didn't want to be an elephant keeper, because I wasn't that thrilled with the idea of working with an animal that might kill me. Elephants kill more keepers than any other animals. But it was hard to remember that right at this moment when I was so insanely jealous of people who got to shake hands with the baby elephant's trunk. I needed to make friends with some elephant keepers, I thought. Maybe then they'd let me do it sometime.

I saw that in the other yard, the sad woman was now bringing another elephant out.

“Why is that one separate?” I said.

“She wouldn’t get any of the pumpkins if she was with the others,” Chris said.

With animals like the elephants, often the whole zoo staff knew about their personalities and family history. I wouldn’t expect Bruce to know which of my pygmy marmosets was the submissive one, but if I asked Chris about elephants, he could tell me all sorts of stories about each of them and what happened to them long before I worked here.

The sad elephant walked up to the pumpkins and gave one a tentative kick. I saw the keeper talking to her, encouraging her. Zoo people were like other animal people—there was the type who always wanted to rescue the blind dog with three legs, who liked trying to draw the timid animals out of their shells. But that kind of thing just made me impatient. There’s a pumpkin, dammit. What are you waiting for? Seize the day!

The sad elephant put a foot on a pumpkin, and left it there for a moment. Then she put her weight down and it was crushed. It didn’t give the same satisfying *splat* that the others had. But there was a little scattered applause, from the three-legged-blind-dog crowd, the people who were happy to see the sad elephant make an attempt at what came naturally to all the others.

I turned back to where the baby elephant was making a mess of crushed-up pumpkin bits. I didn’t feel guilty about liking the animals that were more fun, I thought. Which reminded me of something.

“Do we have time to go visit the capybaras?”

“Not really,” Chris said, “but let’s go anyway.”

Wombat and pumpkin stomping and capybaras. I wanted to skip down the path holding his hand, but I managed to keep the feeling hidden inside.

* * * * *

I looked at the clock as I sat down at the computer. So I was going to be leaving late again. When I got home, the pugs would gaze at me with those tragic pug expressions, shaped by generations of selective breeding by people who apparently enjoyed feeling guilty every time their dogs looked at them. But I had to email Allison about what species of wombat we were going to get. I was afraid if I waited, I would seem unappreciative, or she might discover some reason to change her mind.

I knew that common wombats were the cutest kind. They were the roundest. But there was no point in picking an animal I couldn't get. It was nearly impossible to get animals out of Australia, even ones that weren't endangered. So I had to find out what was a realistic possibility.

Chris had already checked the surplus list for me, where zoos listed the animals that they were trying to get rid of. There were no wombats on it. But the list wasn't always up to date, and I knew Allison had her special powers of persuasion. So I needed to find out what zoos had any wombats to begin with.

There's a website where you can find out where animals are in zoos all over the world. It's called Isis, for International Species Information System. Zoo staff can get more detailed information, but anyone can go and find out the basic species holdings. Before I worked at a zoo, I used to use it all the time to find out where they had some good animal that I wanted to go on vacation to see.

Sometimes the answer is discouraging. If you want to see an aye-aye, you'd better be able to get to North Carolina. Otherwise you are out of luck. But if you want to see capybaras, you can probably find some pretty nearby. Either way, it's fun to be able to find this out before

you get there.

I logged on to the computer and checked the wombat holdings in North America. There was only one place that claimed to have one common wombat. That was worse than I'd remembered. There was a biggish handful of zoos that had the hairy-nosed wombat, so we'd have to take our chances with that. Still, there sure weren't a lot of them. There were more hairy-nosed wombats than aye-ayes, but not by much.

So, anyway, I just had to email Allison, and then I could go home. But somehow I found myself reading my other email first. I shouldn't be wasting time like this with the pugs waiting for me to come home, but first let's just clean out all these pointless memos about computer viruses and blood drives and lectures that I'd never have time to attend and—oh, not more email about the pandas. Don't get me started on the pandas. Why was everyone supposed to be so fascinated by every move the pandas made? I could probably teach marmosets to tap dance and still not get as much attention as—

I hit delete. I needed to go home. I started a new message.

Dear Allison, I typed.

Wait, is that okay? I can't just write to her using her first name, can I? I wondered. But it sounds funny to use her title. Email was pretty informal, and everyone called her by her first name. No, they *referred* to her by her name—did they really address her that way? I certainly never did. But then what? “Dear Ms. Craine”? No one called her that. “Dear Director”? That was totally bizarre.

