

FLIGHT

Marty O' Hara watched the three panda cubs wrestling in the aisle at thirty-five thousand feet. He was aboard his uncle Travis Wolfe's converted bomber jet, winging his way south to the Amazon basin in Brazil with several other members of Wolfe's Cryptos Island crew. Marty was exhausted and wanted to take a nap, but he couldn't because he was holding Wolfe's growling three-pound teacup poodle on his lap. It was all he could do to keep PD, as the tiny dog was known, from leaping into the fray and getting mauled by the adorable black-and-white bear cubs.

"Panda-monium," Marty quipped.

His cousin, Grace, looked up at him from the aisle where she was supervising the wrestling match. "Punny," she said. "I'm sure going to miss these cubs."

Marty had to admit that the cubs were cute, but he hadn't been around them enough to know if he was going to miss them or not.

Marty's best friend, Luther Percival Smyth IV, and their new friend, Dylan Hickock, were in the back of the jet behind a hermetically sealed bulkhead, to everyone's olfactory relief, feeding the Mokélé-mbembé hatchlings. The two not-so-little

dinosaurs were voracious eaters, and they always smelled worse — if that was even possible — after a meal. Travis Wolfe and Ted Bronson were three rows in front of Marty, staring at their laptops and crunching the treasure trove of data that Grace had stolen from Noah Blackwood’s computer. It had only been a day since Ted, Marty, Luther, and Dylan had rescued Grace from Blackwood’s mansion, where the renowned naturalist had held Grace, his own granddaughter, since kidnapping her several weeks earlier.

“Blackwood,” Ted said, pointing to the television screen above his head.

Marty was out of his seat like a shot, clutching PD.

“A rerun from last night,” Wolfe said.

A smiling Dr. Noah Blackwood was being interviewed inside the Squidarium at Northwest Zoo and Aquarium. A giant squid was swimming in the background. Standing next to Blackwood was Dr. Michael Loch, the zoo’s director. He looked as if he would rather be in the clutches of the giant squid, with its beak piercing his skull, than standing next to Noah Blackwood.

“So, what do you think, Dr. Blackwood?” the eager reporter asked.

Noah amped up his smile to 250 watts. “It’s magnificent!” he said, putting a congratulatory hand on Loch’s shoulder.

Loch looked like he was going to be sick.

“We will learn a great deal about these mysterious denizens of the deep by having this specimen in captivity,” Noah continued. “I couldn’t be prouder of Dr. Loch and the NZA staff.”

Marty rolled his eyes. Noah was making it sound like Loch and the NZA staff worked for him.

“Doesn’t having the giant squid here at NZA affect the bottom line at your wildlife park, the Seattle Ark?” the reporter asked.

Noah’s smile dimmed, but only slightly. “A rather crude way to put it,” he said. “And the answer is no. I am not interested in the bottom line. My sole purpose in life is the conservation of wildlife. I am not concerned with how many people come through the gates of the Seattle Ark versus Northwest Zoo and Aquarium. My mission can be summed up in two words, ‘Wildlife first.’”

My sole purpose, Marty thought. My mission. My, my, my . . . Lie, lie, lie . . . Liar, liar, pants on fire.

“I didn’t mean any offense,” the reporter said, then continued undeterred. “I was interviewing some zoo visitors here at NZA, and they said they’d been planning to visit the Ark today but changed their minds when they found out the panda cubs wouldn’t be on display. I was just thinking that the —”

Noah cut him off. “I’m glad you brought up the panda cubs,” he said. “They are a perfect example of what I was just saying. We determined that they were becoming slightly stressed by all of the attention they were receiving. We decided to take the cubs off display for their own well-being, knowing full well that it might affect our so-called bottom line, as you put it.”

Marty glanced behind him. Grace had stepped forward in order to better see the interview. The cubs were pulling on her shoelaces. If anyone was stressed, it was Grace. She was hanging on to the seats on either side of the aisle, trying not to topple over.

“How long do you think the cubs will remain off display?” the reporter persisted.

“Until we deem it appropriate to put them back on display,” Noah said.

Or until Butch has a chance to pop over to China and poach three more cubs for Blackwood to showcase, Marty thought.

Among the files that Grace had “liberated” from Blackwood’s computer was a report about how his henchman Butch McCall had “harvested” the cubs from their mothers in the Gansu province of China.

Noah made a big deal out of looking at his watch. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut this short,” he said. “I have animals to tend to back at the Ark.”

“Five less than you did two days ago,” Marty said.

Grace laughed. They watched Noah walk out of camera view. A look of relief passed across Dr. Loch’s face. The camera panned back to get a view of the crowd watching the giant squid.

“Is that Al Ikes?” Grace asked.

Marty stepped closer to the screen. Grace was right: It was Al Ikes, but he wasn’t dressed like the Al Ikes they knew. His typical three-piece suit had been replaced by a black hoodie, jeans, and high-top sneakers.

“That’s Al,” Wolfe confirmed. “He and his crew are keeping an eye on Blackwood while we’re away.”

Al must have realized he was being filmed because he quickly stepped out of the camera shot. He was ex-CIA, and he didn’t like to be photographed. He and his “crew” were in charge of security on Cryptos Island, Wolfe’s headquarters.