Okay, there was nothing I could do but skip that part for now . . . I left a blank line and typed some more.

I checked on Isis and nearly all the wombats in North America are the hairy-

nosed, so I guess we'll have to try to get one of those, even though the common ones are cuter.

I read it over. No, better take out the “cute” remark. It made it sound more informal, which might make it okay to address her by her name, but still . . . I backspaced. I was beginning to understand why I'd avoided starting this. Going back and rereading all the spam and memos was starting to seem like an attractive option.

I checked on Isis, and nearly all the wombats in North America are the hairy-nosed, so I guess we'll have to try to get one of those.

Um, but is that it, then? Now I just say “Love, Hannah,” and that's the whole message? That's no good. Wait, maybe I need to be making this less like it's just between the two of us. I typed some more.

All of us at Small Mammals are very excited . . .

No, is that not businesslike enough? This was giving me a stomach ache. I backspaced and tried again.

All of us at Small Mammals are eagerly awaiting . . . are looking forward to . . .

I moaned and highlighted the whole sentence and hit the delete key.

“What a face. What are you doing?”

I looked around. It was Margo, on her way out.

“Writing to Allison about the wombat,” I said, trying not to wail.

“Be careful what you wish for,” she said, airily, and walked out.

I desperately typed some more and read it over.

Hi

I checked on Isis and the only wombats in North America are the hairy-nosed, so I guess we'll have to try to get one of those. We're all really looking forward to it.

Thanks,

Hannah

Oh God. I probably sounded like a moron, but what would she expect from a lowly poop-shoveler? I wasn't expected to be able to write fancy memos, just push a broom and lock the cage doors behind me. Right?

I stared at the screen for another minute. I went back and put a comma after "Hi" and stared at it some more. I wondered if I should just forget about getting a wombat if it meant I had to sound like a moron in front of the director of the whole zoo. She always seemed so friendly and interested in me when she was there in the same room. But when she wasn't, you heard all the stories about how she threw her weight around, and you got the definite impression that she didn't suffer fools gladly. Was this an email that a fool would write?

I might have stared at the screen all afternoon, but just then Chris came in the door from outside that was right next to the desk. He stopped to look in his mailbox before walking around me. The idea of him reading the message over my shoulder was suddenly my most immediate and overwhelmingly terrifying problem. It would be bad enough to sound stupid in front of Allison, but for Chris to see how stupid I sounded in front of Allison would be unbearable.

I quickly hit *Send*. Of course, now that I was in a rush to get rid of the message, the computer hemmed and hawed for a moment before sending it and making it disappear from the screen.

Just as he turned around, the "message sent" notice appeared and I sighed, I guess

noticeably, because he looked at me a little funny.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, forcing a bright tone.

He put his hand on the back of the chair. I closed my eyes and tried not to lean back against his arm.

“Hairy-nosed wombats are probably the only kind we can get,” I said.

He nodded. “Hairy-nosed is a good name.”

Oh, it was. I hadn't thought of that. “Oh, yeah,” I said happily.

I opened my eyes and saw that he was smiling at me like it was adorable how I felt about wombats. I blushed and turned away, looking intently at my email.

“I'm heading out,” he said.

“I'll lock up,” I said, not looking at him.

“See you tomorrow.”

He went back out the door. I stared at the screen for no reason for another minute, then got up to get ready to go.

Chapter 3

I looked at my watch as I walked past the capybaras. They were immobile piles of brown shagginess, their eyes closed, dreaming about chewing grasses all day. I was early again. All that leftover Halloween candy was definitely giving me extra energy. Maybe a steady diet of chocolate after every meal including breakfast was something I should consider more seriously.

As I neared the building, I realized that my early arrival wasn't the only unusual thing about this morning. I heard sirens. We could hear sirens from the streets all the time, but these sounded much closer. And now, looking up the path past the entrance to Small Mammals, I saw flashing lights up near the Elephants building.

This would have been a good day to have forgotten to put my radio away and brought it home by accident. Whatever was going on, there must be a ton of radio traffic right now, even this early. I thought about running to get one so I could eavesdrop. No, the heck with it. Why not take the direct approach?

They might need help, I rationalized as I started to trot up the hill, despite knowing that an escaped animal situation never involved flashing lights. And an animal emergency wouldn't call for the ambulance that I saw as I got closer.

There were police, too. And the biggest surprise was that they were in the outdoor elephant yard.

More police were blocking the way into the building. But a group of people was gathered on the path overlooking that yard. I didn't know most of them—Large Mammal staff who were familiar only by sight. But one of them had his back to me, and I recognized that black spiky

haircut. No surprise—Ray would be in the middle of trouble whenever he could manage. He'd know what was up.

I ran up and touched him on the shoulder. "Ray."

He turned and looked at me. His face was so serious that it scared me. His goofiness on Halloween was typical, but he had a dark side too. This wasn't either, though, and I wasn't sure what to think.

"Hannah," he said, putting his hands on my shoulders, "you don't want to see this."

"Don't want to see what? How can I tell before I know what it is? What happened?"

He walked me a little bit away from the group of other keepers.

"There's a body in the elephant yard," he said quietly. "One of the keepers found it this morning."

"Oh no," I said, "One of the elephants attacked a keeper?"

"No. It doesn't look like it's one of us. And it wasn't just the elephants. Because someone had put a pumpkin around his head."

I stared at him. It was the day after elephant pumpkin-stomping. He didn't have to explain any further.

"Oh," I said. Kind of a stupid reaction. But I was stunned. Why would anyone do such a thing? It was so bizarre and sick, I wondered if I was dreaming. But I was sure I'd never felt so realistically queasy in a dream.

I looked over toward where the police were searching the elephant yard. It was weird to see people in a different uniform in there. Only elephant keepers were allowed in the elephant yard. Because elephants were dangerous. They could kill you.

Once I looked, I started walking in that direction like an irresistible force was sucking me

in.

“Hannah,” Ray said and reached his hand for mine.

I shook my head without knowing what I meant by it. I looked into his dark eyes. I found the words I was searching for. “I don’t want you to protect me.”

He looked unhappy but said nothing. He waited till I had gone a few more steps and followed slowly behind.

I got as close as I could and leaned against the railing. Ray came and stood next to me. I could feel him watching me.

The body was lying on its stomach. You could tell it was a man from the clothing. If it had been a keeper, the clothing wouldn’t have told you anything, since we all dressed the same. But he was wearing a men’s business suit.

Without being told what had happened, it might have been kind of hard to tell at first. Which parts were just smashed pumpkin, and which were smashed something else, wasn’t all that clear. Fortunately, I guess. And there was the disbelief, too—surely it was just some trick of the light. But eventually there was no choice but to believe it. His head must have been inside the pumpkin.

I was oddly calm. My first thought was, it’s a good thing Robin is on vacation. She can’t even stand it when we find a mouse on a glue trap and have to kill it by hitting its head against the counter.

Maybe the reality of the situation hadn’t sunk in. Or maybe I was getting used to death. The first time I found one of my animals dead, it was devastating. The second time, well, you had to accept it; none of them lived forever. The first time I saw a chunk of one of my animals cut up on the table at pathology rounds, it was horrible. The second time, I was interested to

understand what it had died of.

I suddenly thought of something.

“No one would just lie still while that happened,” I said. “He must have been already dead. Or at least drugged.”

Ray nodded, like he'd already thought of that.

“Do you know who it is?” I said.

He shook his head. “But we could see they found a wallet, so the police must know.”

I realized that I had a more immediate problem. It was not my job to figure out who was dead in the elephant yard. I had a different job entirely, and it was almost 7:30, and I wasn't at work yet. I didn't have a radio, so I wouldn't know if anyone was looking for me. Surely this was such an exceptional circumstance that I wouldn't get in trouble? But it was hard to tell. People could be such sticklers for the rules and regulations around here.

But before I decided what to do, it didn't matter, because just then the one who'd have been looking for me found me.

“Do you know who it is?” I said to Chris without any preliminaries.

He looked at me with the blank expression that meant that he knew something he thought shouldn't tell me. I held his gaze while the part of him that was one of us wrestled with the management part.

After a moment he looked away and said, “It looks like it was Victor from the ID he was carrying.”

“Oh,” I said stupidly, again. Yeah, obviously they'd have to do a little work to identify the body for sure, I thought with a shudder. Poor Victor. What a horrible way to die. Just two days ago I'd been showing him the tenrec and complaining about the Small Mammals building having

nothing but stupid trick-or-treat rainforest raisins. It was hard to believe.

And poor Allison. Their relationship had been quite public, so now she was going to have to deal with it in public. Even though she was used to being the center of attention, surely that was going to be hard.