Didn’t do us any good two nights ago when Blackwood tried to have his chupacabra murder us, Marty thought. *Not that I’m complaining. If Al had known about our plan, he would have*

stopped us from going to the Ark, and we wouldn't have gotten the hatchlings — or the panda cubs.

“What about Butch and Yvonne?” Marty asked.

“Al hasn't caught sight of them yet,” Wolfe answered. “Which is a little worrisome. But he reported that Blackwood went back to the Ark after the interview and was very visible throughout the day.”

“Butch is probably still licking his wounds,” Ted said. “I did a number on him the other night. I doubt he'll be moving around much today.”

Marty hadn't seen the “number” Ted was talking about, but Grace had told him that Ted was some kind of fiftieth-degree black-belt ninja, as well as a super genius and a hijacker. Ted had managed to rescue them with Blackwood's own helicopter, which was now stowed away in the back of Wolfe's converted bomber.

Wolfe looked at Marty. “I suspect Yvonne isn't moving around too well today, either, after what you did to her with that pig.”

Marty grinned. He hadn't hurt Blackwood's other trusted employee, Yvonne Zlobinavech, but she was probably still shaken up. He and Luther and Dylan had locked Yvonne in a dark room with a potbellied pig after convincing her it was the chupacabra she had sent out to kill them.

“I wish I could have seen her face,” Wolfe said, returning his grin.

“You wouldn't have recognized her,” Marty said. “She looks a lot different without her fake smile. Kind of scary, actually.”

One of the pandas wrapped its front paws around Wolfe's right leg and tried to take a playful bite out of it. He laughed and picked it up. “You'll get a mouthful of metal, little guy.”

Years earlier, Wolfe's right leg had been bitten off by Mokélé-mbembé, the mother of the dinosaur hatchlings, but his injury wasn't apparent when he walked or ran. Ted had invented a prosthetic leg out of a special metal alloy that Wolfe claimed was better than flesh and blood, but Marty knew his uncle would rather have his real leg back.

"Do they have a good enclosure for the pandas at the jaguar preserve?" Grace asked.

Wolfe looked a little confused by the question, which wasn't unusual. He always looked a little confused when Grace or Marty asked him a question. "I'm not sure," he finally said. "I haven't been there before, but it doesn't matter. The cubs aren't going to the preserve."

"What are you talking about?" Grace cried.

"The pandas don't belong to us," Wolfe said.

"They don't belong to Noah Blackwood, either," Grace said.

"Exactly. Which is why I asked Phil and Phyllis if they would make a side trip to China after they drop us off in Brazil."

Phil and Phyllis Bishop were Cryptos Island's pilots. The father-daughter team were in the cockpit flying them south.

"Kind of a big side trip," Marty said.

"But necessary," Wolfe insisted. "We can't possibly take care of these little guys where we're going. We'll have our hands full with the hatchlings. I've been in touch with the Chengdu panda research center. They've agreed to take the cubs off our hands with no questions asked."

"Is it a good place?" Grace asked.

"The best," Wolfe assured her. "I've been there several times. It's where the cubs belong, and it's the best place to keep them out of the clutches of Noah Blackwood."

"They belong back with their mothers," Marty said.

Wolfe frowned. "I agree, but that's no longer possible."

"Thanks to Butch McCall," Grace said bitterly.

They all knew that Butch had shot the mothers to get the cubs.

"Can't we have him arrested or something?" Marty asked.

"Animal poaching. International wildlife smuggling. Violation of the Endangered Species Act. I bet he's broken a dozen laws."

"He and Noah Blackwood have probably broken thousands of laws," Ted said. "But we don't have any solid proof."

"What about the files I stole?" Grace asked.

"It's fabulous information, but it's vague," Ted explained.

"We understand what they're talking about because we know what they're capable of, but nothing we have here would stand up in court. For one thing, the information's stolen. For another, Blackwood and Butch have been doing this stuff for decades. They're very careful with the language they use. These records could be interpreted in several different ways."

"And Blackwood's a very powerful man," Wolfe added. "He has a lot of money and a lot of influence. Nobody's going to be eager to prosecute him even if we find something that's actionable." He fixed his dark, intense eyes on Grace's robin's-egg-blue ones. "And then there is you," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Grace asked.

"Noah Blackwood is going to come after you."

"Not very likely after I hacked his computer, kidnapped his panda cubs, and stole back the hatchlings," Grace said.

"Actually, it's even more likely now," Wolfe said. "Noah doesn't like to be crossed. He doesn't like to lose. He wants you back."

“And he wants the hatchlings back,” Ted added. “And the pandas, although he’ll have a hard time getting them once Phil and Phyllis return them to China. He will be coming after all of us.”

“What do we do?” Grace asked.

“We have a good head start,” Wolfe said. “We have eyes on Noah Blackwood. What we do now is take advantage of the time by trying to find Marty’s parents.”

Wolfe handed Grace the panda cub. PD growled, but Marty held him tight.

“I’ll put the cubs back in their enclosure,” Grace said.

“I’ll give you a hand,” Marty said.

He dropped the tiny poodle in Wolfe’s lap. PD continued to growl.