“Does she—” I stopped, because following Chris’s gaze I saw the answer to my question. A car had just pulled up, and Allison was getting out of it.

Whatever she already knew, you could tell that she was just as in charge of the situation as she always was. We were used to watching creatures interact without conversation, but you didn’t need any professional expertise to interpret her body language, even at a distance. An officer outside the door of the building started to say something to her. She barely slowed down to snap at him, and you could just see him flinch. She disappeared into the entrance. After a moment I saw her stride out into the elephant yard.

I don’t know how I expected her to react, but I guess it wasn’t surprising that there were no hysterics. She knew how to conduct herself in public, whatever was going on inside her.

She looked at the body and talked to some important-looking police person, and after that, they started to take it away. Had they waited for her to identify it? Or had she stopped them from taking it away till she’d seen it? This was her territory, and nothing important happened without her being a part of it.

Police were still swarming over the elephant yard, I suppose looking for evidence. She looked at them with what was, even at this distance, clearly disgust, and said something to the police official. It was pretty obvious that his reply was not what she wanted. There were a few things in the world even she couldn’t control. She wasn’t happy, but the only way she could deal with the situation was by making a dramatic exit.

She passed back through the Elephant House quickly. She came out the same door she'd gone in and barked orders at various members of her staff who were waiting nervously around the car. She didn't get back in, though, and I remembered it probably wasn't her car—she lived right outside the back gate of the zoo and didn't need to drive here.

She strode up the path. No one followed her. That must have been one of her orders, or they'd all have been flocking around her. Her long golden hair streamed behind her. She had the kind of hair that would have been the center of attention even if her personality wasn't, and that was probably as much work to take care of as a pet. I remembered how Margo always said she'd been promoted to director because of her hair. It was an exaggeration, but since her job was to be the public face of the zoo, her looks didn't hurt.

I was lost in thought and didn't realize Chris was saying my name until he touched my arm lightly.

"We should go," he said.

I looked around and saw Ray was sitting on a bench behind us. "Can I catch up in a second?"

"Sure," he said, starting to walk away. He'd never get through all those knots of people without stopping anyway. It looked like half the keeper staff had found their way here. Nothing was going to happen quickly today.

I walked over to the bench and told Ray I had to go.

"This is awful," I said, reluctant to leave. "I feel so bad for her, such a terrible shock, and to have to deal with it in public."

He was unmoved. "Knowing her, she was probably about done with him anyway. It's good timing."

“Ray, don’t joke. That’s horrible.” Although he was unnervingly correct, in fact. Allison’s love life was conspicuously serial. Still, this was a dreadful thing to say out loud right now. Changing the subject, I said, “You know she says she’s going to get me a wombat at Small Mammals.”

“No wonder you’re on her side,” he said, like he could sympathize. There was probably some special reptile that he’d always wanted the zoo to get, too. “But be careful of who comes bearing gifts.”

I sighed. He didn’t hate Allison like Chris clearly did, but his attitude had always been hard to interpret, like a lot of things about him. This wasn’t the first time he’d warned me against Allison in his usual dramatic and mysterious manner. Sometimes he seemed to admire her, but in a way that implied she had evil talents. Yet other times he hinted he’d been on Allison’s long roster of conquests back in the mists of time, which to me was any time before I’d started to work here. Such a thing was believable if only because you couldn’t imagine him refusing the experience. But I had no idea whether it was true, much less what feelings it would leave him with.

“I really have to go,” I said, looking over to where Chris had made his way to the outermost gaggle of standing-around people. He was about to make his escape back to Small Mammals, and I should be going with him. Animals didn’t stop pooping or needing to be fed because someone had died, no matter how horribly. We had work to do.

Ray nodded. I hated to leave him alone in the mood he seemed to be in, but there was nothing I could do about it. I gave him a regretful backward glance as I ran after Chris, who was finally disengaging himself from a last conversation and trying to start down the hill back to the building.

“Hey,” I called, and he turned and waited for me.

We walked together in silence for a moment.

“They’re going to keep the park closed at least for the morning,” he said. “It’s too hard to keep people away from the elephant yards.”

That was good. I didn’t want to have to keep explaining to people why the Elephant House was closed.

I noticed he kept glancing over at me in a funny way, but I was lost in thought. I was thinking of the last time I’d seen Victor, bringing me back chocolate from the Reptile House at the Halloween event, conspiratorially confessing that it was politically incorrect candy with no connection to rainforest preservation. It was hard to believe he wasn’t going to be popping up all over the zoo anymore.

We stopped at the door. I stared into space while Chris got out his keys. After a moment I noticed nothing was happening, I guess, and I looked over and saw he was looking at me intently.

“Are you okay?” he said.

I looked back at him stupidly, I think, because the inappropriate thought that was going through my head was that his eyes looked like heavenly blue morning glories on a cloudy day.

“I’m okay,” I said after a moment.

He nodded, and we went into the building.

* * * * *

Jeff and Caleb were working in the kitchen when we got there. “Where’ve you guys been?” said Jeff. Somehow both of them had missed all the commotion and didn’t know what was going on.

I didn't really want to listen to a description of what I'd just seen. I went in the ladies' room and changed into my boots. I sat there for a while, feeling sad that I'd never get to show Victor the three-banded armadillo that we used for demos. He would have appreciated the story about how its closest other relative in the building was the sloth. He would have been interested in how visitors were often confused about whether it was a mammal. He would have really liked it.

When I returned to the kitchen, Jeff looked pale and was asking Chris all kinds of questions that no one could answer yet. That seemed like a normal reaction. Caleb was weird, though. He'd been an elephant keeper till recently—you'd expect him to be especially interested. But he seemed completely unmoved.

Maybe he was just being his usual lugubrious self, I thought. Caleb was big and bearded, the sort of person you would describe as bearlike even if you didn't work at a zoo. His hair was reddish, starting to go gray. Reddish brown was like a bear, but I thought that when he went grayer he would remind me of a musk ox, especially when he let his beard get shaggy. Jeff was so different standing next to him, bony and leggy, more like some kind of tall deer or antelope, maybe even a giraffe.

That got me thinking of what different animals all the men were. The rest of them were definitely not hoofstock. Ray was dark and feline. Compact muscles ready to spring, and a little undercurrent of scariness even when he was just lazing around. Victor had been foxlike, not just his hair, but how he was kind of quick and graceful. And how he popped up where you didn't expect him, but it was always a nice surprise.

Chris was a problem, because what animals had blue eyes? I couldn't imagine him any other way. There was a blue-eyed lemur, but lemurs were lovable but dumb, which was definitely

wrong. Maybe he was a wonderful purebred dog of some kind. Sometimes you saw a dog that was so perfectly put together and moved so beautifully that it took your breath away. But why was he the only one I thought of as a domestic animal, I wondered. Maybe because he was the one I wanted hanging around my house—

“Hannah,” someone was saying. Repeating, it sounded like.

I looked around. It was Caleb. Jeff and Chris were gone. I hoped Jeff hadn't been so upset that he'd needed to go sit down. Jeff was a delicate flower. Caleb was a big old tuber.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was kind of out of it. What did you say?”

“Could you pass me that sweet potato?”

I picked up a big old tuber from the table in front of me and looked at it stupidly for a moment and then handed it to him. I thought how it was a good thing that we didn't normally feed pumpkin to any of our animals. I was especially glad that I'd already cleaned the jack o'lanterns out of my exhibits.

“I was thinking about Victor,” I said, only partially lying. “It's so awful. It's so hard to believe.”

Caleb just grunted. And then I remembered something. Hadn't I heard that he was one of Allison's previous boyfriends?

How could Margo be off today, I thought, frustrated. She was the only one I could ask. It was weird, suspicious even, that he had had so little reaction to the news. Maybe I was wrong. But suddenly I felt uncomfortable about being with him.

“I'm going down to the mara yard,” I said. Not that it was any of Caleb's business. But I felt like I needed to cover my urge to flee. I wanted out, and the maras, my only outdoor exhibit, were as out as I could get and still be working.

Caleb nodded without looking up. I grabbed my mara pans and meds out of the fridge and trotted out the door.

This was going to be hard, I thought as I walked down the path. The animals were all used to their routine at a certain time, and the maras were hard to medicate, not like the greedy little primates who would gladly take poison if you hid it inside a grape. Maras are the second largest rodent in the world. After the capybara, of course. They are also called Patagonian caviés—caviés, like guinea pigs. They are like very large guinea pigs on long deer-like legs, with Vulcan ears. Visitors always had strange theories about what they were—huge bunnies, little kangaroos, rabbits crossed with dogs. Don't ask me why they don't just read the sign, which says very clearly that they are rodents. That would be too easy.

What was relevant about them at the moment right now, though, was not their appearance or the order they belonged to, but their personalities and behavior. They are skittish, like the little deer that they resemble. And what I had found lately is that they were incredibly fussy eaters. It's a typical herbivore thing. They had ancestors who were afraid to eat unfamiliar food, and so more likely to skip eating something poisonous, and so also more likely to stick around to leave descendants—who were also afraid to eat unfamiliar food. Great in the wild; not so great when your keeper is trying to make you feel better with medicine.

I climbed over the wall, sat down in their yard, and held out a leafeater biscuit. "Here, babies," I said, "come have your cookies." Leafeater biscuits are little red crunchy things that are supposed to be apple flavored. They don't taste like anything to me. But the maras and lots of other animals love them. So I assume I just don't know what I'm missing.

The maras both turned and looked at me for a few moments. They were prey animals, so they couldn't help being cautious. It was in their nature. I tried to be patient. It was a beautiful

morning, and I had a nice view of the Reptile House from here. It was another of the old buildings, made of red brick with stone reptiles decorating it. Usually I was happy to sit here and look at it against the blue sky, wondering what Ray was up to, listening to the gibbons in their nearby exhibit starting to hoot and holler.

The female mara came up to me slowly and took a biscuit. “There you go, mousie-pie,” I said, happily. The first one had no medication on it. I quickly squirted a little of the liquid onto the second one. I held the medicated end, and pointed the plain end into her mouth. She took the end with her teeth while she was still chewing the first one, and I pushed it in gently, feeling her soft lips with my fingers. Success! I grabbed another one and squirted a little more medicine onto it and held it in the same way.

She took it in her teeth and then stopped chewing. And then she dropped it.

Okay, maybe she was just clumsy. I picked it up and tried again. She took it again and dropped it.

Maybe she just didn't like the dirt that was sticking to it now. I gave her another plain one, and she ate it right up. I put a tiny bit of the meds on another and held it out. She touched it with her teeth, dropped it, and walked away.

This problem had been coming on for a while. At first, she'd actually seemed to like the medicated biscuits better than the plain ones. Then she gradually stopped eating as many of them, so now, most days she was getting somewhat less than the full dose.

But walking away from the second biscuit with a tiny drop on it. This was bad news.

“Silly tasty prey animal,” I said. “Silly girl. I'm not trying to knock you out and then eat you. I promise.”

She sat and blinked.

“Come on, munchkin. You need to have more of this. It’s good for you and tastes good too. Yummy grape flavor,” I cooed. “Please.”

She got up and walked toward me. I watched a jogger run by as the mara came slowly closer. I waited anxiously while she sniffed my offering. She took the plain biscuit and chewed it up. “Good maragirlie!” I held out another with a tiny bit of meds on it. She took it and started to chew, and my heart leapt with joy, and then she dropped it and walked away.

I felt my eyes start to water. Then I sniffled. Wait a minute. This is stupid, I thought. This is frustrating, but it’s nothing to cry about. But I had been so happy that I had managed to train them to hand feed and that we’d found a flavor of meds that she would eat. Now we’d have to start all over again from scratch. And now I was really bawling.

I felt like a lunatic sitting in the dirt crying over my mara not taking her medication, but I couldn’t help it. I rubbed my eyes with my sticky fingers and got grape ibuprofen all over my face, and that just made me cry harder.

I leaned back against the little tree I was sitting under and stared helplessly out of the mara yard. Through my tears I saw the red brick of the Reptile House. And I remembered Victor’s red hair, and Ray, this morning, and why we were outside the Elephant House.

Now it made more sense why I was crying. And for some reason, that made me stop.

I rinsed my fingers in the maras’ pool, and tried to wipe the tears and sticky grapeyness off my face with my wet fingers. I got up. There was no point in spending any more time on this. We were just going to have to find another kind of medication. Rodents 1, Hannah 0. Humans had these big convoluted brains, but we so often lost these battles with the allegedly “lower” species. They were good at what they did. And what these guys did was be careful not to eat funny-tasting things that might be poisonous. It was hard to fight millennia of evolution.

I put the rest of the unmedicated biscuits in their food pan. The female came over while I was still putting the pans down on the ground. She purred as she started to eat. You know that little trilling noise that a guinea pig makes? The maras make almost the same noise, but much louder. It was such a sweet little sound, I wanted to cry again, but I got my broom and swept up some mara poop instead.